

MODULE 2:

Education systems reinforcing biased gender norms

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Key messages

- Education can liberate, but it can also reinforce gender norms, often through practices based on deeply internalised and unquestioned expectations. These can persist despite formal commitments to gender equality and reforms of curricula and learning materials.
- Gender norms are transmitted through school practices and systems, peer and staff-student interaction, as well as the formal curriculum, learning materials and teacher education systems.
- Prevailing gender norms in schools vary across contexts and intersect with other biases and stereotypes, often compounding the educational disadvantages faced by marginalised students in particular.
- Conformity with prevailing norms is often rewarded by the approval of others, while non-conformity is sanctioned through exclusion, gossip or violence.
- Gender-restrictive political actors seek to harness education's power to reinforce rather than challenge restrictive gender norms. They do this by limiting access, influencing curricula, and reinforcing gendered and heteronormative practices.

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About this module

This module explains how schools and education systems often reinforce inequitable gender norms and stereotypes. This is sometimes intentional in contexts where policies and practices emphasise specific visions of gender relations, often framed as part of national or religious values. More commonly, however, it is unintentional, and reflects norms that are so naturalised that they are taken for granted.

The module explains how social norms theory provides insights into how norms are reinforced through social interactions in school settings, before discussing how they are embedded in curricula and learning materials. It then outlines how 'anti-gender' or gender-restrictive political forces seek to reinforce conservative gender norms in education. It should be read alongside [Module 5](#), which outlines how schools and education systems can counter these mechanisms to nurture pro-gender equality norms.

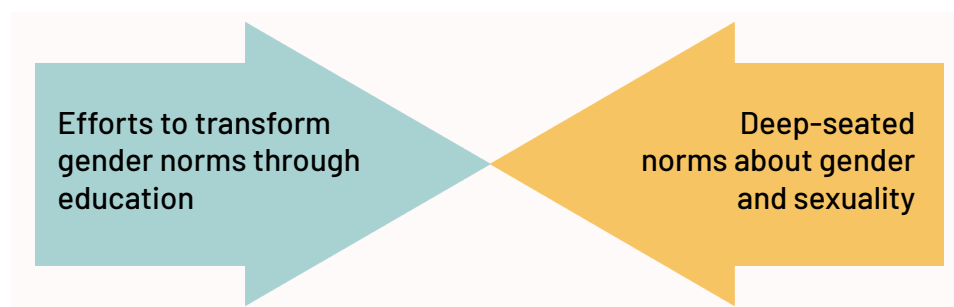
Deep-seated norms may sit in tension with formal efforts to shift gender norms through education, with both sets of forces pushing in different directions at the same time.

How education systems reinforce prevailing gender norms

Sociological studies and feminist analyses of education have long recognised schools as key places where prevailing gender norms and stereotypes can be reinforced, through both the formal curriculum, and the 'hidden' curriculum – the values that are transmitted through school rules, practices and culture ([Haralambos and Holborn, 1990](#) cited in [Chapin, 2021](#)). Gender norms are typically based on heteropatriarchal values that normalise male dominance and stigmatise non-heterosexual orientations. Even in contexts of significant social change and progress towards gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, most schools do not recognise societal shifts towards greater fluidity in gender or sexuality ([Donovan et al., 2023](#)).

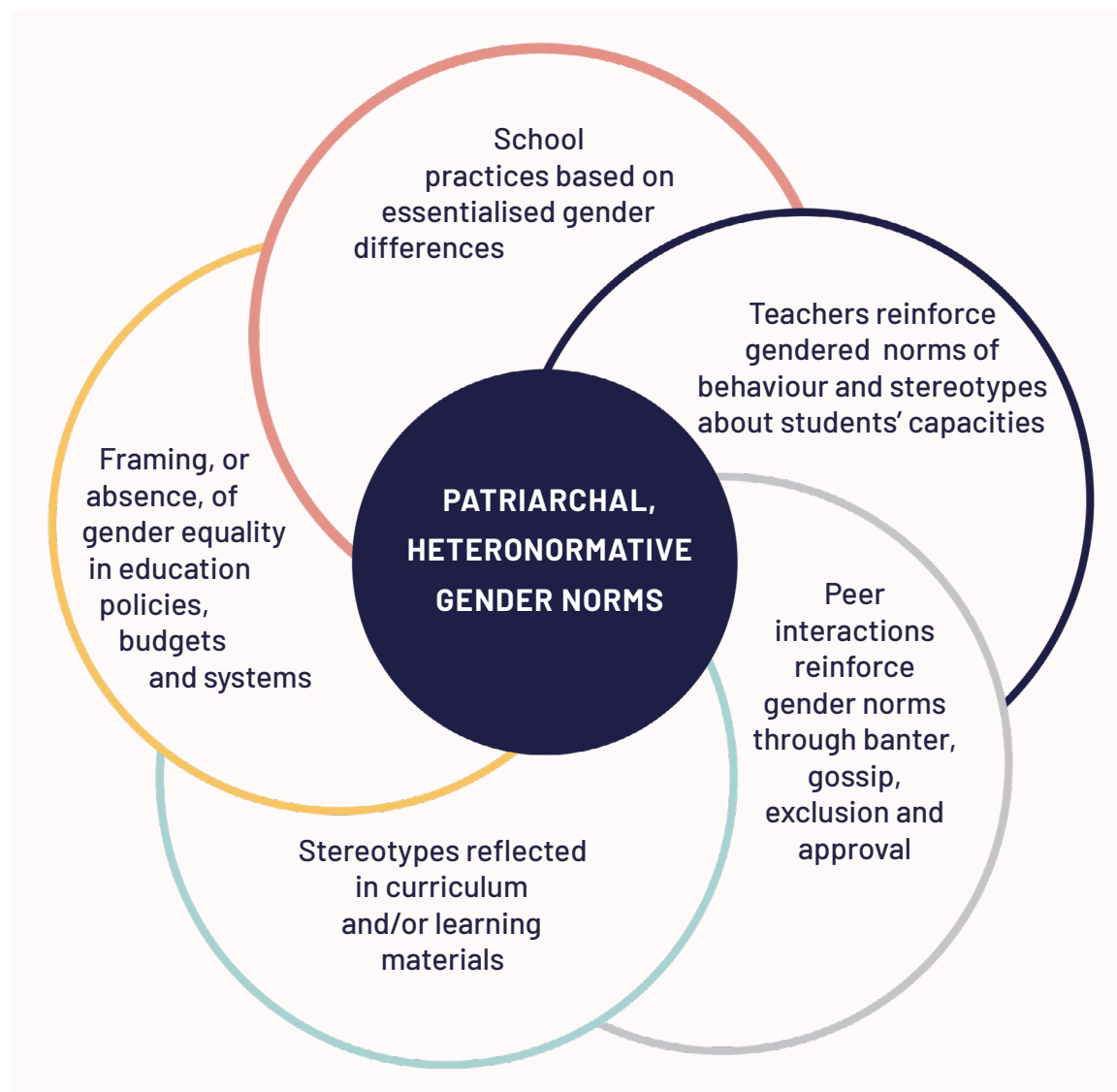
These norms about gender and sexuality and the stereotypes that are based on them intersect with other norms, stereotypes and biases that have arisen in particular historical contexts, often reflecting colonial legacies ([Zhang, 2026](#)). In white-majority contexts, for example, Black girls are often 'adultified' – both sexualised and subject to expectations of maturity that are inappropriate for their age ([Epstein et al., 2017](#)). Similarly, in South Asian contexts, caste, religion and class shape how girls' bodies, mobility and morality are policed, so that a Dalit or Muslim girl may experience school very differently from an upper-caste, majority-religion peer ([Jatoliya, 2025](#)).

Figure 2.1: Competing forces in education



These deep-seated norms may sit in tension with formal efforts to shift gender norms through education, with both sets of forces pushing in different directions at the same time. They are also likely to differ, even within schools, reflecting the agency and values of individual teachers, and the extent to which students accept or challenge prevailing norms (Donovan et al., 2023). Figure 2.2 shows some ways in which discriminatory norms are reinforced through education systems.

Figure 2.2: How education systems can reinforce gender norms



Source: Author

School practices based on essentialised gender differences

As [Donovan et al. \(2023\)](#) explain (in a study conducted in England but with much wider relevance), students' biological sexes are often essentialised – treated as the source of innate differences based on 'common sense'. Across different school systems, the responses of schools commonly include gendered uniforms/dress codes, and sometimes result in different curricula (particularly in sports). The latter is particularly common in secondary schools and may reflect sex differences that become more apparent after puberty.

School policies and procedures often display ambivalence about students' emerging sexuality. It may be seen as something to be suppressed and as being inappropriate in an educational context (e.g. [Zhu et al., 2022](#)), while at the same time school uniforms often emphasise conventional heterosexual femininity ([Donovan et al., 2023](#)).



School uniforms often emphasise conventional heterosexual femininity.

Other aspects of school life, such as the assignment of chores or disciplinary practices, are also often gendered ([Skipper and Fox, 2022](#)). Qualitative studies show, for example, girls are more likely to be tasked with cleaning, while boys are allocated tasks that need greater physical strength ([Dunne et al., 2023](#)). Likewise, girls are more often assigned tasks that are seen as more 'decorative', while boys take up leadership roles, reinforcing ideas about femininity and masculinity as naturally different ([Shoaib et al., 2026](#)). In addition, school practices based on sex rarely acknowledge, or struggle to adapt to, the presence of students whose gender identity does not conform with their biological sex ([Paechter et al., 2021](#); [Vidal Velis et al., 2024](#); [Francis, 2025](#)).

Overall, these rules and practices lead to the reinforcement of gender differences and their greater significance, even in contexts where a school's ethos and policies seek to promote gender equality.

Box 2.1: Insights from social norms theory

Several concepts derived from social norms theory help shine light on how gender norms and stereotypes can be reinforced in schools. Prevailing gender norms and stereotypes set up empirical expectations: how someone of a certain sex will normally behave; and normative expectations: how they should behave.

These norms are often interpreted rigidly by young children, who can assert very stereotyped views of what boys and girls can do, like, wear, etc. (see [Module 7](#) on early childhood). These norms continue throughout childhood, with some evidence that early adolescence is another time when peers often enforce gender norms rigidly ([Brussino and McBrien, 2022](#)). Social norms theory also highlights that students are not just recipients but producers of norms; they monitor each other's behaviour, signal approval or disapproval, and sometimes collectively shift what is seen as acceptable.

Peer interactions

Peers often enforce gender norms by rewarding students who conform with popularity and status, and sanctioning those who do not through jokes, gossip or bullying, both online and offline ([Kågesten et al., 2016](#)). Depending on the context of a school and its community, this can lead to the promotion of very restrictive and stereotyped visions of masculinity and

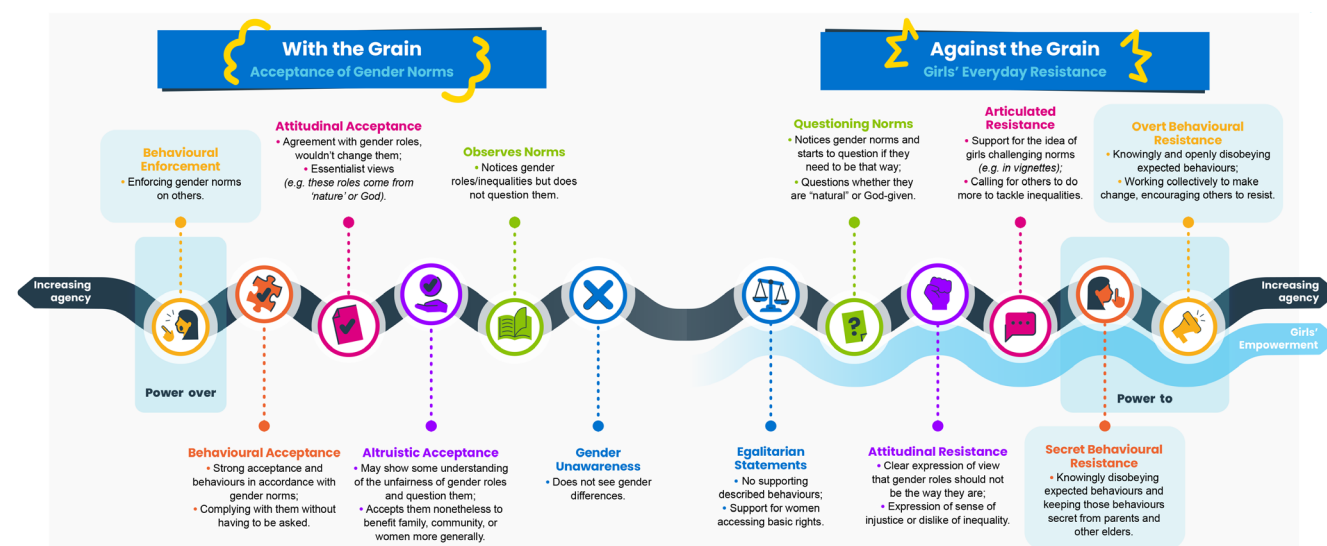
femininity as the only acceptable ways to be a boy or a girl (Zhu et al., 2022; Donovan et al., 2023). Given most students' desire to fit in with their peers, and depending on their own level of commitment to their own or their family's values, children who have grown up with less restrictive ideas about gender in their own homes may adopt more stereotypical attitudes and behaviour at school.

These narrowly acceptable forms of masculinity (Module 6) and femininity can limit students' aspirations. Students may, for example, come to believe that certain subjects or future careers are not for people like them (Module 3). Restrictive gender norms (often reinforced online) can affect young people's physical and mental health by, for example, promoting unattainable body images as a standard to which everyone should aspire, or creating the sense that anyone who disagrees with these norms does not fully 'belong' (Donovan et al., 2023).

Gendered interactions between peers go beyond pressures to conform, to include sexual harassment and violence (Bhana et al., 2021). A large body of evidence shows that LGBTQI+ students are particularly at risk of verbal and physical bullying related to perceived non-compliance with prevailing gender norms (see Module 8).

This said, young people – and particularly older adolescents – often take the lead in shifting gender norms if they find the dominant norms in their society too restrictive. Peer groups and networks of friends can function as informal communities where students can question restrictive gender norms and push the boundaries of what it means to be a girl or a boy (of a particular religion, social class or ethnic group, for example) in their social context (Vanner, 2025; Shoaib et al., 2026). Figure 2.3 shows a spectrum from young people's acceptance and enforcement of gender norms through to individual and collective activism for change.

Figure 2.3: Spectrum of approaches to gender norms: from acceptance to activism for change



Source: Plan International and Cardiff University (2025: 8).

Online spaces can help students access new communities of peers who also question prevailing norms, and can provide them with inspiration and new 'scripts' about gender. Students may also seek to challenge unfair practices and norms, and to promote a culture of gender equality and intersectional inclusion through more organised school-based activism (Mahpara et al., 2024; Vanner, 2025). See Module 5 for further discussion about supporting space for student-led gender equality initiatives.

Teachers' reinforcement of gendered norms and stereotypes

It is not only students who reinforce gender norms and stereotypes: teachers and other school staff may also do so through gendered comments and actions ([Gajda et al., 2022](#); [Donovan et al., 2023](#)). These comments are often based on essentialised stereotypes and minimise the role of socialisation. Gender differences are variously understood as affecting behaviour (e.g. boys are rowdy, girls are diligent), capacity to learn (e.g. boys/girls are smarter and learn faster), and aptitude for particular subjects (boys are better at maths, girls are better at languages). The implications of these for learning outcomes are discussed further in [Module 3](#).

Teacher biases rarely reflect gendered perceptions alone: they may also reflect discriminatory (or positive) stereotypes about students of a particular ethnic, religious, racial, class or caste background, nationality, sexual orientation or ability – stereotypes that are themselves gendered. For example, a UNICEF study in six Latin American countries reported teachers making sexist and xenophobic comments based on stereotypes about Venezuelan migrant and refugee girls – alleging that they ‘steal’ jobs, food and husbands from the native population ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). Where teachers’ behaviour towards students is based on intersecting stereotypes, it can affect students’ aspirations ([UNGEI, 2023](#)).

Even where teachers consider themselves in favour of gender equality, they may still agree with generalisations of this kind and may, therefore, replicate gender norms and stereotypes ([Londen et al., 2025](#); [Vu and Pham, 2025](#)). Research from various countries also suggests that teachers often feel ill-equipped to support transgender or non-binary students, leading them to fall back on rigid binary understandings of gender even when they personally support inclusion ([Kubacka and D’Addio, 2020](#)).

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Teachers do not only reinforce ideas about gender overtly, but also through pedagogical practices, which may also unconsciously replicate biases. These include differences in the amount of time and attention paid to (different groups of) boys and girls ([Bassi et al., 2018](#)), and the quality of that attention. See [Module 3](#) for a more in-depth discussion of how teachers’ gendered pedagogical practices can affect learning outcomes.

Stereotypes reflected in curriculum and learning materials

Teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, worksheets, posters and digital resources often reflect prevailing gender norms, and can subconsciously reinforce stereotypes and biases ([Brussino and McBrien, 2022](#)). Research shows that continuous or frequent exposure to stereotypes in learning materials can reinforce biases, while materials with diverse and non-stereotyped text and images can help to stimulate more equal attitudes ([RTI International, 2015](#)).

Despite efforts to reduce stereotyping as part of textbook revisions, considerable biases remain. For example, a study of more than 1,000 English-language textbooks from 34 countries found that women and girls were consistently under-represented compared with men and boys and were more likely to be depicted in stereotypical roles, such as nurses and home-makers. These textbooks also commented on women's and girls' appearance more frequently than that of boys and men ([Crawfurd et al., 2024](#)).



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These findings are confirmed by studies from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan in Asia ([Islam and Asadullah, 2018](#)), and Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda in Africa ([Russell et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, a study from Ecuador found that although women were more represented than men in textbooks overall, they were often depicted in highly stereotypical ways ([Simbaña and Esquivel, n.d.](#)). These biases may reflect the absence of people in textbook drafting committees who are sensitised to gender equality issues ([Bhattarai, 2020](#); [Merawi, 2020](#)).

Education policy and systems reinforcing inequitable norms



Education policies and systems can also unconsciously reinforce prevailing norms, or actively assert them in order to reinforce specific political positioning.

It is not only interactions between people or the content of learning materials that reinforce inequitable gender norms. Education policies and systems can also unconsciously reinforce prevailing norms, or actively assert them in order to reinforce specific political positioning. Active efforts to promote conservative gender norms through education are discussed in the following section on the impact of gender-restrictive politics. This section, therefore, will focus on unconscious biases and more organic backlash.

Underlying policies and systems that end up reinforcing inequitable gender norms reflect a deprioritisation of equality issues, which are perceived as luxuries or as not central to the fundamental business of education policy: enrolment, retention and learning outcomes. This, in turn, can lead to gender equality policies that exist only on paper, without serious efforts to implement them, and token or insufficient budgets to enact change.

Where policies for gender equality in education exist but without serious commitment to implementation, responsibilities are often concentrated in one person who does not have the power to enact change – often a junior female official to whom responsibilities are assigned on the basis of her gender. The lack of power and status among gender champions can hamper efforts to build ownership of an agenda ([UNGEI, 2022](#)). It can also signal to other elements of the education system – e.g. curriculum and assessment authorities, teacher education providers, local education authorities, school governance bodies – that actions to strengthen equality and inclusivity are optional ([Michalko et al., 2025](#)). In such contexts, pro-equality action depends largely on the agency of individual institutions, school leaders or teachers, and is likely to be haphazard and piecemeal ([Wolfenden et al., n.d.](#)).

Teacher education illustrates this clearly. In countries where teacher education is decentralised to universities (rather than teacher training institutions following standard curricula), the extent to which pre-service teachers are supported to reflect on gender and other inequalities and biases can vary considerably. For example, a study in Colombia found that gender equality or broader inclusion-focused courses are often optional rather than core requirements and that they are, therefore, taken by only the most motivated students (Serrano et al., 2024). A study of pre-service teachers in Spain found that gender-related topics are integrated only moderately into their coursework, with content focused primarily on gender-based violence (GBV) and equal opportunities, while foundational gender concepts receive little attention (Miralles-Cardona, 2025).



Subject tracking systems can also reinforce gender biases by subtly steering girls or boys towards certain subjects.

Beyond teacher education, subject tracking systems can also reinforce gender biases by, for example, subtly steering girls or boys towards certain subjects. Similarly, assessment systems can replicate inequalities where a combination of micro pedagogical practices (e.g. teachers disproportionately asking boys more challenging questions) and teachers' biases about academic competence interact with norms that affect students' ability to study for high-stakes assessments. These issues are discussed in more detail in [Module 3](#).

Having outlined ways that education systems reinforce inequitable gender norms largely through inaction and deprioritisation, the next section discusses organised efforts to reinforce and assert restrictive gender norms through education. Ways in which education systems can promote more gender-equitable norms are the focus of [Module 5](#).



How gender-restrictive politics affect education

Organised political movements that are opposed to feminist or LGBTQI+ rights have increasingly targeted education in recent years, as a key space where the values of the next generation are formed and consolidated. Resistance to gender equality in education, as in other areas of society, is not new, but it has become more organised as a result of years of funding and transnational networking, and the rise of far-right politics.

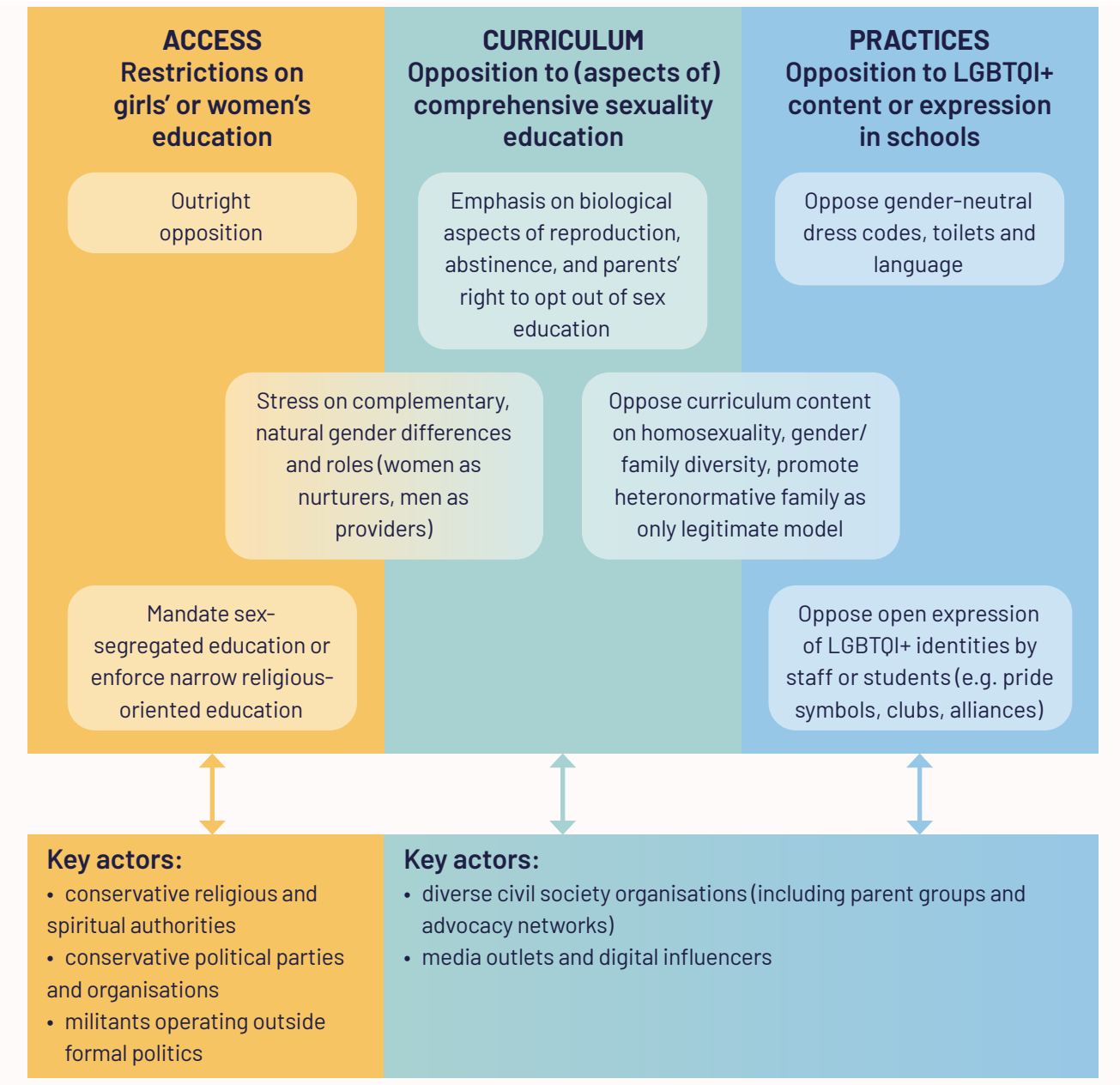
Gender-restrictive actors aim to change norms and worldviews in line with their beliefs, recognising that this may take decades (Martínez et al., 2021). Further, many gender-restrictive actors frame education as having been 'captured' by left-wing, ethnic or religious minorities, feminist and LGBTQI+ agendas. In some contexts, this framing is part of a broader far-right identification of 'enemies within and without'. This demonises internal 'scapegoats' and external or 'Western' agendas, such as anti-racist education, and human rights and equality education, and sexuality education. Gender-restrictive actors often emphasise the need to protect children from exposure to foreign or confusing ideologies, and argue for

content to be science- or evidence-based. These claims are often deployed strategically with different audiences to help mobilise support among specific stakeholders (Martínez et al., 2021; Kuhar et al., 2026).

Campaigners’ emphases differ by political and cultural context, and span issues of:

- **access** – who can attend schools, and how schools should be organised (single sex, etc.)
- **curriculum content** – what students can learn, with a particular focus on relationships and sex education, and/or on ensuring that learning materials comply with specific interpretations of religious traditions, or of history and cultural values
- **school policies and practices** – such as gender-neutral uniforms, or the use of inclusive language.

Figure 2.4: What aspects of education do gender-restrictive actors focus on?



Source: Adapted from D’Angelo et al. (2024: 11).

One issue, in particular, unites many of these actors: opposition to (aspects of) school-based relationships and sex education, with national and global campaigns mobilised against comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Figure 2.4 shows some of the key areas of focus for different groups of gender-restrictive actors in relation to school education.

An ALIGN report by [D'Angelo et al. \(2024\)](#), *Whose hands on our education?*, identified three key ways in which gender-restrictive political actors aim to influence education:

- **Influencing discourse, including through misinformation.** Gender-restrictive campaigns often make use of emotive rhetoric – for example, around protecting children from sexualisation, or countering cultural imperialism. This can involve exaggerated claims and misrepresentation of proposed or actual policies, as, for example, with an initiative in Brazil to reduce homophobia in schools, which was misrepresented as promoting homosexuality through a 'gay kit' (in reality a set of learning materials and resources to nurture respect for diversity). Gender-restrictive campaigns have often effectively mobilised grassroots associations (e.g. parents' groups, religious congregations), and have built cohorts of aligned youth leaders. They have also made extensive use of digital media as spaces to disseminate their norms, values and talking points, including through engagement with conservative-leaning influencers ([D'Angelo et al. 2024](#)).
- **Leveraging governance institutions to influence educational laws, policies and practices.** Gender-restrictive politicians have used political power to restrict relationships and sex education, to prevent the use of non-gendered language in schools, and in the most extreme case – Afghanistan – to end all access by girls and women to post-primary education. In electoral democracies, gender-restrictive organisations have supported like-minded candidates, and undertaken strategic litigation to assert key principles such as the right of parents to opt out of their children receiving sex and relationships education. At international level, organised campaigns have targeted key UN institutions and declarations, seeking in particular to remove reference to comprehensive sexuality education ([Ipas, 2023](#)). In some contexts, gender-restrictive actors aim to present themselves as scientifically credible, neutral actors, offering training and advice to the public sector ([Martinez et al., 2021](#); [Datta, 2025](#)).
- **Violence and intimidation towards both individuals and organisations.** These acts include coordinated campaigns and threats against teachers, education officials or civil society organisations seen as advocating for gender equality, LGBTQI+ inclusive curricula or practices. These often go beyond the disagreements that are a normal part of democratic politics to include actual (or threats of) physical violence, and the shutdown of civil society organisations on spurious grounds ([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)).



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Implications and risks

The rise of gender-restrictive politics undermines both existing efforts and potential future action to nurture gender equality and social inclusion through education. Some key implications and risks of gender-restrictive politics in education include the following:

- **Active reinforcement of restrictive norms and stereotypes.** This can limit children's aspirations, and present only certain ways of being as acceptable, with negative effects on the mental health and well-being of students who reject conventional masculinity and femininity, including LGBTQI+ students.
- **Rejection of reforms and efforts to nurture more equitable norms through education,** rather than a review of proposals to adapt them to context. This can limit students' access to important knowledge, such as health information and sources of support if they experience gender-based violence. By making certain topics or ideas off-limits, this blanket rejection of reforms limits education's transformative potential.
- **Dilution or closure of a key curriculum space where gender equality is likely to be covered** – education on relationships and sex education in its various forms, including health and life skills education.
- **Self-censorship.** Schools and teachers avoiding certain topics to avert (potentially violent) push-back ([Human Rights Watch, 2022](#); [Serrano et al., 2024](#)).
- **'Mission creep'.** Emboldened by specific victories (e.g. the stalling of proposed legislation or the removal of specific ministers), gender-restrictive agendas may snowball, creating a risk of new campaigns against as yet unidentified targets.

How schools and education systems reinforce gender-restrictive norms

[Brussino and McBrien \(2022\)](#) - *Gender stereotypes in education: Policies and practices to address gender stereotyping across OECD education systems* discusses how gender stereotypes affect gender norms and learning outcomes.

[Donovan et al. \(2023\)](#) - *Understanding gender and sexuality: The hidden curriculum in English schools* provides a very clear explanation of how the hidden curriculum operates to reinforce norms of gender and sexuality.

[Gender at the Centre et al. \(2022\)](#) - *How is gender equality included in education sector planning? An analysis of power, voice and social change in Mali* discusses resistance to gender equality in education.

[Jatoliya \(2025\)](#) - *Gendered classroom interactions in India: patriarchy reproduced and resisted* explains how teachers' gendered micro pedagogical practices build boys' cognitive abilities more than those of girls.

[Vanner \(2025\)](#) - *Gender transformative education as explained by youth feminist activists* illustrates how education can reinforce gender norms, and discusses youth activism for transforming gender norms through education.

Gender-restrictive politics in education

[D'Angelo et al. \(2024\)](#) - *ALIGN's Whose hands on our education? Identifying and countering gender-restrictive backlash* synthesises evidence on gender-restrictive actors in education, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries.

[IPAS \(2023\)](#) - *False pretences: the anti-comprehensive sexuality education agenda weaponizing human rights* outlines the main anti-CSE actors and how they link to each other, UN member states, and other global, regional and national anti-rights and anti-gender trends (available in English, French and Spanish).

[La Mala Fe \(2025\)](#) - *Ofensivas anti-género en la educación: la educación sexual es uno de los principales objetivos en América Latina* provides an overview of anti-gender campaigns targeting education in Latin America (in Spanish).

[Srnrdelj and Kuhar \(2025\)](#) - *Anti-gender mobilizations in Europe and the feminist response: productive resistance* documents anti-gender politics across diverse fields, including education in Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Türkiye.