

MODULE 8:

Gender norms and LGBTQI+ students

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Key messages

- Schools and education systems often reinforce gender norms that treat heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation through official curricula, gendered dress codes, sports and activities, and a 'hidden curriculum' of unwritten rules and values.
- LGBTQI+ young people, or those perceived to be LGBTQI+, often face bullying, harassment and violence in education. In some contexts, schools may punish or even expel them.
- LGBTQI+ students are more likely to skip classes, miss school, achieve lower academic results, and even drop out entirely.
- Schools can support a shift in gender norms towards acceptance of sexual diversity, given their pivotal role in shaping the attitudes of young people.
- The education sector has a responsibility to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, based on policies that are non-discriminatory, inclusive, and do not tolerate bullying.
- Effective measures also include curricula and learning materials that foster greater acceptance of sexual and gender diversity, and investment in teacher capacity and training, as well as direct support for students and their families.
- Partnerships, particularly collaboration between ministries of education and LGBTQI+ organisations, are a common feature of progress.

About this module

This module examines how gender norms affect the experiences of LGBTQI+ students in formal school settings, from their educational access to their academic achievement. It draws out the impacts of discriminatory gender norms on LGBTQI+ young people, including harassment and bullying that lead to poor academic achievement and drop out. It looks at how gender norms are reinforced in school environments, through curricula, policies and school practices such as binary sex-based dress codes. It also includes a short section on LGBTQI+ teachers. Finally, it provides recommendations on how to address homophobic, queerphobic and transphobic norms in schools.

Schools and education systems often uphold gender norms that view heterosexuality as the normal and only acceptable form of sexual orientation (Francis, 2019).

Why do gender norms matter for LGBTQI+ students?

Prejudice against LGBTQI+ people is often rooted in norms that uphold heterosexuality and the male-female binary as 'the normal way to be'. Deep cultural beliefs about gender roles and 'appropriate' masculinity and femininity create environments where people who do not conform ([Browne, 2024](#)) can be punished through discrimination, harassment and bullying, as well as verbal and physical violence ([UNESCO, 2016](#)).

Schools and education systems often uphold gender norms that view heterosexuality as the normal and only acceptable form of sexual orientation ([Francis, 2019](#)). They do this, first, through what is officially taught in their curricula on relationships and sex education. Second, schools often reinforce gender binaries in their policies and practices, through dress codes, sports, and class chores and activities that are divided by gender. Third, gender norms are threaded through the 'hidden curriculum' – the unwritten rules and values that young people encounter in school from their teachers and peers – which can reinforce a culture's gender norms. LGBTQI+ young people, or those perceived to be LGBTQI+, can experience bullying, harassment, and violence in education because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). This is largely a result of being seen as 'different' from the 'norm'.

Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression are often tied together, and both can lead to discrimination. Sexual orientation is sometimes expressed through non-conforming visual codes and markers – for example, boys wearing makeup or girls having short hair. Breaking gender norms through visible gender expression (such as mannerisms, behaviour

or appearance) may be more of a trigger for violence than someone's actual orientation (Blondeel et al., 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2023). As a result, transgender students may experience even higher levels of school-related gender-based violence than those who conform to norms of gender expression (Özdere, 2023). In a study in Europe in 2019, up to 90% of trans women reported experiencing or having experienced school bullying based on their gender identity (UNESCO, 2021). Gendered norms of appearance differ for people from different ethnicities, class and other axes of identity. LGBTQI+ young people who are also from a minority ethnic group or religion, class or caste, may face intersectional discrimination. In the US, a study showed that Black LGBTQI+ students felt that their identities were less valued, and they felt less safe at school, compared with non-Black LGBTQI+ students (Lloyd et al., 2024).

Most of the harassment experienced by LGBTQI+ school students comes from their peers, but discrimination is also perpetuated by teachers and other school staff. Many schools fail to act on such incidents, or implicitly condone them, allowing discrimination to flourish. In places where sexual and gender diversity is stigmatised or criminalised, schools may actively punish students who are perceived to deviate from the norm or even expel them. Schools often have some freedom to set their own policies but are also subject to regional and national directives on LGBTQI+ inclusion, which may either reinforce or challenge prevailing gender norms.

More positively, schools can support a shift in gender norms towards acceptance of sexual diversity, given their pivotal role in shaping the attitudes of young people. By encouraging critical thinking, challenging gender stereotypes, and providing opportunities to practise equality, education has the potential to transform gender norms (UNICEF, 2021).



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State of the evidence on discrimination against LGBTQI+ school students

Some robust and large-scale cross-national surveys provide evidence on the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in education. These include [UNGEI's 2018](#) worldwide survey; [GLSEN's 2019](#) survey of LGBTQ secondary school students in seven Latin American countries; [UNESCO's 2021](#) European study; and the [2024 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#) European study. However, to reach a large number of people, these surveys are often administered online, which creates a bias towards people who have access to technology. There are also single-country studies that look at specific issues in depth (e.g. [Francis, 2019](#) on the views of young people in South Africa, and [GLSEN, 2016](#), on teachers' experiences in the US). The overwhelming majority of evidence comes from North America and Europe, presumably because countries in these regions often provide legal protections for the rights of LGBTQI+

people and are obliged to monitor their implementation and protection. There is less information and data for regions where LGBTQI+ lives are criminalised because it can be dangerous for people to speak out, and because research may not be permitted.



Violence is severely under-reported because of this fear [of repercussions], and because of a lack of trust in the authorities to respond supportively.

This lack of information reflects widespread problems with recording data and reporting on LGBTQI+ issues, particularly violence and discrimination, including a reluctance among LGBTQI+ people to participate in research because it puts them at risk of retaliation and of being 'outed' ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Violence is severely under-reported because of this fear, and because of a lack of trust in the authorities to respond supportively, particularly when authorities may perpetrate violence and discrimination ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Where LGBTQI+ identities are criminalised, research can be unsafe. Yet despite the lack of large-scale evidence, research consistently shows that LGBTQI+ people face high levels of violence, abuse and discrimination on the basis of their SOGIESC, including in education systems ([Social Development Direct, 2022](#)).

Most research on LGBTQI+ young people and education focuses on secondary school or adolescent settings, as this period of their lives is often when young people become aware of their SOGIESC. Some surveys, however, include respondents up to around the age of 25, who reflect on their earlier experiences at school. There are, however, complications when it comes to conducting research on people under the age of 18, as parental consent is required, and young people may not want to tell their parents about their sexuality and gender identity.

There is also a lack of large-scale or comparative research on teachers who identify as LGBTQI+. The limited qualitative evidence mostly comes from the US and Europe. Discussions of the experiences of LGBTQI+ teachers often focus on the perceived risks and benefits of coming out (disclosing their LGBTQI+ identity) in their schools.

Violence and safety in schools

Schools are often hostile environments for LGBTQI+ students. There is widespread recognition that LGBTQI+ young people are more likely to experience bullying, harassment and violence in schools than their non-LGBTQI+ peers. LGBTQI+ students can face teasing, name-calling, public ridicule and humiliation, intimidation, physical and sexual assault, and even death threats:

- A worldwide survey from 2018, published by MAG Jeunes, found that 42% of 21,000 LGBTQI+ youth respondents had been ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened at school because of their SOGIESC status, with 10% experiencing physical assault and 4% sexual assault ([MAG Jeunes, 2018](#)).
- In a 2019 GLSEN survey of LGBTQI+ secondary school students in seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay),

students reported commonly hearing homophobic remarks and negative comments about gender expression (GLSEN, 2019).

- A large European study by UNESCO in 2021 (14,000 13–18-year-olds, and 3,000 19–24-year-olds) found 83% had witnessed negative comments in school related to people's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or variations of sex characteristics (UNESCO, 2021).
- The longitudinal FRA survey on LGBTQI+ equality in Europe shows a recent and alarming increase in school bullying. Of 100,000 LGBTQI+ people aged 15 and above, 60% to 70% said that they suffered bullying, ridicule, teasing, insults or threats during their time in school because they were LGBTQI+ – a steep increase compared with the 2019 findings (when the European Union average was 46%) (FRA, 2024).
- The United Nations Free and Equal Campaign for LGBTQI+ rights suggests that 45% of LGBT young people worldwide have been bullied at school (United Nations, n.d.).

Figure 8.1: Percentage of LGBTQ students who have experienced harassment: Latin America 2019



Translation: LGBTQ students in Latin America commonly face harassment at school due to their sexual orientation. Percentage of LGBTQ students who experienced verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation.

Source: *Todo Mejora, X account (2019).*

The high prevalence of bullying and harassment they face makes LGBTQI+ students feel unsafe in school environments and beyond. The 2018 worldwide survey by MAG Jeunes on inclusive education and access to health for LGBTI+ young people reports that 22% of respondents rarely felt safe at school, and 15% never felt safe at all (MAG Jeunes, 2018).

This survey included many respondents from China and Russia. However, the results disaggregated by region show that a larger proportion of respondents from the Arab States (57%) reported feeling unsafe at school than respondents from any other region. GLSEN's 2019 Latin American study found that LGBTQI+ students in all seven surveyed countries avoided certain school spaces because they felt unsafe; usually the most gendered spaces like bathrooms, changing rooms and gym classes (GLSEN, 2019). It is clear, therefore, that improving safety is crucial to enable LGBTQI+ students to attend school and learn effectively.

Who perpetrates harassment and violence?

Harassment and bullying of LGBTQI+ students are perpetrated by both their peers and school staff. MAG Jeunes' worldwide survey of 21,000 young people showed that 70% to 80% of verbal and physical harassment was perpetrated by peers (MAG Jeunes, 2018). Peers can be a highly important reference group for adolescents, making their bullying and harassment particularly influential in upholding mainstream gender norms (ALIGN, n.d.). But teachers and school staff may also discriminate against LGBTQI+ students.

GLSEN's Latin American study found that, with variations across the seven countries, between 58% and 79% of students had heard teachers make homophobic remarks and that between 48% and 80% had also heard negative remarks about gender expression. More promisingly, however, half to two-thirds of students reported that school staff intervened when they heard homophobic comments (GLSEN, 2019). Yet, even where teachers are clearly charged with countering discrimination, this responsibility is often inconsistently applied in practice.



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Academic achievement and dropout

Unsupportive, unsafe or discriminatory environments at school mean that LGBTQI+ students are more likely to skip classes, miss school, achieve lower academic results, and even drop out entirely. Across the seven Latin American countries mentioned above, a quarter or more of LGBTQI+ students (23% to 36%) reported missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe (GLSEN, 2019). They were at least twice as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced higher levels of verbal harassment related to their sexual orientation, than students who had experienced lower levels. The 2018 worldwide survey by MAG Jeunes found that 33% of trans girls and 30% of trans boys had considered leaving school because of the challenges they faced (MAG Jeunes, 2018). While research often mentions poor participation, attendance, and dropout, there are few robust statistics that examine rates of LGBTQI+ youth absenteeism.

Students may also be denied access to school or formally expelled because of their SOGIESC. World Bank research found that some religious and coeducational schools in Indonesia deny LGBTQI+ students access (Cortez et al., 2021). In Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda, research finds that media sensationalism has whipped up moral panics

over alleged same-sex sexual activity in schools, that have sometimes resulted in suspension and expulsion of LGBTQI+ youth (see, for example, [Thoreson \(2019\)](#)).

The consequences of missing school, dropout, or expulsion can be severe. UNESCO emphasises that homophobic and transphobic violence has adverse effects on mental and physical health ([UNESCO, 2016](#)). LGBTQI+ young people are particularly prone to psychological poor health, with [reports](#) of anxiety, fear and poor mental health extremely common ([Özdere, 2023](#)). The United Nations Independent Expert highlights how school dropout among LGBTQI+ students leads to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, alcohol and drug abuse, and, in some cases, self-harm or suicide ([United Nations, 2019](#)). School dropout can also be associated with problems in adult life, as it can increase the risk of family rejection ([Thoreson, 2019](#)), leading to homelessness. In addition, lower levels of education lead to reduced skills and less likelihood of securing a decent job ([Cortez et al., 2021](#)).

School policies and curricula

Including affirming and positive content in school curricula about diverse SOGIESC has a powerful transformative potential. Scientifically accurate information empowers LGBTQI+ students, impacts how they understand themselves and navigate their lives, and affects how other students understand the issues and treat their classmates (and other LGBTQI+ people in their lives). Relationships and sex education that support diversity can establish equitable and respectful attitudes in young people, contributing to a generational norm shift. Schools can also teach critical thinking skills, which enable young people to challenge gender stereotypes and call out discriminatory gender norms ([Muñoz and Perez Murcia, 2021](#)).



Only 17% of 50 reviewed countries include SOGIESC in their sex education curricula.

But many countries do not include LGBTQI+ content in school sex education curricula at all ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). UNESCO reports that only 17% of 50 reviewed countries include SOGIESC in their sex education curricula ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). In the FRA survey in Europe in 2023, 35% of respondents aged 15–17 said that their school education never addressed LGBTQI+ issues, an improvement from the 47% found in the 2019 survey, but still a significant share ([FRA, 2024](#)). In some African countries, political discourses about maintaining traditional social norms, national identities, and protecting children's 'innocence' have resulted in the exclusion of homosexuality, abortion and pleasure from curricula ([Achen et al., 2023](#)). For example, in Burkina Faso in 2021, the then Minister for National Education, Professor Stanislas Ouaro, spoke against comprehensive sexuality education as an attempt by development partners to force acceptance of homosexuality in the country ([ISDAO and QAYN, 2022](#)).

If schools do include LGBTQI+ content in their curricula, it is often framed in a negative way. In South African schools, for example, queer youth reported that sexuality is often framed in terms of deviance, danger and disease to encourage abstinence ([Francis, 2019](#)). A textbook released in Cameroon in 2018 conflated and denounced homosexuality, sodomy and zoophilia (the textbook was later retracted as conservative forces felt that it normalised pornography and immorality) ([Awondo et al., 2022](#)). Discriminatory teaching materials and curricula reinforce negative stereotypes, embed unequal gender norms and contribute to bullying and violence against LGBTQI+ students ([Cortez et al., 2021](#)).



The absence or poor delivery of CSE contributes to reinforcing unequal gender norms for another generation.

Even if LGBTQI+ content is included in the official curriculum, some teachers may choose to skip it if they feel uncomfortable about it, are opposed to it, or if they do not feel well-equipped to answer questions ([UNESCO et al., 2021](#)). UNESCO's worldwide review of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) shows it is very common for teachers to be poorly trained on sexuality education and struggle to provide accurate information, even if they are supportive ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). The absence or poor delivery of CSE contributes to reinforcing unequal gender norms for another generation, instead of leveraging the transformative potential of education (see [Module 5](#)).

Anti-rights movements have mobilised to oppose inclusive curricula and sex education ([Datta, 2021](#)). They often exploit feelings of anxiety around young people's sexuality and sometimes use religious arguments or appeals to tradition and family values to put pressure on schools and governments to remove mentions of homosexuality from curricula. They have been successful in many contexts; for example, the Ministry of Education and Sciences in Paraguay prohibited teaching materials that it deemed supportive of gender theory or 'gender ideology' ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). In Argentina, President Milei has defunded CSE, entirely eliminating the budget to train teachers to teach CSE in 2025 ([Fibgar, 2026](#)).

Removing or silencing discussions about SOGIESC has direct and negative outcomes for LGBTQI+ young people. In the US, research by the Human Rights Campaign in 2024 shows clearly that hate crimes against LGBTQI+ youth on school campuses have more than quadrupled in states with restrictive LGBTQI+ laws ([Todd, 2024](#)).

School policies on gender expression and identity may also reinforce negative gender norms. School dress codes are part of the hidden curriculum that reinforces norms of 'appropriate' appearance for each gender, which may be stereotyped ([Cumming-Potvin, 2023](#)). If gendered dress and hair codes reflect stereotypical and conservative gender norms and are strictly enforced, they can discriminate against gender non-conforming students, especially those marginalised by race and class as well, which UNESCO refers to as institutional violence ([UNESCO, 2016](#)). Gender-restrictive dress codes can sometimes marginalise transgender students to such an extent that they drop out of school ([Cumming-Potvin, 2023](#)).

The absence of gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities might negatively affect those who do not feel safe in sex-segregated facilities. This is not limited to transgender students; lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are often made to feel unwelcome by their peers in single-sex facilities such as communal changing rooms ([Harris et al., 2022](#)).

Teachers

Teachers fulfil multiple roles, from facilitating learning and upholding a school's values and discipline system, to advocating for change and providing pastoral support to individual students. In the context of LGBTQI+ rights, a teacher's most important role is to act as an ally, role model and advocate for young people. A national survey in the US by GLSEN in 2016 found that LGBTQI+ educators were more likely to support LGBTQI+ students, with 74% of respondents engaging in advice, personal support, advocacy and teaching LGBTQI+ topics

(versus 49% of non-LGBTQI+ teachers)([GLSEN, 2016](#)). Visibility and role-modelling are strong supportive elements for LGBTQI+ youth and contribute to more inclusive gender norms. But homophobic environments affect teachers too, and many are unable to protect LGBTQI+ students if they fear there will be professional repercussions.

GLSEN's US survey shows that LGBTQI+ educators face a hostile environment at school. In particular, many fear that they will face a backlash from parents and school administrators – or even lose their job – if their identity is known or if they engage in inclusive and affirming practices for their LGBTQI+ students. Another study in the US reports a strong discourse of privacy, caution and silence among lesbian, bisexual and gay educators to different degrees, as they navigate selective levels of 'outness' ([Simons et al., 2021](#)). Most of the evidence on LGBTQI+ teachers comes from the US, but available evidence points to a few examples from other countries ([Hordatt Gentles and Kumar Shrestha, n.d.](#)):

- In Czechia, a study in 2021 found that 52% of LGBTQI+ educators did not talk about their sexual orientation at work; 71% reported that they feared negative reactions from their colleagues; 64% feared it would damage their relationships in the workplace; and 44% feared it would impede their professional progress.
- In Israel, a study in 2021 found that 94% of teachers had received homophobic and insulting comments from their students and 53% had heard homophobic comments from other teachers and staff members.

These fears of negative repercussions appear to be well-grounded. For example, in Chile in 2007, a teacher who came out as lesbian had her teaching certificate revoked (her certificate was later reinstated through the Inter-American Court of Human Rights)([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)). In addition, the recent surge of anti-gender campaigns has targeted teachers who affirm LGBTQI+ rights. In Brazil, teachers who are perceived to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights have been threatened, harassed, intimidated and even criminally investigated by state actors ([SAIH, 2020](#)).



The volatile and rapidly changing nature of anti-LGBTQI+ laws and political discourse leaves teachers very uncertain about what they are allowed to say.

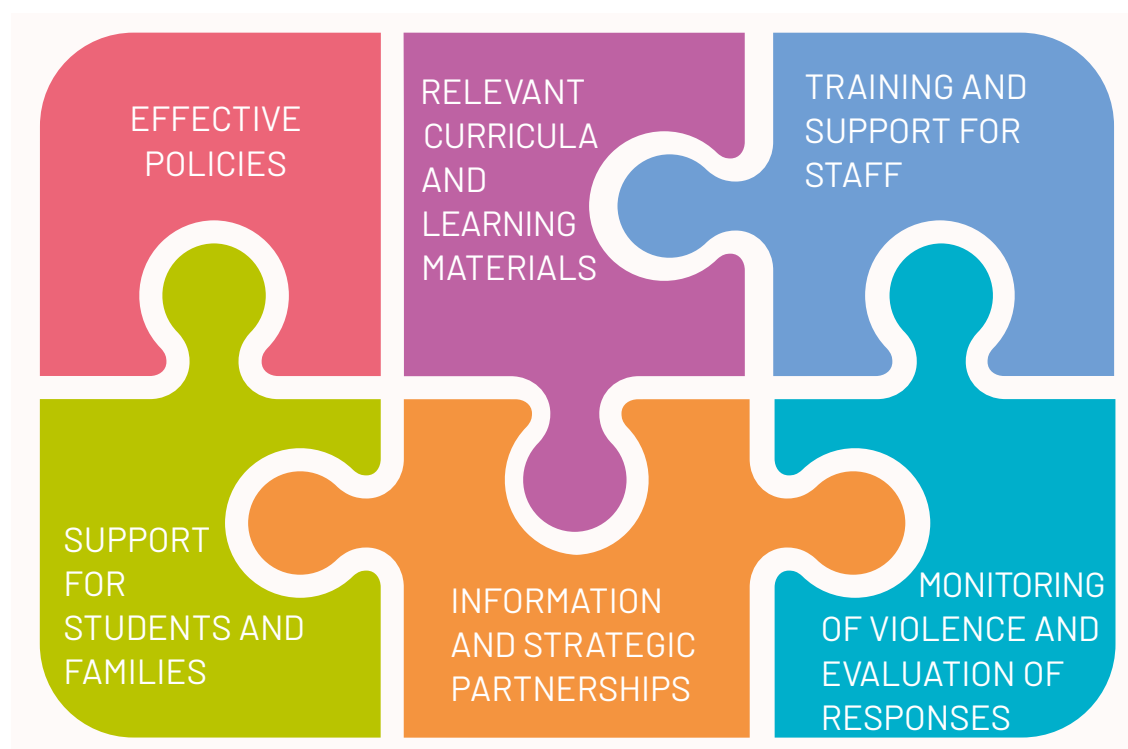
The volatile and rapidly changing nature of anti-LGBTQI+ laws and political discourse leaves teachers very uncertain about what they are allowed to say. Many end up self-silencing in order to avoid repercussions. Removing supportive teachers directly imperils LGBTQI+ students, who lose allies in a structural position of power. As school employees, LGBTQI+ teachers are protected under legal provisions that prohibit discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC in the 81 countries that had such provisions, as of 2022 ([Hordatt Gentles and Kumar Shrestha, n.d.](#)). Yet the enactment of legal protections is often weak.

Effective policies

The education sector has a responsibility to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Tackling anti-LGBTQI+ discrimination in schools supports progress towards [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#) (SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and upholds the rights to education and the rights of the child, as agreed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Although many countries are reluctant to state their full support for LGBTQI+ rights, almost all states have signed the CRC, which protects the right to education for all children, including their protection against discrimination on the basis of their SOGIESC.

UNESCO's 2016 policy recommendations on education sector responses to violence based on SOGIESC (Figure 8.2) are a useful guide on how different elements connect to create a comprehensive response ([UNESCO, 2016](#)). The next section follows this outline, drawing together recommendations on what works.

Figure 8.2: The elements of a comprehensive education sector response to homophobic and transphobic violence



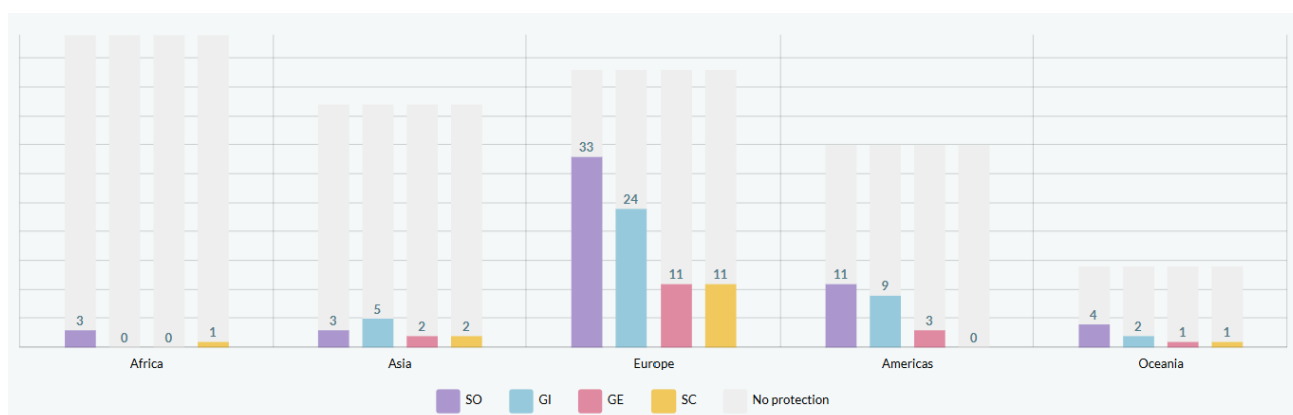
Source: [UNESCO \(2016: 37\)](#).

Legal provisions

At their root, homophobic, queerphobic and transphobic violence and discrimination are the results of restrictive gender norms that must be addressed in wider society, going beyond schools ([UNESCO, 2016](#)). Schools' ability to tackle discrimination depends on the legal and policy environment that surrounds them. For example, if same-sex activity is

criminalised by law, schools will have only limited room for manoeuvre. Figure 8.3, from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), shows the extent of legal provisions for protection against discrimination in education, on sexual orientation (SO), gender identity (GI), gender expression (GE), and sex characteristics (SC).

Figure 8.3: Number of countries with legal provisions for protection against discrimination in education, as of 2024



Source: [ILGA \(2026, April update\)](#).

A supportive legal framework facilitates schools' implementation of anti-discrimination measures ([Cortez et al., 2021](#)). In South Africa, which has constitutional protections for LGBTQI+ rights, students have successfully challenged discrimination from teachers, showing that a robust legal system is necessary ([Thoreson, 2019](#)). It is helpful to have national or regional action plans that specifically prohibit school bullying based on SOGIESC ([UNESCO, 2020](#)).

Laws and policies on anti-discrimination must also protect teachers as (state or private) employees. Governments and education employers should uphold workers' rights in line with International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190 of 2019 against violence and harassment at work ([ILO, 2019](#)), and protect specific LGBTQI+ rights within wider strategies – for example, in teachers' unions. Laws alone are usually not enough, as they can be poorly implemented, or they may lack political support ([UNESCO, 2023](#)).

Non-discriminatory school policies and facilities

All school policies should be inclusive, with anti-discrimination measures and inclusive language throughout ([GLSEN, n.d.](#)). One example is Argentina's 'Maternity Rooms', where adolescent parents can leave their young children while they learn ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). SOGIESC-inclusive policies also benefit staff ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). It may also be helpful to provide at least one gender-neutral toilet in addition to single-sex facilities, although this may be difficult in contexts that lack clean and safe water and toilet facilities more generally. Gender-neutral uniforms or relaxed dress codes may foster inclusion ([UNESCO and ILGA, 2021](#)). Allowing students to change their names and pronouns is a delicate matter to manage, including debates on what age is appropriate and whether parents should be informed ([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)), but in principle these changes can counter discrimination ([UNESCO and ILGA, 2021](#)).

Case study: Mixed success – Chile



Chile's legal framework is not committed to CSE, but a patchwork of other laws and policies have made progress on creating more inclusive schools. However, this progress is threatened by the election of José Antonio Kast in 2026, who leads a far-right party that is known to stand against LGBTQI+ rights.

Social movements in Chile have played a strong role in pushing for legal protections for LGBTQI+ people, including in schools. Protests in 2006 led to the inclusion of sexuality and gender in the life-skills curriculum, and further mobilisation prompted the Gender Identity law in 2019. The latter law is seen by teachers as clearly protecting trans students against discrimination and encouraging behaviour change towards inclusion among teachers. However, sexual orientation is not explicitly protected or discussed in the law and policy, but contained within broad references to diversity and non-discrimination. Further, decisions on the curriculum content are left to individual schools, which leaves gaps in coverage and content. Many teachers have positive attitudes to sexual diversity but report lacking confidence to lead SOGIESC discussions, especially under conservative pressures. International anti-gender groups have been active in Chile for at least ten years, and parent-led groups have protested specifically against LGBTQI+ inclusion in school policies. The rising pressure against LGBTQI+ rights means that supportive teachers and schools may struggle to maintain commitments to inclusion.

Source: [León-Himmelstine et al. \(2025\)](#); [Vidal Velis et al. \(2024\)](#); [UNESCO \(2023\)](#).

School anti-bullying policies

Proactive policies have a strong impact on reducing anti-LGBTQI+ harassment, increasing staff intervention, and increasing the likelihood that students will report incidents ([GLSEN, 2025](#)). School policies need to specifically state that violence against LGBTQI+ people is prohibited, as generic anti-bullying policies are not as effective ([UNESCO, 2016](#)).

Relevant curricula and learning materials

Including LGBTQI+ content in a positive way in teaching about gender and sexuality has a strong impact on students' attendance and feelings of school belonging, as shown by GLSEN research ([GLSEN, 2024](#)). CSE that positively covers LGBTQI+ issues can also develop more positive attitudes to diverse SOGIESC among all students, and reduce anti-LGBTQI+ bullying, contributing to a shift in norms towards greater acceptance of sexual and gender diversity ([Kosciw et al., 2022](#)). CSE gives critical skills to young people related to their sexual health and reproductive rights and has been shown to reduce gender- and sexual-based violence and unintended pregnancies, as well as delaying the age of marriage for young women ([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)). As such, CSE benefits all young people, not just LGBTQI+ students ([UNESCO, 2023](#)).



CSE gives critical skills to young people [...] and has been shown to reduce gender- and sexual-based violence.

Changing the content of teaching materials sometimes requires specific legislation to change curricula, remove discriminatory language and revise textbooks (Cortez et al., 2021). UNESCO cites a positive example from Namibia, where the Life Skills curriculum requires students to understand and discuss differing sexualities (UNESCO, 2016). Curricula need to be adaptable to local contexts, which includes using local terms for different genders and sexualities, and incorporating other intersectional identities.

Training and support for staff

Teacher training on LGBTQI+ issues

It is important to invest in teacher capacity and confidence to deliver inclusive curricula and address norms underpinning anti-LGBTQI+ bullying (UNESCO and ILGA, 2021). This requires including positive LGBTQI+ content in pre-service training and continuing professional development (Clark and Kosciw, 2022). Teachers who have positive attitudes to LGBTQI+ rights may be able to influence their students even where such topics are not formally taught (Wekesah et al., 2019). As discussed in more detail in [Module 5](#), effective teacher training helps teachers critically examine their own gender biases and the norms they, perhaps unknowingly, reinforce in the classroom (UNICEF, 2021). Sweden, for example, has tried a 'norm critical' approach for in-service training, which examines how and why norms determine who is 'normal' or 'abnormal' and encourages staff to reflect on discrimination and difference (UNESCO, 2016).

Teacher training on anti-LGBTQI+ bullying

Providing awareness training to staff, students, teachers and parents is important to prevent bullying (Cortez et al., 2021). Training on generic bullying at school is not considered sufficient by UNESCO to address the specificities of homophobic and transphobic bullying (UNESCO, 2016). Teachers benefit from training on anti-discrimination measures (Cortez et al., 2021) and how to recognise and address SOGIESC issues among students, and on preventing violence (UNESCO, 2016). Training should take an intersectional approach that understands how different groups of young people experience discrimination related to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Support for students and families

Support for people experiencing bullying

Measures should be put in place to support students who are the target of bullying or are affected by discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC. These could include counselling in school or referrals to outside services (UNESCO, 2016). Japan, for example, has a national LGBTQI+ helpline to call, and the UK has a website to report online abuse (UNESCO, 2016). It is important to note, however, that solutions should not require students to put up with bullying or suppress their SOGIESC in order to fit in, and should be supportive of diversity. Resource constraints limit what is possible but even having a sympathetic teacher to talk to can be helpful (Turn the Bus, 2019).

Case study: Best practice – gender-sexuality alliances



These student-run clubs are often considered in the literature as a successful mechanism to create inclusive schools. They bring together LGBTQI+ students with supporters to discuss and address issues of gender and sexuality in their schools and communities. In the Netherlands, research found that LGBTQI students who had a GSA club in their school were:

- more likely to report that the general student body was more accepting of LGBTQI+ people
- more likely to feel that they belong in their school
- less likely to miss days of school because of feeling unsafe
- less likely to hear biased remarks, such as ‘that’s so gay’, at school.

Source: [IGLYO \(2024\)](#).

Supportive school personnel

Supportive and sympathetic staff can help LGBTQI+ students feel a greater sense of school belonging and become less likely to skip school ([GLSEN, 2022](#)). Changing attitudes and awareness among school staff is essential to increase support for LGBTQI+ students. For LGBTQI+ teachers, a supportive work environment and allies among the staff can help them to become positive role models.

Guidance for family members

Guidance is needed for the families of all school students on how to respond to harassment and violence, as well as awareness campaigns and materials on the rights of students and relevant school policies on inclusion ([GLSEN, 2020](#)). Families also need support to provide a positive and accepting home environment for the well-being of LGBTQI+ young people, because approaches that are only school-based will not work without buy-in from families ([UNESCO and ILGA, 2021](#)).

Information and strategic partnerships

Partnerships, in particular with LGBTQI+ community organisations, can contribute to successful responses to counter discrimination. UNESCO research shows that one common



In many countries, civil society organisations are also leading advocacy on LGBTQI+ rights and SOGIESC education in schools, countering the narrative of conservative anti-gender movements.

feature of progress on including SOGIESC in CSE has been collaboration and partnership between ministries of education and LGBTQI+ civil society organisations ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). For example, in Nepal in 2014, the non-governmental organisation Blue Diamond Society developed and delivered a training course for teachers and school administrators. This supported the introduction of a new inclusive curriculum on sexual and reproductive health and helped schools identify solutions to address problems faced by their LGBTQI+ students ([UNESCO, 2016](#)).

Other initiatives by LGBTQI+ organisations include anti-bullying networks with teachers and student unions, long-term awareness raising and training, and contributing to education policies and curricula development. In Cambodia, for example, the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia has trained Ministry of Education staff on inclusive language in the CSE curriculum, explaining why each term is accurate, scientific and age-appropriate ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). The training changed attitudes among the Ministry's senior leadership, some of whom began to use more LGBTQI+ inclusive language. Community organisations can be particularly helpful in translating national educational policies into locally appropriate terms, using language that will be effective for different identity groups. In many countries, civil society organisations are also leading advocacy on LGBTQI+ rights and SOGIESC education in schools, countering the narrative of conservative anti-gender movements ([UNESCO, 2023](#)).

Monitoring of violence and evaluation of responses

Policies alone are not enough; they must be supported by reporting and disciplinary procedures. These procedures can be as simple as anti-bullying committees in schools, as seen in India ([Cortez et al., 2021](#)). In addition, school practices should include clear guidance on how to report discrimination and provide follow-up mechanisms for staff ([GLSEN, 2020](#)). UNGEI's Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework for Ending School-Related Gender-Based Violence provide a helpful framework for action ([UNGEI, 2019](#)). Also see [Module 5](#).

Useful resources

[Browne \(2019\)](#) - *Gender norms, LGBTQI issues and development* is an online guide from ALIGN that summarises the impact of gendered social norms on LGBTQI+ people in developing countries.

[Browne \(2024\)](#) - *Hostile landscapes: how do gender-restrictive actors contribute to violence against LGBTQI+ people* is a report by ALIGN that assesses the influence of anti-gender actors in creating a climate that normalises violence against LGBTQI+ people.

[Cortez et al. \(2021\)](#) - The World Bank report, *Equality of opportunity for sexual and gender minorities*, offers policy recommendations to address the challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities in six areas: criminalisation, education, labour markets, public services and social protection, civil and political inclusion, and protection from hate crimes.

[D'Angelo, et al. \(2024\)](#) - ALIGN's report, *Whose hands on our education? Identifying and countering gender-restrictive backlash*, focuses on the activities of gender-restrictive actors and organisations that promote a narrow vision of gender relations through the education system.

[GLSEN \(2020\)](#) - *Model state anti-bullying and harassment legislation: Model language, commentary, and references* provides a model legislative framework and guidance for states to develop comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment laws that protect students, including LGBTQI+ youth, in schools.

[GLSEN and Todo Mejora \(2019\)](#) - The report, *A global school climate crisis: Insights on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender & queer students in Latin America*, illuminates a crisis for LGBTQI+ students across seven countries in Latin America and explores its structural, cultural, or governmental roots.

[MAG Jeunes \(2018\)](#) - The summary report, *Global consultation: Inclusive education and access to health of LGBTI+ youth around the world*, published with support from UNESCO, outlines findings from the first large-scale qualitative study on the inclusion and exclusion experiences of the world's LGBTI+ youth.

[UNESCO \(2023\)](#) - *Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) country profiles* summarises the progress made by 50 countries in relation to CSE, covering all regions of the world and all income levels.

[UNESCO \(2016\)](#) - *Out in the open: Education sector responses to violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression* summarises key findings from a global review of homophobic and transphobic violence in educational settings and of education sector responses.

[UNESCO and ILGA \(2021\)](#) - UNESCO's policy paper, *Don't look away: no place for exclusion of LGBTI students*, reviews evidence on the challenges faced by LGBTI learners and measures taken around the world that promote or undermine their educational inclusion.