



Rutgers

Freedom to think. Freedom to thrive.

Reshaping sexuality education
for new realities.

Young people are navigating a digital, divided world: relationship and sexuality education must evolve across systems and societies to meet their realities and needs.

2025

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A close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on the eye and cheek area. The person has dark skin and their hair is styled in thick, dark braids. A blue garment is visible on the left side of the frame. A light blue rectangular box is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image, containing the text "Executive summary".

Executive summary



Freedom to think. Freedom to thrive.

This white paper presents a forward-looking agenda for ensuring relationship and sexuality education is safeguarded, inclusive and resilient in an era of complex digital realities, ideological backlash and drastic cuts in global health funding. It argues that relationship and sexuality education must evolve. Evolve not only to protect young people's health and safety but also to strengthen equality, trust and democratic participation.

For Rutgers and its partners, the way forward is clear: confront online harms, scale proven approaches sustainably and unite resilience.

Unlocking the future: Three strategic priorities

Confront online harm and disinformation.

Young people's lives are increasingly shaped by digital spaces—where misogyny, extremist narratives and disinformation proliferate. To protect and support them:

- Embed digital literacy within relationship and sexuality education so young people can recognise manipulation, disinformation and resist harmful gender norms.
- Equip parents, educators and caregivers with the tools to support open conversations about digital life.
- Invest in youth-led initiatives and credible counter-narratives that challenge extremist voices with positive alternatives.
- Expose the networks behind attacks on Relationship and sexuality education and show how they use fear and disinformation to undermine trust in evidence-based teaching.



Scale what works, sustainably and strategically.

With reduced donor investments in global health and political pushback, relationship and sexuality education must move beyond temporary interventions. Long-term success requires:

- Embedding relationship and sexuality education in national or subnational education systems and policies, rather than as donor-dependent projects.
- Strengthen civil society organisations to advance systemic change, ensuring relationship and sexuality education is integrated into curricula and accessible to all young people.
- Supporting research and local adaptation so programmes are cost-effective, relevant and politically resilient.
- Harnessing digital innovation to expand safe and inclusive access, while avoiding new digital divides.



Build collective power and resilience.

Attacks on relationship and sexuality education are part of wider anti-rights and anti-democratic agendas. They demand coordinated, cross-movement responses. This means:

- Forging alliances across sectors and geographies, connecting with feminist, youth, LGBTQI+, racial justice, disability and climate movements.
- Creating infrastructures for mutual protection, shared learning and coordinated advocacy.
- Supporting locally led campaigns and storytelling that link relationship and sexuality education to community values and lived realities.
- Using digital platforms and international spaces to amplify diverse voices and connect struggles for equality and education.
- Ensure sustained funding for alliances and locally led initiatives that counter anti-rights narratives and protect progress on relationship and sexuality education.



Reading guide

This white paper is structured to move from context to solutions:

- **Introduction (p. 8–13):** outlines pressures facing young people today.
- **Chapters 1 and 2 (p. 14–23):** details digital and political forces undermining relationship and sexuality education.
- **The way forward (p. 24–37):** presents the proposed strategy—confronting harm, scaling sustainably and building collective resilience.
- **Recommendations (p. 29, 33, 36):** summarises actionable guidance for governments, donors and civil society.

The paper offers recommendations for policymakers and donors, alongside insights on digital culture and programme design that may inform practitioners and researchers.

Tone and intent

At its heart, this paper highlights the urgency of ensuring relationship and sexuality education keeps pace with young people's realities. It reflects a commitment to evidence, collaboration and innovation, while emphasising solidarity with the movements and communities working to protect young people's rights. The agenda laid out is both practical and ambitious: it seeks not only to withstand external pressures but to transform them into opportunities for more inclusive, sustainable education systems.

Conclusion

Relationship and sexuality education is a vital investment in young people's lives and futures. By working together to equip young people with critical skills, embed programmes in resilient systems, and build strong alliances, we can support their healthy, safe and happy development and ensure their freedom to think and freedom to thrive.

Who we are

Rutgers is the Dutch centre of knowledge and expertise on sexual health, safety and wellbeing. We provide reliable information, resources and support young people to make informed decisions about their bodies, lives and futures. In collaboration with partners and experts working in education, healthcare and wellbeing, we support young people to grow up healthy, safe and happy. Our work spans the Netherlands, Europe and globally.

For this paper, we bring together relevant literature, practitioners' knowledge and programmatic insights (including those of youth-led organisations) and the expertise of SRHR professionals. With these perspectives, we explore the implications of current developments for relationship and sexuality education and we guide strategic discussions on investment, research and collaboration.



Introduction

Reshaping relationship and sexuality education for a generation navigating unprecedented social change

Being young is a time of growth, discovery and possibility. Today's young people bring creativity, resilience and a desire for connection to a world that is rapidly changing. As they navigate complex physical, emotional and social transitions, they do so amid digital disruption, social fragmentation and widening inequalities. As digital culture reshapes how young people connect, learn and express themselves, relationship and sexuality education plays a vital role in helping them build confidence and critical thinking. While political and ideological pressures are growing, young people are also using online spaces to find information, share experiences and advocate for change – when they're equipped with the tools to do so.

In a changing world, young people need support to develop the knowledge, skills and values that help them navigate relationships, sexual health, safety and well-being. Relationship and sexuality education plays a key role in this process and must be inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant to reflect the realities of young people's day-to-day lives.

Relationship and sexuality education is a lifeline for young people, helping them make informed decisions, communicate effectively and build meaningful connections with others. These skills support not only individual well-being, but also stronger families, schools and communities.

Progress under pressure

In recent decades, governments and communities around the world have taken meaningful steps to expand access to relationship and sexuality education and to make it more relevant to young people's lives. Many programmes now go beyond a narrow focus on biology, contraception and disease prevention. Instead, they support young people to exploring relationships, identity, consent and emotional well-being, equipping them with skills they can draw on throughout their lives.

Civil society organisations have played a vital role in this progress - driving innovation, supporting inclusive design and delivery, and advocating for education that reflects the realities young people face today. Young people themselves are increasingly shaping this work by sharing their perspectives, challenging outdated curricula and helping design education that speaks to their needs and lived experiences.¹

Yet, progress is facing growing resistance. Well-funded, transnational networks of extreme-right, ultra-conservative, and so-called 'anti-rights' actors, are actively working to challenge gains in human rights at both national and international levels.² In many contexts, this has led to renewed efforts to restrict relationship and sexuality education in favour of abstinence-only education, sharply limiting access to inclusive, accurate and developmentally-appropriate information for millions of young people.

At the same time, funding cuts from major donor governments and increasing restrictions on civil society organisations are limiting their ability to defend young people's rights, support innovation and strengthen education programmes.

Today's largest generation of young people is growing up in an unprecedented digital world³ – one that offers new possibilities for connection and learning, but also exposes them to serious risks. This digital reality is reshaping how they understand themselves, relate to others and engage with the world around them. These shifts have significant implications for their social and sexual health, safety and well-being, making it even more important to ensure they receive education that helps them navigate these complexities with confidence and care.



Rethinking ways to support young people

Governments, civil society and the communities around young people must work together to protect the progress made. At the same time, they need to rethink relationship and sexuality education so it reflects the rapidly changing realities young people face today.

What's needed now is a revitalised, unified effort across sectors and disciplines to reshape relationship and sexuality education so it truly meets the needs and aspirations of young people, wherever they live. This is especially important as digital technologies reshape how young people learn and connect.

When well-designed and inclusive, this education equips young people with the tools to build respectful relationships, communicate across differences, and contribute to stronger, more connected communities. These skills not only support individual well-being, but also help families, schools and societies thrive.

To get there, we need better ways to involve young people in shaping education; to build stronger evidence about what works across diverse settings; and to support governments and public institutions to implement high-quality, cost-efficient education at scale.

Equally important is investing in partnerships and collaboration that bring together different perspectives and expertise. A united approach can create the conditions for young people to grow up informed, supported and confident in navigating their lives.

This paper shines a light on the complex new realities young people are navigating today. Drawing on global research and insights, it explores the barriers they face and highlights proven ways to support their sexual health, safety and well-being. It aims to guide strategic discussions on investment, research and collaboration – moving beyond defending relationship and sexuality education towards advancing it as a vital part in young people's lives.

Education that meets the needs and aspirations of young people.

reshaping
sexual
education

Growing up online: what digital change means for relationship and sexuality education

Young people today spend a growing share of their lives online⁴, primarily through mobile devices. Digital content is now central to how many understand the world – shaping their views on relationships, sexuality and identity in profound ways. This makes it essential to rethink how relationship and sexuality education approaches digital culture and its influence on young people's lives.

Online spaces can be a vital gateway to information and support on sexual and reproductive health and rights⁵, often with fewer concerns about stigma, confidentiality, cost, or access. For young people in restrictive environments – whether socially, geographically or politically - or those from marginalised groups, the internet can be one of the few available lifelines.

Much of the content young people encounter online is unregulated and profit-driven, with little regard for accuracy or well-being. This increases their exposure to disinformation and misinformation and online spaces that reinforce harmful gender norms and inequalities, such as the so-called 'manosphere'. These spaces can negatively affect how young people understand relationships, identity and may increase their exposure to exploitation, coercion and radicalisation.

These risks are compounded by poor platform regulation and limited access to reliable guidance on digital safety. Without stronger safeguards and support, young people can be more exposed to online harms. The following sections explore these emerging trends and consider what they mean for the future of relationship and sexuality education.

digital trends

Sexually explicit content and media

With increased internet access, more young people are encountering sexually explicit material, including online pornography, sometimes from an early age. Some seek it out intentionally, driven by curiosity or peer influence; others come across it unintentionally, such as by mistyping a search term. For many boys, in particular, exposure to online pornography has become a routine part of adolescence.

Sexually explicit content and media can play a role in exploring sexuality from puberty onwards. However, the kind of content young people encounter matters. Some mainstream material contains violent, misogynist, racist or degrading themes, which can shape unrealistic expectations of relationships and sex.⁶ This can reinforce harmful gender norms and unsafe or unhealthy behaviours, including sexual coercion, unsafe practices, disrespect in intimate relationships and inconsistent condom use.⁷

Disinformation and misinformation are shaping how young people understand relationships, health and sexuality

Across the internet, disinformation and misinformation on topics such as relationships, health and sexuality are spreading quickly and often unchecked. In today's competitive online 'attention economy', provocative and polarising content tends to be amplified by algorithms – giving visibility to material that may be misleading or harmful. This dynamic is now a lucrative business model, benefitting influencers who profit from engagement rather than accuracy.⁸

False or manipulative content often travels faster than reliable information, reaching young people at scale with little oversight. Algorithms⁹ can reinforce harmful messages without users even realising, entrenching stereotypes and limiting access to balanced, evidence-based content. This challenge is a particularly acute in parts of the Global South, where platforms like Facebook remain a key news source,¹⁰ yet have scaled back investments in moderation and editorial oversight.¹¹

At the same time, content promoting gender equality, well-being and sexual and reproductive health and rights is often mislabelled as explicit or inappropriate, and removed.¹² As a result, legitimate educational material are harder to find, reducing young people's access to accurate information.

The rise of peer-to-peer content and closed messaging groups adds complexity, giving misinformation a stronger foothold while crowding out guidance from schools, parents and healthcare professionals. But young people are not navigating this alone. With the right support, they can build skills to assess and question the information they encounter, in partnership with their families, communities and trusted adults. Strengthening these connections can help ensure that digital spaces complement, rather than undermine, young people's understanding of relationships and sexuality.

Understanding digital influences on boys: Masculinity, identity and belonging in online spaces

Some of the powerful online influences shaping how adolescent boys think about gender, identity and relationships today come from what is often referred to as the ‘manosphere’ – a loose network of online communities and personalities focused on masculinity, men’s rights and gender roles. While this ecosystem spans a wide range of perspectives, its more extreme corners promote misogynistic,¹³ homophobic and racist content, often delivered through charismatic ‘manfluencers’ such as Andrew and Tristan Tate.

These figures often blend advice on topics that resonate with boys – such as self-improvement, confidence, wealth and physical fitness – with narratives that present feminism and gender equality as threats to male status and identity. This framing can create a sense of male victimhood and ‘aggrieved entitlement’: the resentment and hostility some men feel when they perceive a loss of traditional privileges.¹⁴

Many of these influencers revive restrictive, binary ideas of gender and ‘male supremacy’, often using pseudoscience or evolutionary claims. Some go further and promote physical, sexual and psychological violence against women and girls, normalising harassment or coercive behaviour through humour or manipulation.¹⁵

Importantly, boys are not always actively seeking out this content. Algorithms can promote it to them unprompted¹⁶, drawing them into echo chambers where views become increasingly extreme. This ‘radicalisation pipeline’ can entrench harmful gender norms and increase the risk of tech-facilitated gender-based violence^{17,18} and in some cases offline harm. Misogynistic narratives are also becoming more closely linked with other forms of hate and extremism,¹⁹ including racism, anti-LGBTQI+ ideologies and online exploitation.

Girls are also being drawn into parallel subcultures. The ‘tradwife’ trend, for example, features female influencers who promote ultra-conservative gender roles and aesthetics.^{20,21} These messages can appeal to adolescent girls for various reasons^{22,23} – from aesthetic appeal or a desire for safety and belonging – but often carry anti-feminist, anti-abortion, fundamentalist ideologies. Some openly oppose relationship and sexuality education, instead promoting homeschooling as a way to shield children from progressive ideas.

These digital spaces shape how young people understand gender, relationships, consent and equality. Those who lack strong support networks, trusted adults or positive role models offline, may be susceptible to these messages, especially in environments where gender inequality is already being reinforced.

In this context, relationship and sexuality education that reflects the digital realities of young people’s lives is more essential than ever. This means not only equipping them with critical thinking skills to challenge harmful content, but also creating space for honest conversations about identity, belonging and the pressures they face online. It also involves working with families, educators and communities – so that young people are supported by the people around them.

What young people need to stay safe online

As digital access and innovation accelerate and weak regulation persists, young people face growing risks of tech-facilitated gender-based violence. It takes many forms, including online harassment, cyberstalking, doxing, sextortion and rape threats. These forms of violence are evolving rapidly, outpacing regulation and support structures. Anonymity, speed and poor oversight give perpetrators more freedom to act and to adapt.

Some forms of tech-facilitated gender-based violence are specifically targeted at children. In 2023/24, one in eight of the world's children were victims of the non-consensual taking, sharing of and exposure to sexually explicit images and videos.²⁴ The rise of generative artificial intelligence has introduced new risks, including the creation and spread of sexualised deepfake images of women and children.²⁵

Tech-facilitated gender-based violence reflects and reinforces long-standing gender-based violence patterns. While girls and women are most often targeted, boys and LGBTQI+ people are also at risk. In a 2020 study of 32 countries, more than half of the girls (51%) reported experiencing harassment on social media.²⁶ Children who face intersecting forms of discrimination are particularly vulnerable – including those with disabilities, indigenous children, and ethnic or religious minorities – are especially at risk.²⁷

The impacts can be serious and long-lasting. Alongside, deep psychosocial damage, digital violence can spill over into physical violence - and vice versa.²⁸ The socioeconomic consequences are also significant, particularly for girls and young women, who may “self-censor and withdraw from online civic and political spaces”.²⁹ At a time when so much of life takes place online, this withdrawal deepens exclusion and silencing.³⁰

Tech-facilitated gender-based violence is increasingly being used as a political tool. Both state and non-state actors have deployed digital violence to target dissenting voices, stoke division and restrict democratic debate.³¹

Yet, despite the scale and seriousness of this issue developments, regulatory responses remain weak in many countries.^{32,33} Public understanding of tech-facilitated gender-based violence – what it is, its legal implications and how to respond – remains limited. Digital literacy is often inadequate, especially for young women and girls, who face the highest risks. Outreach on ‘digital hygiene’ - the practices to keep people safer online³⁴ – is also limited.

Tackling misogyny and harassment in online gaming environments

The multibillion-dollar gaming industry and its adjacent platforms have become central to young people's entertainment and social lives. Millions of children – especially boys – play online video games from a young age. The rise of livestreaming has amplified this trend. Watching or becoming a 'streamer' – someone who livestreams themselves playing video games on platforms like Twitch, TikTok, DLive and YouTube – is now a mainstream activity and a revenue stream for many boys and young men.

Streamers sometimes blend gaming tips with commentary on masculinity, life advice, or money-making strategies. As such, online gaming communities have become key spaces where ideas about gender are produced and circulated among young people.³⁵ While these communities can provide social connection and skill-building opportunities, they can also spread problematic beliefs and behaviours.^{36,37}

Harassment, abuse and exposure to sexually explicit content remain common in online gaming. In the U.S., 43% of teen video game players report being harassed or bullied while gaming online and 8% say they have received unwanted sexually explicit material.³⁸ The increasing use of in-game and livestream voice chat creates additional challenges for moderating harmful content, particularly in environments where regulation and safeguards are limited.

Conclusion

Relationship and sexuality education must keep pace with the digital realities shaping young people's lives. Unregulated exposure to harmful content is altering how young people understand relationships, sexuality and identity. Without urgent, strategic investment, education systems risk falling dangerously behind.

Relationship and sexuality education must equip young people with the knowledge, critical thinking and digital literacy to navigate them safely. This requires approaches grounded in evidence, shaped by young people's lived experiences and needs and responsive to the complex social and psychological dynamics that draw young people to online content.

At the same time, stronger support is needed to counter the political weaponisation of social media, advance gender equality and promote digital safety. Ensuring relationship and sexuality education remains relevant and protective in the digital age is not optional. It is a vital, urgent investment in the health, safety and well-being of a generation.

Relationship and sexuality education must equip young people with the knowledge, critical thinking and digital literacy to navigate them safely.

How political and ideological trends affect relationship and sexuality education

Around the world, access to sexuality education is under increasing pressure from rising extreme right and ultra-conservative actors, also known as 'anti-rights' networks',³⁹ political shifts and economic challenges. These directly undermine progress in providing young people with inclusive, evidence-based education on sexual health, safety and well-being. The erosion of access to sexuality education threatens not only young people's health and safety but also essential advances in gender equality and human rights.

An anti-rights agenda targeting relationship and sexuality education

Across the world, a well-funded, transnational network of anti-rights actors is working to block, delay or reverse progress on gender equality, human rights and inclusive education. These actors include ultra-conservative political groups and foundations, faith-based organisations, think tanks and digital influencers.⁴⁰ United by a shared opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality, they promote a rigidly patriarchal worldview, reject scientific consensus and seek to undermine public trust in multilateral institutions.

A significant part of this anti-rights network's influence stems from powerful religious groups. Evangelical and Catholic organisations, often funded and supported by U.S. and European networks, play a pivotal role in shaping relationship and sexuality education debates through a normative, heterosexual lens. These faith-based actors leverage culturally resonant narratives, framing relationship and sexuality education and LGBTQI+ rights as threats to 'traditional values' and local customs.

This framing masks the rich diversity of understandings and expressions of gender and sexuality in many contexts prior to colonialism played in introducing rigid binary gender roles and heteronormative standards.⁴¹ Understanding this legacy is important for developing context sensitive strategies that support inclusive sexuality education and counter act anti-rights campaigns.

Relationship and sexuality education has become a central target of their campaigns. In many contexts, anti-rights actors frame it as ideological, inappropriate or dangerous - using it as a rallying point to stoke broader 'culture war' narratives. Terms such as 'woke' are deployed strategically to discredit gender equality, anti-racism and LGBTQI+ inclusion, while emotive claims about so-called gender-ideology are used to justify censorship, policy reversals and regressive legal reforms. These tactics contribute to a wider erosion of democratic institutions, such as freedom of expression, academic independence and inclusive governance.

Digital platforms play a central role in these efforts.⁴² Hard-right political groups frequently collaborate with influencers and tech companies to amplify misinformation, obstruct online safety legislation and build transnational reach. Studies — including one published in *Nature* — have shown that conservative social media users share misinformation at significantly higher volumes than their liberal counterparts.⁴³ As political, cultural and economic life becomes increasingly digital, these connections will deepen and become harder to track and counter.

The consequences for relationship and sexuality education are direct and escalating. Curricula are weakened or removed⁴⁴, educators silenced and ministries deterred from advancing rights-based teaching.⁴⁵ The chilling

effect on education systems and civil society organisations is growing. In many regions, gains made over decades are now at risk.⁴⁶

A coordinated, cross-sectoral response is urgently needed. Donors, policymakers and education leaders must act to safeguard young people's right to accurate, inclusive, developmentally-appropriate education. This means supporting independent institutions, investing in education systems that reflect young people's realities and addressing the spread of digital disinformation. Protecting space for relationship and sexuality education is not only critical to young people's health, safety and well-being - it also underpins broader efforts to uphold human rights and democratic values.

The use of anti-science rhetoric to undermine education and rights

As anti-rights networks gain momentum, anti-science rhetoric is increasingly being used to challenge not only relationship and sexuality education, but also climate research and efforts to decolonise history and political education. This campaign forms part of a wider 'war on woke' – a manufactured culture war designed to mobilise support for populist agendas.⁴⁷

Claims of defending 'free speech' often serve as a selective shield—protecting ultra-conservative views that promote anti-abortion, abstinence-only messages and heteronormative marriage, while silencing voices advocating for gender diversity, abortion rights, contraception and relationship and sexuality education. This selective censorship directly undermines young people's access to vital information and support, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about their bodies, identities and futures.

This coordinated assault⁴⁸ highlights the need to situate relationship and sexuality education within broader political and human rights conversations and to embed it across curricula, rather than isolating it as a standalone subject. With young people's sexual and social experiences increasingly shaped by digital culture and artificial intelligence, restricting access to evidence-based education on multiple fronts threatens their ability to make informed decisions.

Abstinence-only relationship and sexuality education: a growing threat to young people's rights and health

Ultra-conservative anti-rights groups increasingly frame relationship and sexuality education as a threat to their patriarchal and undemocratic goals. In its place they advocate for abstinence-only education programmes that withhold critical information from young people about their bodies, health, safety, relationships, well-being and rights.

These programmes typically stigmatise sex before marriage, promote heteronormative and patriarchal values and exclude or denounce LGBTQI+ people. Young people are left without vital knowledge about contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), consent, or healthy communication. Instead of supporting informed, autonomous decision-making, these approaches often rely on fear, shame and misinformation. Evidence shows that such programmes undermine public health, fail to meet young people's real needs and may even cause harm to them.^{49,50,51}

By contrast, relationship and sexuality education that covers young people's realities and needs, is proven to help young people delay sexual debut, have healthier and more respectful relationships and make safer choices — including consistent contraceptive use.^{52,53,54} When provided in developmentally-appropriate, culturally relevant and evidence-based ways, relationship and sexuality education equips young people with essential skills to navigate a complex social and digital world.

Despite this, ineffective and at times harmful abstinence-only programmes are gaining traction in multiple regions, including the United States,⁵⁵ parts of Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, often propelled by the political influence and digital strategies of anti-rights networks.⁵⁶ These actors use their resources to lobby decision-makers, spread disinformation and reshape policy frameworks in ways that limit what young people are allowed to learn.

These campaigns are often supported by transnational religious alliances, with conservative faith-based groups from the US and Europe actively shaping policies and public attitudes in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa.^{57,58} This coordinated effort amplifies opposition to relationship and sexuality education and reinforces patriarchal, heteronormative norms.

In this context, donors and policymakers must take a clear stance. Young people everywhere deserve access to accurate, relationship and sexuality education that reflects their realities - not programmes that deny them the information they need to make informed choices about their health, safety and well-being, now and in the future.

Global reach of U.S. anti-rights agenda

The growing influence of U.S.-based ultra-conservative networks pose a significant threat to global progress on relationship and sexuality education. Since the 2025 inauguration of President Trump, policies emerging from Project 2025a have explicitly called for the elimination of relationship sexuality education, the criminalisation of gender-diverse content and the redefinition of trans identities as 'pornography'.⁵⁹

These efforts extend beyond U.S. borders. Through foreign aid, diplomatic pressure and alliances with like-minded actors, the U.S. government and conservative lobby groups have increasingly shaped policies on sexual and reproductive health and rights. This includes defunding UN agencies, pushing anti-abortion declarations and supporting local campaigns against relationship sexuality education.^{60,61}

This transnational pressure strengthens anti-rights actors around the world and makes it harder for governments and educators to protect young people's right to accurate, inclusive and developmentally-appropriate education.

a Project 2025 is a roadmap devised by ultra-conservative U.S. groups aimed at shaping harmful policies both in the U.S. and globally



Global donors and development partners must respond by supporting strong, evidence-based education systems and resisting efforts to export restrictive ideologies through development assistance.

Donor withdrawal threatens decades of progress

Amid shifting global priorities and financial constraints, funding for sexual and reproductive health and rights - including relationship and sexuality education - is under increasing pressure. Several leading donor countries have recently scaled back international aid, affecting programmes that support young people's rights, health and well-being.^{62,63}

One of the most far-reaching examples is the dismantling of USAID. The resulting budget reductions threaten to decimate sexual and reproductive health and rights and education programmes globally.⁶⁴ Current estimates suggest a 99% cut to basic education funding,⁶⁵ a dramatic reversal with serious implications for access to relationship and sexuality education and related services.

These cuts come at a time when anti-rights networks are gaining ground and digital misinformation is spreading rapidly. Without sustained investment, progress on gender equality, access to education and sexual and reproductive health and rights is already being rolled back — with adolescents and marginalised communities paying the price. The impacts are not theoretical or distant: young people are already losing access to the information and support they need to make informed choices, stay safe and live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Conclusion

Clearly, the rapid dismantling of sexual and reproductive health and rights and education programmes triggered by aid cuts is already having a devastating human toll. Beyond the demolitionist shock-and-awe tactics coming from the U.S., broader shifts in global development spending also highlight the urgent need to rethink how donor-funded sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes are designed, delivered and financed. These debates are not new: decades before recent political upheavals, national, regional and international discussions were underway on how to move beyond aid dependency.

However, this moment is distinct due to the growing, coordinated efforts of anti-rights networks, the exploitation of digital spaces to spread disinformation and explicit attacks on scientific expertise and democratic norms. This convergence of challenges demands renewed urgency in promoting evidence-based education and human rights.

Recent developments underscore the need for affordable, sustainable relationship and sexuality education programmes that governments can deliver at scale, with strategic support from civil society and insights from a robust, up-to-date evidence base. They also emphasise the importance for cohesive local, national, regional and international responses to the rapidly evolving architecture of aid and sexual and reproductive health and rights.





**Way
forward**
Unlock the future.
Healthy, safe and
powered by young
people.

In the twenty-first century, a complex mix of digital, political and social pressures threatens young people's health, safety and well-being. Education that centres health, rights and agency is more vital than ever and it requires urgent, sustained protection. This is not only about safeguarding physical health. It's about equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to navigate complexity, challenge inequality and shape a future in which they can truly thrive.

Securing the future of sexuality education: rethink, plan and act.

The threats facing young people today show that relationship and sexuality education must be rooted in strong public support, flexible enough to withstand resistance and bold enough to scale. It's not just about surviving funding cuts or political attacks, it's about building lasting, system-wide change that includes young people at every step. Governments, educators, civil society, researchers, tech platforms, parents and young people themselves all have a vital role to play.

Expanding relationship and sexuality education demands a collective shift in thinking, planning and action — from governments, civil society, educators and young people themselves and those around them. This means:

1. **Confront online harm and disinformation** by equipping young people and the adults around them to recognise, resist and challenge harmful narratives.
2. **Scale what works, sustainably and strategically** by building on successful approaches that embed relationship and sexuality education in systems, even in hostile environments.
3. **Build collective power and resilience** by investing in collaboration, solidarity and long-term strategies that protect rights and promote inclusive, evidence-based education.

rethink
plan
act



Confront online harm and disinformation

The digital world shapes how young people understand themselves, each other, and the world around them. Yet it is increasingly saturated with harmful content – from misogynistic influencers and manosphere communities to disinformation campaigns. These narratives don't just distort facts; they fuel hate, divide communities and threaten young people's health, safety and well-being.

Supporting young people to critically engage with digital spaces is essential. This means fostering digital media literacy to help them recognise disinformation, distinguish between free speech and hate speech and understand how online narratives impact their rights and identities. Education should also highlight the predatory business models behind influencers and platforms, addressing the broader technological systems enabling online misogyny.⁶⁶

Relationship and sexuality education can amplify positive male voices and role models, providing young people with credible alternatives to harmful narratives. Involving boys in identifying these role models ensures content is relevant.⁶⁷ Positive messages and storytelling are crucial for challenging disinformation and misinformation and manosphere narratives. Researchers should explore the effectiveness of counter-influencer content, including the use of humour, to understand what resonates best with young people.

Challenging disinformation and building trust

It is necessary to challenge well-coordinated disinformation campaigns that target relationship and sexuality education with fabricated moral panic, weaponise emotions and polarise debates, pitting different groups against each other. This includes exposing conservative think-tanks, networks and institutions that orchestrate anti-gender discourses and attack critical scholarship more broadly, as well as investigating their networks to reveal how fabricating moral panics serves political agendas.⁶⁸

Value-based messaging frameworks^b can help build public trust in progressive voices by focusing on shared goals: the safety, dignity and development of children and adolescents. Effective interventions frame discussions about healthy masculinities and gender equity within broader social injustices, while acknowledging the specific disadvantages faced by specific groups.⁶⁹

While schools remain central, engaging young people in their digital spaces – such as gaming platforms, TikTok and other social media – with trusted voices, engaging content and positive role models is equally important. This work extends beyond the classroom, requiring a digital strategy that includes working with popular influencers and youth leaders to offer credible alternatives to extremist narratives.

Supporting key caregivers and strengthening research

Parents, caregivers and other key adults require support to recognise harmful digital trends and have open, informed conversations with young people. Differences in how generations use technology and navigate relationships highlight the need to improve digital, media and sexual literacy among adults involved in children's education, health and well-being. This includes not only parents and caregivers but also policymakers, educators, social workers, healthcare and mental health professionals, religious and community leaders, therapists and sports coaches. These adults need up-to-date, evidence-based training on how digital culture affects adolescents' development and how to connect young people with reliable sexual and reproductive health and rights resources.⁷⁰ For educators, integrating this training into teacher education is advisable, while reaching other adults – especially in socially restrictive settings – requires focused civil society support and further research.⁷¹ It is also important to involve these adults in the design and delivery of relationship and sexuality education.^{72,73} Wider efforts should aim to shift societal norms toward embracing diverse perspectives on masculinity and gender, a role well suited to civil society groups.

Research plays a vital role in understanding factors that protect young people from negative online influences and those that increase vulnerability, particularly regarding how digital misogyny intersects with other forms of abuse. More insight is needed on how boys' offline experiences affect their online risks, the online-offline dynamics and how digital misogyny may lead to or overlap with other abuse and extremism. Social scientists and young people themselves have a crucial role in exploring these issues across different contexts and communities.

Amplifying young people's voices and supporting youth-led movements advocating for accurate education is essential. Investment in platforms that

^b See for example those developed by the Global Partnership Forum on CSE, Rutgers and its partners, including IPPF Member Associations.

allow young people to share experiences and participate in building positive digital environments is critical. Young people, researchers and campaigners call for youth involvement in safety-by-design principles and preventative online safety measures that anticipate threats before they arise.⁷⁴ Enhanced methods for ongoing engagement, participatory research and programme design capable of cutting through digital 'noise' are required.⁷⁵ Digital tools can improve research depth and reach, especially when paired with civil society outreach and youth networks.⁷⁶

Research should also address access and barriers to relationship and sexuality education for underserved, underrepresented and vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+ youth, out-of-school youth, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, sex workers, refugees and those in fragile or conflict-affected settings. Studies could examine how literacy and language affect access, what skills and tools ensure education uptake, how intersecting identities influence delivery,⁷⁷ and how barriers push young people toward harmful online information. Civil society is well positioned to connect researchers with these groups through youth programmes and networks.

Further research is needed on the emerging intersections between digital extremism and attacks on women's rights, LGBTQI+ people, relationship and sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health and rights and broader challenges to truth and expertise. Relationship and sexuality education should reflect these complex intersections and provide relevant resources and support. Lessons from counter-extremism strategies could inform curriculum approaches to digital misogyny and homophobia targeting young people.⁷⁸ Most research on online misogyny has focused on English-language content; understanding narratives, strategies, user types and platforms in other languages and cultures is crucial for developing effective countermeasures.⁷⁹ There is also a need for tools to monitor extremism in youth-popular spaces like gaming.

Creating a safer, healthier online culture

Multiple stakeholders must collaborate to improve online safety for young people. Efforts should recognise the significant influence of supranational commercial gatekeepers and their control over content exposure. Experts worldwide call for greater transparency and regulation of digital corporations, especially regarding social media algorithms that push content to young users,⁸⁰ stronger moderation of harmful content, including AI-generated deepfakes, the (re-)introduction of fact-checking to challenge disinformation and misinformation and a stronger focus on age verification mechanisms. Strategies must be regularly reviewed to keep pace with rapid digital changes.

Many experts emphasise safety-by-design principles and systems-based regulation focused on platform architecture and content curation logic rather than mere content removal. This approach shifts from a content-centric notice-and-takedown regime to redesigning curation systems so harmful material is not algorithmically amplified. This distinction protects freedom of speech - a democratic value - while challenging false claims of freedom of reach that enable harmful manipulation.⁸¹ Safety-by-design calls for a move away from the Silicon Valley 'move fast and break things' mentality, prioritising user protection and risk mitigation from the outset.⁸² Achieving effective regulation is complex. Content moderation has long been under-resourced by digital platforms, which, particularly U.S.-based corporations, increasingly resist regulation. They find support from a U.S. administration committed to 'free speech absolutism' for certain viewpoints while suppressing others.⁸³ The EU is shifting from online safety toward 'competitiveness',⁸⁴ retreating from legislation like the AI Liability Directive (AILD), raising concerns about child safety implications.

Recommendations for action

To counter online threats and disinformation and strengthen the digital resilience of relationship and sexuality education:

- ✓ **Invest in digital literacy** as a core part of relationship and sexuality education, equipping young people to critically navigate online spaces, recognise manipulation and reject harmful gender norms.
- ✓ **Diffuse developmentally-appropriate digital literacy across curricula** not as isolated sessions. Train all school staff to support this.
- ✓ **Develop systemic, multidisciplinary responses** to online harms, involving young people to identify key issues and co-designing learning approaches.
- ✓ **Embed counter-narratives** into relationship and sexuality education programmes, using positive role models and youth-led storytelling to promote respect, equality and healthy relationships.
- ✓ **Fund youth-led initiatives** that challenge online misogyny and disinformation and elevate youth voices in shaping responses.
- ✓ **Include positive, empowering guidance** on how to use digital spaces to access robust, age/culture-appropriate information, education, support and solidarity. Involve young people in building positive digital environments.
- ✓ **Equip educators and parents** to understand the digital threats facing young people – including misogynistic influencers – and support open conversations.
- ✓ **Expose the agendas of hostile campaigns** and work with local movements to root relationship and sexuality education in authentic local values.
- ✓ **Develop value-based messaging frameworks** that shift public opinion and build wider societal support for relationship and sexuality education. Work with social scientists and young people to analyse social dynamics and devise effective messaging.
- ✓ **Strengthen research** on young people's digital lives, using participatory approaches and reaching across demographics and geographies.
- ✓ **Monitor how different forms of digital extremism intersect** and exploit vulnerabilities across all genders. Ensure relationship and sexuality education addresses these evolving threats.



2

Scale what works, sustainably and strategically

To ensure relationship and sexuality education's long-term impact and accessibility, short-term interventions are no longer enough. The multifaceted impacts of geopolitical changes demand sustainable programme design, local management, strategic involvement of civil society and robust evidence-based responses to protect and advance initiatives globally. This means scaling what works in ways that are sustainable, resilient and context-responsive, with civil society organisations vital to this effort.

Relationship and sexuality education programmes refer to the planned sets of learning activities, resources and support services designed to deliver and equip young people with accurate, developmentally-appropriate information about their sexual health, safety and well-being. Programme design involves creating and adapting these activities to fit local contexts, meet the evolving needs of young people and respond effectively to cultural, political and societal realities.

Across the globe, civil society organisations have been instrumental in creating the supportive environments that enable relationship and sexuality education to take root and grow. They build bridges with religious and community leaders, educators, policymakers, healthcare professionals, families and caregivers and the media. They foster transparency, counter the influence of organised anti-rights networks and cultivate broad-based support for relationship and sexuality education.^{85,86}

But in today's reality of shrinking development aid and increased competition for funding, their role must evolve.

Fostering productive working relationships with policymakers

Rather than acting only as implementers of donor-funded initiatives, civil society organisations are increasingly playing the role of strategic enablers of systemic change. This means working closely with education ministries, civil servants and local actors to ensure that relationship and sexuality education is adopted, scaled and sustained – even in the absence of continuous external funding. By collaborating with mid-level bureaucrats and tapping into existing policies and mandates, civil society organisations can help advance implementation from within systems, while also supporting advocacy, community engagement and scale-up.

These relationships with civil servants and policymakers are essential. As one expert observed: “The programmes and implementation of relationship and education work only with national government commitments and community-level buy-in.”⁸⁷ Strategies should be tailored according to the stance of decision-makers – whether supportive, ambivalent, or opposed. Civil society organisations can also support officials to better understand anti-rights actors, their international connections and the tactics they use. This may involve preparing officials for backlash, disinformation campaigns, or personal attacks associated with relationship and sexuality education policy and programming.

The crucial role of research, testing and adapting solutions

Civil society organisations are also uniquely placed to design, test and adapt relationship and sexuality education approaches that are locally effective, cost-effective and relevant. Their proximity to communities allows them to identify what is likely to succeed or fail in practice – and what could be scaled effectively with additional investment. By partnering with researchers, they can strengthen the evidence base, refine content and respond more effectively to complex and changing social conditions. These alliances also help defend against misinformation and organised attacks.⁸⁸

There are already many compelling examples of this in action, including in restrictive or politically sensitive settings. These successes show that effective, inclusive relationship and sexuality education can take root even in difficult circumstances – but this requires investment. Civil society organisations need support not just for delivery, but also to build long-term strategies, strengthen their internal systems and plan for change that endures beyond project cycles.

Key partners in this work include community groups, progressive religious organisations, youth-led movements, parent and caregiver communities and opinion leaders. Research consistently shows the value of involving stakeholders who are undecided or resistant to relationship and sexuality education alongside those who are already supportive.⁸⁹ More attention is also needed on ‘values-based resistance’ – how resistance is shaped by deeper beliefs and norms – and on the different entry points that can be used to promote relationship and sexuality education, such as linking it to broader goals like social justice or racial equity.⁹⁰

At the same time, research into relationship and sexuality education has declined in recent years – due to underfunding, gatekeeper resistance and personal attacks on researchers.⁹¹ This must be urgently reversed. Researchers also need to intensify efforts to involve young people in participatory, open-ended research and in shaping how relationship and sexuality education programmes are designed and evaluated.

It is equally important to avoid duplication, coordinate with complementary research initiatives and share evidence across networks. These strategies are especially critical in volatile or unpredictable funding and policy environments, where decision-making must be both responsive and robust.

The role of digital innovation in scaling up relationship and sexuality education

Digital innovation offers powerful new tools for expanding access to relationship and sexuality education and building creative, collaborative responses to global challenges. Digital platforms allow different actors – from teachers and health workers to young people themselves – to co-create and deliver education that is more flexible, inclusive and responsive to young people's lives.

Used thoughtfully, digital tools can help reduce judgment and stigma, foster open conversations, counter harmful narratives and support youth-led or peer-to-peer approaches. They can help expand access to education across formal and informal settings – including in places where relationship and sexuality education is otherwise limited or restricted. They can also reduce costs and extend reach, particularly when designed to support marginalised or out-of-school groups.

But it is essential to avoid widening digital divides. In communities with limited connectivity or digital literacy, governments and civil society organisations should explore hybrid approaches – such as combining digital tools with community radio, mobile-based education, or local learning hubs. UNESCO has called for more research on how digital technology can support equitable access to relationship and sexuality education in formal education.⁹²

Digital delivery must also be designed with user safety in mind. Risks to privacy, safety and well-being – for both learners and facilitators – must be addressed through strong safeguarding measures and safety-by-design principles. Policymakers and programme designers need to collaborate with digital platforms to prevent relationship and sexuality education content from being wrongly flagged, suppressed, or censored.

Scaling sexuality education sustainably is not just a technical task – it's a political and strategic one. It requires vision, commitment and smart collaboration. But it is absolutely possible – and essential – if we are serious about protecting young people's rights, health and futures.

Recommendations for action

To scale effective relationship and sexuality education in sustainable, context-responsive ways:

- ✓ **Evolve the role of civil society**, so organisations are not just implementers but strategic enablers of system-wide change. This means working closely with education ministries, civil servants and local actors to embed it into national systems.
- ✓ **Design, test and adapt relationship and sexuality education programmes** that are cost-effective and grounded in local realities, making them easier to integrate into school systems.
- ✓ **Partner with researchers**, to build the evidence base needed to convince decision-makers and to tailor approaches to real-world challenges.
- ✓ **Learn from successes** including those in restrictive or politically sensitive settings. Make full use of existing tools and insights that show how to 'do more with less.'
- ✓ **Invest in organisational capacity** of civil society organisations to plan long-term, support systemic change and sustain partnerships beyond project cycles.
- ✓ **Share research and monitor** developments to strengthen the global evidence base. Prioritise delivery models that adaptable across schools, community and healthcare settings.⁹³
- ✓ **Engage stakeholders who are resistant or undecided**, not just those already in support, in the design of interventions.
- ✓ **Learn from other social movements** such as those working to decriminalise abortion – that have used sophisticated advocacy and evidence strategies to shift policy and public opinion.



3

Build collective power and resilience

Attacks on relationship and sexuality education are not isolated. They are part of a broader global surge in anti-rights, anti-gender and anti-democratic networks – organised and funded by far-right and ultra-conservative actors around the world. These intersecting threats are becoming increasingly coordinated, well-resourced and transnational – and they pose growing risks to young people's rights and access to education. Addressing this requires more than resisting in isolation. It demands long-term strategies to build collective power, resilience and solidarity.

Change is already being driven by movements and organisations working locally to protect rights and expand access to relationship and sexuality education. But greater impact will require stronger alliances, across borders, across sectors and across movements. Trusted partnerships and coalitions make it possible to share tools, data and insights; to better deliver relationship and sexuality education in volatile contexts; and to provide mutual protection. Coordinated action also helps reduce risks for individual organisations, strengthens advocacy with policymakers and platforms and amplifies voices in national and international media.

Working together also helps to expose shared patterns of disinformation and backlash. Across different geographies and agendas, anti-rights actors often use similar strategies: targeting education, suppressing accurate information, attacking individual advocates and distorting public debate. These tactics can be anticipated and countered but only by learning from each other's experiences and aligning strategies.

Forging stronger ties with aligned movements is critical. The pushback against relationship and sexuality education echoes threats facing feminist, youth-led, LGBTQI+, racial justice, disability and climate movements and many of the same actors and arguments are being used to undermine them all. Building alliances across these networks opens the door to new forms of collaboration, strengthens intersectional thinking and allows a wider, more diverse set of voices to lead. At the same time, it is vital to champion locally driven campaigns that protect both LGBTQI+ communities and access to locally tailored relationship and sexuality education, avoiding advocacy that may be seen as externally imposed.

Global events, research spaces and campaigns provide important opportunities to align strategies and elevate stories - including the World Association for Sexual Health, the International Conference on Family Planning, the International Association for Adolescent Health, Women Deliver and others. But local advocacy remains central. When relationship and sexuality education is framed as an external or imposed agenda, backlash can intensify. Campaigns rooted in local leadership, language and lived realities are most likely to be seen as credible and relevant. Storytelling can play a powerful role here - not only communicating the benefits of relationship and sexuality education, but connecting it to broader struggles for justice, safety, inclusion and well-being.

Lessons from countries such as the Netherlands demonstrate the power of coordinated defence - where civil society, educators, media and policymakers unite in real-time monitoring, strategic litigation, media advocacy and joint responses. Such broad coalitions, involving diverse allies from academics to comedians, are vital to counter ultra-conservative attacks.

Building collective power also means building infrastructures of resilience that can support this work over time. These include:

- Safe spaces for collaboration, planning and reflection
- Mechanisms to monitor opposition tactics and anticipate backlash
- Structures for coordinated responses, solidarity and protection
- Shared funding and pooled resources for those at greatest risk

Solidarity is not only a value — it is a strategy. A shared, long-term approach can help ensure that relationship and sexuality education not only survives but evolves and expands. In the face of well-organised opposition, coordinated action offers the best chance to protect young people's rights and reimagine what is possible.

***Working together
also helps to expose
shared patterns of
disinformation and
backlash.***

collective
power

Recommendations for action

To strengthen collective power and resilience in support of relationship and sexuality education:

- ✓ **Build a coordinated international counter-movement** to push back against attacks on relationship and sexuality education and proactively reshape global and local action to protect and expand it.
- ✓ **Establish a counter-movement think tank or hub** to coordinate strategy and alliances, provide a safe space for the exchange of ideas, research and best practice and monitor anti-rights actors. Secure long-term funding to ensure sustainability.
- ✓ **Devise strategies for joint long-term research** across contexts to strengthen both evidence and solidarity.
- ✓ **Develop safety strategies** that protect activists, educators and advocates without forcing them to self-censor. Regularly update these strategies as threats evolve.
- ✓ **Link international advocacy with national efforts.** Use multilateral agreements to influence national policies and leverage international accountability mechanisms like CEDAW and the UPR process.
- ✓ **Forge alliances across geographies, sectors and movements,** especially with youth, feminist, LGBTQI+, pro-democracy and climate justice groups.
- ✓ **Use digital storytelling** to communicate across a range of audiences, demonstrating how attacks on relationship and sexuality education are part of broader assaults on human rights, media, science and democracy.
- ✓ **Push boundaries in storytelling,** moving beyond sexual and reproductive health and rights-focused narratives to show relationship and sexuality education's relevance across all aspects of life.

Freedom to think, freedom to thrive.

The challenges facing sexuality education and young people today can seem daunting. The forces arrayed against freedom and human rights have deep pockets, powerful influence over political agendas in many countries and increasingly dominate big tech.

Yet there are many reasons for confidence. Across the world, movements for justice, equality and education are advancing powerful, strategic responses. There is deep knowledge, proven practice and a wealth of lived experiences to draw on. Not only to resist attacks on education and rights but to redesign education systems so they meet young people's evolving realities.

Young people themselves are driving much of this work. Around the world, they are demanding education that is inclusive, holistic and responsive—education that strengthens resilience, builds critical thinking and supports well-being. Governments, civil society, donors and communities need to recognise this leadership and act in meaningful partnership.

In a climate of limited resources and rising political polarisation, this will take determination, imagination and collaboration. But it is possible. By working together across sectors and movements, it becomes possible to share capacity, shift narratives and sustain progress. Collective voice and collective power will be key to building a healthier, more just world where young people's rights, dignity and futures are protected and realised. That means expanding access to relationship and sexuality education that reflects the new realities they live in - and upholding their freedom to think and freedom to thrive.

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