



Feminist **SEX**uality
Education



Ensuring safe, uncoerced, egalitarian and mutually pleasurable sex and relationships for the next generation: a synthesis report

A Publication by the European Women's Lobby



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
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Introduction

For thirty years, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) has advocated for a fair, feminist Europe based on our values of equality between women and men, diversity, peace, dignity, justice and respect. As we seek to realise this vision, we recognise that engaging between generations and having critical discussions is key to understanding and transforming the world around us.

We recognise that currently the delivery and depth of sexuality education (SE) varies across Europe by country, region and even from school to school and classroom to classroom. For the EWL, it is crucial that every girl and boy across Europe is empowered and protected by comprehensive feminist SE, and all should have equal access to this. This will not only support equal and pleasurable sexual encounters when they occur, but have the wider benefit of more aware and respectful relationships, a politically aware and engaged public and ultimately the opportunity to reduce violence, inequality and discrimination which women and girls risk daily.

This is why we have undertaken this project to map the reality of SE practices across our European membership: to identify what are the feminist principles that, when implemented, could realise a transformative change in our societies to tackle the consistent inequalities faced by women and girls.

This report is intended to set out opportunities for change and development which can assist campaigners, educators and political champions who strive to tackle injustice for a more equal, fair and enjoyable European society.

The most important point of reference for subject-specific professional recommendations in Europe is the Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe issued by WHO-Europe and the BZgA Centre for Health Education (2010). This gives detailed recommendations and guidelines for establishing the basic standards for SE, yet it falls short of

addressing heteronormativity and examining the sexist power-relations in sexuality and pornography in a truly critical and structural manner. The latest UN handbook (2018) providing guidance on establishing evidence-informed SE internationally does somewhat better in this regard. It notes that children should be educated on gendered stereotypes and should learn that violence against women and girls is caused by the desire to exercise power and dominance, not an inability to control urges arising from physical need (p.52).

The EWL found it crucial to contribute our feminist perspective to this space due to the lack of, or suboptimal emphasis on, feminist issues through these international standards and frameworks - and due to practitioners' inconsistent applications of these in practice. The most fundamental aspect which needs to be further embedded in SE is to challenge the hierarchical relation between women and men. Unless we recognise and explicitly stress the necessity of feminist relationship and sexuality education, the structural nature of this inequality and its presence in sexuality and relationships; the differential socialisation and conditioning affecting girls and boys; the elevated risks faced by girls; and the societal effect of these issues will be left at the margins of discussion.

This report gives proposals at national and international levels for progressive changes in regulations and curricula to ensure a transformative feminist sexuality education. It establishes key principles which should be considered crucial to underpinning and critical and constructive engagement with young people regarding their relationships, sexuality, sexual interactions and how these matters interplay with their experiences in society and culture.

Methodology

The European Women's Lobby produces knowledge within the five following principles: Women's rights are human rights, Solidarity, Inclusion, Autonomy, Participation. Hence, an inclusive feminist framework has been adopted as the theoretical background for this report. The report is based on the input received in 2016 from 28 national EWL national coordinations and other, subject-relevant national organisations in response to an EWL questionnaire inquiring about the provision of sexual education, related issues, and country demands and recommendations. Note

that the questionnaire left considerable room for interpretation, and hence the 28 incoming country statements were not necessarily comparable. Yet the main points, concerns and conclusions highlighted by members were convergent, and the analysis revealed clear patterns, shared visions and demands. During the development of the report, key existing international documents were reviewed and taken into consideration as part of the wider system in which this report should be considered and situated.

ABBREVIATIONS

AOUM: "Abstinence only until marriage" method
BDPA: Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
CoE: Council of Europe
CEE: Central-Eastern Europe
CEEBBS: Central Eastern European, Baltic and Balkan States
EC: European Commission
EP: European Parliament
EU: European Union
EWL: European Women's Lobby
FRA: Fundamental Rights Agency
IPPF: International Planned Parenthood Federation
RSE: Relationship and Sexual Education
SE: Sexuality Education
SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
VAWG: Violence against women and girls
WHO: World Health Organisation

COUNTRY CODES

AT - Austria
BE/FR - Belgium/Francophone region
BE/FL - Belgium/Flanders
BG - Bulgaria
CY - Cyprus
CZ - Czech Republic
DK - Denmark
ES - Spain
GR - Greece
HU - Hungary
IT - Italy
LV - Latvia
LT - Lithuania
LU - Luxembourg
MK - Macedonia
MT - Malta
NL - Netherlands
RO - Romania
SI - Slovenia
SE - Sweden
TR - Turkey
UK/E - United Kingdom/England
UK/NI - United Kingdom/Northern Ireland
UK/S - UK/Scotland
UK/W - United Kingdom/Wales

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We demand that every girl and boy has access to an evidence-based, inclusive sexuality education fitted to their specific needs regardless of where she or he is living.

Austria

EWL's Feminist Principles and Goals in Sexuality Education

Whatever the context, all SE should adopt a progressive and transformative basis to ensure it is actively contributing to realising equality between women and men. Here the core principles which should be applied to all areas within SE are set out for the consideration of content developers, policy makers and advocates. It is crucial to ensure that these principles benefit all women and girls, with specific consideration being needed to ensure content reflects the needs of everyone regardless of background, experiences and situations. Not all girls have the opportunity to access traditional education consistently or at all, and additional efforts should be made to ensure they can access supplementary courses which are free and context-specific. Finally, SE curricula cannot exist in isolation: every effort must be made to mainstream key feminist principles across subjects to ensure recognition that a whole-of-society approach is crucial to realise a feminist Europe.

OUR 15 FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

- 1 Comprehensive and holistic: include social, ethical, psychological, legal and historical material on **relationships, applying a structural perspective and involving an analysis of gendered power-relations**
- 2 Based on the values of **equality, mutuality, respect, autonomy, critical thinking, non-dominance, non-violence, personal and social responsibility**
- 3 **Recognises that no one has a 'right' to sex:** at all times **enthusiastic desire**, respect and equality must be at the core of sexual interactions
- 4 Aimed at **risk-reduction and violence-prevention** as well as a positive vision of egalitarian and mutually pleasurable sex and relationships
- 5 **Disrupting gendered stereotypes and norms:** represent people with all body types; feature body hair; openly address body-image disorders and self-harm; encourage bodily self-acceptance and integrity
- 6 **Integrated** into standard school curricula, aligned with social, political, biological, etc. education as per our five core goals and concepts for feminist education practices
- 7 Devised and conducted in consultation **with women's rights organisations** and key stakeholders (young people, teachers and parents)
- 8 Complemented by **services, access to contraceptive, reproductive healthcare and STI-prevention methods**, referral policies and institutional protocols

- 9 Taught by **well-trained** educators (including training on VAWG and sexism)
- 10 **Introduced early, and lasts until the end of school**, with age-appropriate, evidence-based content
- 11 Mandatory and widely implemented, **reaching all groups**
- 12 Fitted to **specific needs** in various contexts
- 13 **Resources, prioritised and monitored** to guarantee quality and effectiveness
- 14 Taught **interactively**, involves discussions without pressure, with a considerate and respectful approach to students
- 15 **Inspiring discussion** beyond the class and beyond schools



Five core goals and concepts for feminist education

Sexuality education cannot exist in isolation, and must form part of an education system which explores many aspects of our society that can contribute to an end of the patriarchal system that enables harm and shame. The EWL demands that the following five key overlapping and interrelated subjects and competencies are considered and adopted not only in specific SE classes but also across all possible subjects including in particular social, political, biological, historical and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematical) classes. The principles outlines should also be considered in relation to school policies such as bullying, harassment, computer use and subject choice policies.

→ PROVIDING HOLISTIC SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS EDUCATION

Feminist SE gives students knowledge on male and female biology, puberty changes, reproduction, and reproductive health. It supports young people in better coping with the changes experienced during puberty. It openly addresses risks related to different kinds of sexual acts and **dispels common myths**. It includes content on STIs and all available contraceptive and STI-prevention methods, the way

to access and use them, and their advantages and disadvantages. It emphasises **shared responsibility** in applying contraceptive and preventive methods and encourages communication about them in intimate relationships. It enables students to make conscious and informed choices in their sexual and reproductive lives and especially, it **enables girls to plan their reproductive futures throughout the life-cycle**. It gives knowledge on pregnancy and abortion and openly discusses what they involve. It openly discusses sensitive subjects such as masturbation, virginity, premature ejaculation, impotence, menstruation and menstrual products and dispels myths surrounding them. **It informs students of their rights** related to sexuality and reproductive health and empowers them to realise these rights, including the right to healthy, safe and pleasurable sex (so long as the partner also desires it; it does not promote an absolute right to sex with another person). It includes information on the organs responsible for male and female sexual pleasure, including the clitoris.

→ BRINGING A LENS ON VIOLENCE-PREVENTION

Feminist SE aims to prevent and gives students knowledge on all forms of violence and harassment against women and girls, and homophobic violence. It helps students understand the causes of VAWG, its links to sexist systems, and helps them recognise that it takes place in a wider social and structural context characterised by hierarchy and male dominance. It provides students with the **language** to be able to describe violence and its different forms and thus aids them in identifying, recognising and disclosing abuse. It combats victim-blaming, emphasises the responsibility of perpetrators, and encourages boys to reflect upon their behaviour and not to engage in abusive, harmful and violent practices. **It emphasises the right to engage in or refuse to engage in sexual acts without coercion, fear of violence, stigmatisation and discrimination**, and empowers students to exercise this right. It openly addresses

and **helps students recognise the violence exhibited in pornography** and aids students in developing a critical analysis of pornography and the fetishisation of violence in popular culture. Watching rape increases the acceptance of and proclivity to rape and sexually aggressive behaviour even in a relatively shorter term (Dawson et al., 2019). Children now learn about sexuality from unlimited access to online pornography, which bears an alarming impact on their image of and practices in sexuality.

It helps students **understand the harms of prostitution** and aims to prevent boys from abusing sexually exploited women. It helps students understand the concept of consent (in a strong sense, **requiring fully willing, desirous and enthusiastic engagement**) and its necessity. It includes information on the laws related to sexual violence, on available victim services and support, and on the psychological effects of violence.

→ ENCOURAGING CRITICAL THINKING

Feminist SE equips students with tools to **critically reflect upon the world surrounding them**. It inspires analysis and critical reflection upon gendered stereotyping, norms and roles; hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity; the unjust distribution of domestic and care labour; sexism; misogyny; sexist discrimination, stereotypes and expectations; the sexual objectification of women and girls; heteronormativity and homophobia; pornography and prostitution; sexual double standards; male-centered, male-dominated sexuality and sexual practice; VAWG, victim-blaming, and justifications for violence. With elements across many subject areas, it aids students in recognising and formulating criticism on injustice and gendered power-relations and gives them the ability to critically examine society, social situations, experiences and stimuli (e.g. media and advertisements, art and literature) from a gendered perspective. It improves media literacy. **It helps**

students identify power-dynamics and understand and recognise that the personal is political.

It aims to inspire discussion and critical reflection **through questions and interactive methods**, rather than authoritative pronouncement. By allowing and encouraging students to question prevailing norms, practices and messages, feminist SE aims to mitigate the effect of sexist indoctrination and gendered socialisation unavoidably affecting children and young people, and stop the reproduction of the patriarchal social order.

→ PROMOTING HEALTHY, NON-COERCIVE BEHAVIOUR AND INTERACTIONS

Feminist SE includes exercises and reflective opportunities for individual reflection, emphasising the importance **of recognising and respecting others as equals** and to refrain from controlling, coercive, pressuring, aggressive and dominant behaviour. It aims to improve students' ability to empathise and relate to others and form genuine connections with others. It aids students in recognising and uncovering how they may be responding to or perpetuating **power-dynamics** in interpersonal and group relationships. It involves discussion on what characterises good and healthy relationships for them, and what characterises unequal relationships. It provides skills in embodying a **positive model of sexuality**, providing an alternative to repeating pornography-based patterns and scripts.

It equips students with communication skills so that they can **openly discuss their boundaries and desires** also in sensitive subjects such as sexuality, and emphasises the importance of being interested in and respecting others' boundaries and bodily self-determination. It counters socialised male sexual entitlement and makes it clear that **no girl or woman owes anything to any boy or man**.

It aims to eliminate bullying, especially sexualised bullying, homophobic bullying, and the bullying of girls and boys not conforming to

gendered norms. It **promotes tolerance and non-discrimination**. It contributes to students becoming responsible and respectful citizens and members of communities, invested in creating and participating in equitable and truly democratic processes.

→ HELPING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTHY ATTITUDES TOWARDS SELF

Feminist SE helps students in their individual development and in attaining healthy attitudes towards themselves. It **counters harmful pressures that objectify and sexualise women and girls**, impose unattainable standards of beauty, and pronounce beauty and desirability as the main value of women and girls. It also counters harmful pressures for boys to be dominant and not show "weak" emotions.

It openly discusses body image disorders, self-harm, trauma and dissociation, and aims to prevent and remedy them. It supports students **in developing a good relationship with their bodies**, promotes health-seeking behaviour, the development of self-esteem and body-positivity. It supports students in attaining self-knowledge and in developing and exercising self-awareness and -reflection, to be able to identify their boundaries, needs and desires in general and in particular situations. It supports students, especially girls, in becoming assertive and in articulating and enforcing their boundaries. It supports students in developing decision-making skills, **making informed and conscious decisions** (including seeking out information when necessary). It supports students in developing autonomy. It supports young people in unlearning pornography-based patterns and scripts and in exploring, identifying and developing their own, **genuine and authentic desires and pleasure**.



Ensuring inclusivity of under-represented groups

For inclusive SE that takes account that diversity is to be found in all communities, it is crucial to promote and understanding of and sensitivity towards the experiences of (political) minority groups as we work to apply the Feminist Principles previously set out. We must recognise the multiplicity of experiences that can be held in a society, classroom and a single individual, and the impact this can have on our experience of the world. SE provides a particular opportunity to promote empathy, understanding and to assist in prevention of harm particularly for those at increased risk of violence, coercion or social disadvantage. The EWL membership identified the following (often intersecting) groups as some of those with special interests in the content of, access to, and representation in, comprehensive SE. Ensuring consideration of how each of the Feminist Principles can be applied in relation to these groups should not only be intended for the benefit of individuals represented in these groups, but for the understanding and benefit of all recipients.

→ **RACIAL, NATIONAL AND RELIGIO-CULTURAL MINORITIES**

Adequate SE has to be provided to all groups regardless of cultural difference using a cautious approach that **combats racism**, the essentialisation, stereotyping and fetishisation of minority ethnic groups, cultures and religions, and that **does not compromise on its scrutiny and criticism of patriarchal settings and patriarchal violence**. Minority groups need to be represented in SE material. Harmful practices prevalent in some communities need to be addressed, with a careful approach conscious of the oftentimes taboo nature of these subjects and potential for community pressure and internalised shame. Alongside other forms of VAWG found in societies, attention should be given **to safeguarding girls from child marriage, FGM and so-called «honour» violence through awareness raising on indicators, rights and supports available**.

In the case of relatively newly arriving individuals and groups to a country or region, special consideration for **language barriers, culture shock, need for information about recognised rights and services** should be made, ensuring sufficient resourcing is ring-fenced for this to be delivered.

→ **FINANCIALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS**

Structural investment in education does not benefit all groups equally. Those from rural backgrounds, urban areas where poverty is systemic, or non-traditional education systems often do not provide the same quality and consistency of education as privileged school areas. Adequate SE has to be provided to all groups, and **infrastructure** needs to be developed to realise this goal. Those returning to education require special attention and services including SE and support outside the school system. In the case of financially disadvantaged groups and individuals within communities, accompanying state-funded services are strongly required. The heightened risk of violence and

sexual exploitation needs to be taken into consideration and **SE needs to be complemented by preventive measures to protect girls from exploitation**.

→ **GIRLS IN STATE INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS EG. ASYLUM SEEKING CENTRES, STATE CARE, FOSTER HOMES, PSYCHIATRIC CARE**

The heightened risk of violence and sexual exploitation for girls in different state and psychiatric institutions and in the foster care system needs to be taken into consideration and SE needs to be complemented by preventive measures to protect girls from (re-)victimisation. A cautious approach is required to address SE subjects and crucially, rather than only occasional classes, **programmes must involve longer processes and be complemented by individual support and counselling as needed**.

Women and girls in such institutions may not have access to standard State education, and it is particularly important that SE teachers have **specialised knowledge, tailored content and provide information about rights and services** in an appropriate and accessible manner. **Single sex safe accommodation and spaces**, as mandated by the Istanbul Convention, must be provided for such girls and women, along with the specialist services and programmes aimed at their empowerment, education and integration.

→ **VICTIMS AND SUSPECTED VICTIMS OF VAWG (INCLUDING WITNESSES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE)**

Potential histories of trauma and specifically sexual trauma should be acknowledged to ensure all girls can engage positively in their SE. Programmes must be conducted with care, keeping in mind the high probability that in every class there are individuals that have in the past or are currently affected by VAWG. This may require additional and **specific resourcing** to be made accessible by Government subsidies. Students must not be pushed to disclose experiences of abuse

and **educators must be prepared to recognise indicators of abuse and to react appropriately** when suspicions or disclosures of abuse arise, including policies and **protocols** to direct victims to the appropriate services and organisations.

Schools must have internal protocols to respond to intra-institution cases of abuse and harassment, including those perpetrated by educators as well as peer abuse and sexualised bullying.

→ **PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY GIRLS AND WOMEN, WITH DISABILITIES**

Adequate SE has to be provided to all groups regardless of difference in abilities using a cautious approach that steers clear of and combats ableism, the essentialisation and the stereotyping of people with disabilities. The language of SE needs to be accessible and inclusive, and people with disabilities need to be represented in SE material. The independence and self-determination of girls and women with disabilities has to be supported as much as possible, and information should be given where possible about supports available to access sexual and reproductive health services. Girls and women with disabilities are at higher risk of sexual abuse, which must be mitigated. The harmful

stereotypes about men with disability unable to form sexual relationships outside of the market of prostitution and pornography should be avoided and discouraged.

→ **SEXUAL MINORITIES, ESPECIALLY YOUNG LESBIANS**

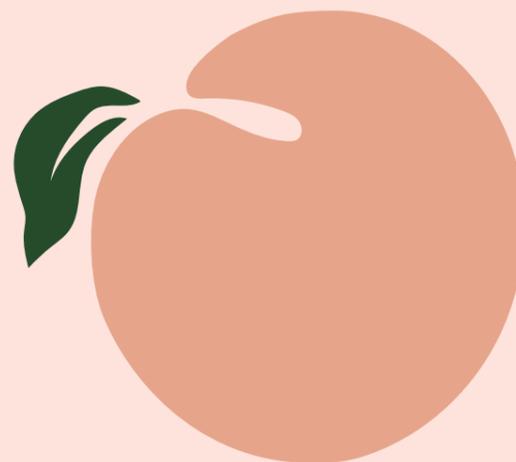
SE should not be limited to the heterosexual relationships but should also encompass same-sex and bi-sexual relationships and support understanding and acceptance, including self-acceptance, for individuals (also) attracted to members of the same sex, both sexes, or not attracted to anyone at all. It must be cautious about taboos and must not put students in a situation where they feel pressure to come out. A safe space and/or contact person or organisations must be provided for members of sexual minorities to enable them asking questions. SE material should include information not only on heterosexual penetrative intercourse, but also on what sex between members of the same sex means; and information on STI-s and STI-prevention in relation to homosexual sexual practices.

1 in 3 women and girls in Europe have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or a non-partner since the age of 15

(FRA, 2014)

Sexuality education should not only teach young people to make informed decisions about their sexual life and health but also on responsibility, respect based on human rights, and gender equality. [...] Without sex education, women risk being seen as reproductive machines rather than whole human beings.

Malta



International and EU Member State legislative frameworks & common application



European and International Legal Framework

Sexuality Education relates to many international and European policy discussions, including: SRHR (as separate rights or recognised as a subset of human rights), human rights, women's human rights, violence against women and girls (VAWG), public health, HIV/AIDS, women's equality, social rights, population trends, crime and criminal justice, education and children's rights. Policies and recommendations framed within these areas often refer to subjects explicitly or implicitly related to SE (with SE interpreted broadly and with a feminist approach).

International legal framework is clear in providing guidance on both minimum standards and best practices for provision of quality SE. Globally, the International Conference on Population and Development's Programme of

Action (UN/ICPD, 1994, see esp. Section 7) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN/BDPA, 1995, see esp. Art. 30, 74, 83.a-c, 83.j-l, Strategic objective B.5) have long ago set out the crucial rights and demands concerning SRHR and SE – including the overall reform of education and curricula so as not to perpetuate sexism but foster an environment conducive to social transformation – in a way that fully converges with EWL's position. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNGA/CEDAW, 1979) and CEDAW Committee recommendations underline the importance of "age-appropriate education, which includes science-based information on sexual and reproductive health" for the empowerment of women and girls and for combatting violence (General Recommendation No31). Sexuality education should be included into curricula at all levels and should "target stereotyped gender roles and promote the values of gender equality and non-discrimination, including non-violent masculinities" (General Recommendation No35).

Regarding European law and policy, the EU can intervene in the domain of education to "support,

coordinate or complement the action of EU countries". SE is often framed as a public health matter (where the EU has a stronger competence), as suggested in the latest EP policy note (2013) on the subject. The EU has indeed the power to launch SE programmes, campaigns and projects in order to guarantee public health, and this approach is supported by reference to the European Social Charter obliging parties to "remove as far as possible the causes of ill health" and to "provide advisory and educational facilities for the promotion of health and the encouragement of individual responsibility in matters of health." The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2007, consolidated text 2012) grants some further leeway for European Union action supporting and complementing member states' efforts in the areas of public health as well as education (see in particular Art.s 6, 9, 165, 166, 168).

The body of European treaties, directives, conventions and recommendations contains further support for addressing issues closely related to SE and to the main concerns flagged by EWL – such as Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography (2011); Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)5 on measures to protect children against harmful content and behaviour and to promote their active participation in the new information and communications environment (2009); and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (or "Istanbul Convention", 2011). The latest European Parliament resolution on the topic stresses that the lack of SE puts the safety and wellbeing of young people at risk and makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse and violence, including online harassment (2019). The Council of Europe, in its latest issue paper on SRHR (2017) highlights the lack of comprehensive SE as a major concern and proclaims states' duty to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate, evidence-based and compulsory SE as a matter of human rights.

The lack of legal provisions comprehensively tackling all forms of violence against women at EU level is a key risk. In addition to the need for European ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the particular the lack of legislation on combatting sexual exploitation despite clear legal basis leaves women and girls unnecessarily at risk and without protection. This gap also sends the wrong message about the role of women in society, further enabling objectification, commodification and hypersexualisation of women and girls which is in sharp contrast to the principles and goals of feminist SE. Similarly, an enduring gap in European law and policy to tackle the prevalence and accessibility of pornography and VAWG online creates a multiplicity of issues, as set out in the EWL report HerNetHerRights (2017). Relevant to this is the key challenge in the assessment of needs and impact of SE across Europe. A driver of this is the lack of cross-cutting data analysis and research which brings together the related aspects of experiences of VAWG, SE provision and prevalence of pornography and objectification and sexualisation in society. This relates not only to the miseducation of young people but also forms an aspect of the full continuum of VAWG



EU Member State variations: law and practice

Despite the fact that all EU member states are due to implement quality SE in order to comply with EU and international standards and commitments, the legal framework across the continent is varied and almost never satisfactory. SE is part of the

obligatory school curriculum in the majority of EU countries, but less than half of them regulate the provision of sexuality education through law or through national curricula. Moreover, in a small number of countries parents can excuse their children from attending the (often already optional) sexuality education classes (HU, RO, UK/England, UK/Wales, UK/Scotland). Even though in many cases sexuality education is introduced in school curricula in more than one subject, e.g. health, psychology, citizenship and other social science classes (AT, BE/FL, CY, FI, FR, DE, LV, NL, SL, ES), this is often limited to a division of biology/physiology and limited social context, without robust mainstreaming. In some countries sexuality education is taught exclusively from a health perspective (BG, HR, CZ, GR, IT, FYROM, RO, UK, LU) and in others it is part of family education, which despite being more transversal than a health approach, presents the risks of perpetuating patriarchal values and traditional gender roles (DK, HU, LT). In most cases sexuality education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and/or Health, which is also responsible for setting up SE programmes.

Only in few cases NGOs and organisations holding special expertise on the topic are involved in the design of those curricula. SE is most often provided by teachers, who can decide to outsource it to expert organisations and NGOs. In certain cases (notably BE/FL) it is underlined that the quality of the materials provided by subcontracted NGOs is of very high quality, but it is up to the school and the single teachers whether to adopt it or not. Mandatory training for teachers who provide sexuality education is present only in very few countries.

Whether SE is mandatory or not, comprehensive or not, countries across all categories flagged the lack of adequate teacher/educator **training** as a primary issue and a barrier to high quality SE and consistent implementation. In most states,

teachers that are later supposed to provide SE receive no training or receive highly limited, optional or even misinformed training (e.g. FR) on SE as part of their formal course of study. NGOs often take up the slack formally or informally, to some extent supported/subsidised by states and institutional actors or in spite of them. That is, schools might "outsource" the task of SE to NGOs, or NGOs provide sporadic SE programmes directly to students and/or by training interested and invested teachers. NGOs' capacities are, however, limited, and certainly cannot come up to the degree of coverage state-wide school systems could – had they fulfilled their role as needed.

Save for a few exceptions, there is a similar lack in state- and Europe-level **monitoring** practices to measure SE implementation and quality; even where these exist, they are occasional rather than continuous (e.g. BE/FR, BE/FL, SE, DK, LT, NL). Furthermore, virtually no large scale monitoring and research exists to measure SE effectiveness in terms of longitudinal attitudinal and behavioural changes and tendencies (e.g. "rape myth" acceptance, sexist attitudes, rape proclivity, abusive behaviour, teenage pregnancy, teenage abortions, spread of STIs, etc.). Routine and systematic examination of these in correlation with SE contents would be crucial to provide comparative perspectives and to evidence the value of including feminist approaches and subjects (such as consent) on a large scale. Unlike state and institutional actors, we call for both participation in mandatory training from their educators providing implementation of monitoring and impact-measuring practices.

Concerning content and approach, SE in Europe still focuses largely on **biological** aspects of sexuality, with subjects such as pregnancy, contraception, STIs and STI-prevention. The second most common class at which the subject is discussed is citizenship education; and **the least common practice is the incorporation of SE-related subjects across the board**. There

is variation ranging from covering exclusively biological curricula to placing a disproportionately significant emphasis on biological curricula in comparison to other, highly relevant subjects. This tendency prevails even in countries identified as having relatively good SE systems (e.g. BE/FL, FI), potentially due to the lack of teacher training in other areas: educators are more confident about their knowledge on biology, which is indeed likely more precise; and they are better equipped to address the subject of SE focusing on its scientific aspects. The difficulty of addressing subjects such as objectification, sexist stereotypes, sexual coercion and abuse, intimate partner violence, healthy and unhealthy relationships, or pornography must be recognised. It requires not only training, but self-reflection on part of the educators themselves, as sexuality, gendered expectations and norms impact all of us (Kardos and Sudár, 2019).

The biological focus also means an emphasis on risks, warnings and **negative** messages, and in the worst case, may involve intimidation and the promotion of **abstinence** as the “responsible” and “informed” behaviour. Several countries show tendencies towards the AOUM (abstinence only until marriage) model well-known from the US discourse (e.g. HU, HR, LT, MT) and/or the so-called ABC model (Abstinence, Be faithful, use a Condom) (MT), implementing “family mainstreaming” approaches in the broader curricula as well as on classes titled “education/preparation for family life” (e.g. HU, LT). This approach integrates sexist, anti-abortionist, heteronormative and homophobic ideologies **rather than respect, equality, mutuality and non-violence** as “family values”, and aims to further entrench strict gender roles and norms. In various countries, teachers of religion are entitled to teach SE (e.g. TR, UK/S).

Countries where the state and government directly recommends or openly allows such approaches represent a challenge in terms of

advocacy, given that there is not only no political will, but direct opposition to introduce evidence-based, let alone feminist SE. In these countries, low degrees of implementation is actually good news. Meanwhile, NGOs who work on this subject and their allies do not have the power, funds, and human resources to implement wide-reaching projects to make up for the shortfalls of institutions possessing better capacities; and may face significant political hostility when conducting SE-related projects (e.g. HU).

Opposition to many of the values and visions forming part of feminist SE is growing across many parts of Europe. This backlash comes not only in the form of top-down, religious and/or conservative populist traditionalism, but in the name of “progress” as well. This is often successfully pushed in non-conservative mainstream media and popular culture; such as the upsurge in opposition to feminist values trends rebranding sexual exploitation as empowerment and sexual desirability in the eyes of men as a form of “power”.

Successful **initiatives** in reaching children and youth directly, especially in hostile institutional environments and in more fragmented rural regions involve the internet: vlogs and blogs by relatable adults and peers (e.g. HU, RO) and mobile apps and websites with the possibility to ask anonymous questions from health professionals (e.g. TR, SI) seem a promising direction. Using technology is crucial to reach the children and youth in the digital generation, and it is essential to give alternatives to the pornographic content available in overwhelming proportions upon searching the web for SE-related terms. Powerful opposition groups have already recognised this (e.g. in FR), and produce a wealth of content filled with traditionalist, religious and sexist ideology, have a strong online presence, organise and publicise events online and successfully apply SEO (search-engine optimisation) strategies to gain visibility.



Geographic variations

There is significant variation in SE provision and quality not only between but also within states. Rural-urban, East-West, South-North and regional borders are prevalent geographical divides, while variation across schools and teachers is influenced by schools’ public/private, secular/religious funding and character, as well as specialisation type (general/grammar/technical/etc.) and if present, particular schools’ professed institutional ideology and ethos.

Rural schools can face additional challenges or barriers to provision of sexuality education including lack of human and material resources. These factors when combined with not making SE mandatory results in a high likelihood of rural schools dropping SE as a priority (e.g. RO). Further, in rural contexts, services are less accessible and anonymity is not guaranteed. At the same time, cooperation between different agents and providers is in some countries (e.g. AT, BE/FR) more prevalent and efficient in rural settings than in urban ones, and there are more precarious youth gathered in large cities (e.g. Brussels). Countries where regional municipalities have relatively high degrees of autonomy (e.g. ES, UK) show great variation in SE provision, content, quality and related legislation.

Even in countries where relatively good frameworks are in place, these do not guarantee universal quality, approach and implementation. Save for some cases, where the general approval of evidence-based SE is high and state guidelines supporting it are barely challenged (NL), the **public/private, religious/secular** divide is highly relevant. Unsurprisingly, concern is raised that some heads of school and teachers in religious

schools are reported to tend not to provide adequate SE, and/or deliver misinformation and detrimental ideologies (e.g. ES, UK/S, BE/FL). In wealthier, social-democratic welfare states and where there are better state attitudes towards SE, private schools are often religious schools, and as such provide less adequate SE than public schools; whereas in less wealthy states, private schools tend to be “alternative” and at times provide better SE than public schools on their own initiative, often in collaboration with NGOs (e.g. GR, RO, HU). Variation according to teacher discretion is not always detrimental: where state curricula include highly problematic versions of “family life” education, critically thinking teachers might pick the part of curriculum they find useful to deliver and might approach it in their own way – insofar as the particular school’s political and ideological leaning allows it and they do not need to worry about getting fired (e.g. HU). Schools’ own position can be influenced by the institution’s historical political and ideological leaning, by the head of school, or by the school ethos determined by the board of governors (e.g. UK/NL).



Advocating for feminist SE: recommendations and demands for European action

We call for mandatory, comprehensive and feminist relationship and sexuality education across the continent.

The primary responsibility for setting standards, frameworks and an enabling environment for the provision of feminist SE lies within the EU institutions and the Member State Governments, and specific calls for change are set out below. Advocates, researchers and educators play a crucial role in advocating for policy changes and in upholding high quality standards throughout the cycle of design, implementation and evaluation of SE. Therefore, even though the following policy recommendations address primarily EU and State

authorities, also educators, content developers, campaigners and advocates can use them as a tool for advocacy and guidelines for action. The recommendations touch upon regulatory actions; development of curricula; tools for campaigning and resources; funding and research needs.

In Europe, 9 million girls have experienced some kind of cyber violence by the time they are 15 years old

(UN, 2015)



Regulatory actions

→ The right to SE and complementary rights to reproductive and sexual health, contraceptive tools, menstrual hygiene products and reproductive services including access to abortion, should be protected by the EU and its Member States. To this end, they should be **adopted as fundamental rights** articulated either as part of the human right to education, and/or as part of a human right to health, and/or as a human right to access information, as an addition to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and/or embedded in other international human rights treaties.

→ **Social media** companies should be pressured by the European Commission to introduce better content-screening and user-protection strategies.

→ Corporations in industries that promote unhealthy messages about sex and relationships, including the media, beauty and advertising **industries should be pressured and regulated so that their harmful effects are mitigated.** The EU should set a framework for these regulatory actions to combat gendered stereotyping in the media, to be implemented by Member States.

→ Considering the relevance of SE for the achievement of equality between women and men, **SE targets should be embedded in legal instruments,** strategies and guidelines to promote equality between women and men both at EU and Member States level.

→ Member States should, on the basis of CEDAW and European laws and conventions concerning non-discrimination, **remove patriarchal practices** (gender stereotypes, gender norm- and role-

enforcing content; biased, heteronormative/homophobic/racist, sexist and un-evidenced misinformation on sexes, reproduction, the responsibility for contraception, etc.) from state curricula and textbooks.

→ The European Institutions should ratify the Istanbul Convention and adopt a **comprehensive Directive to combat the full continuum of VAWG including sexual exploitation.** This process should include a legislative framework assessment to ensure existing laws are considered and strengthened with a specific gendered analysis for adherence to the Istanbul Convention and positions of the Institutions. This must include provisions regarding implementation to include awareness raising through quality feminist SE practices.

→ All EU Member States must urgently implement efficient policies and strategies for the compulsory reporting of **childhood sexual abuse** and adequate response mechanisms, with schools' monitoring implemented and training provided regularly.

→ Given the extremely wide-reaching, powerful and harmful influence of **online pornography,** and its inherently cross-border nature, European countries and the EU should impose unified and stringent regulations on its content and accessibility.

→ European cooperation and more stringent regulation is needed **to prosecute the production, distribution and consumption of child pornography,** as set out in Directive 2011/93/EU. Policies need to be better designed and implemented to identify and prosecute sexual predators grooming girls online, **often across borders.**



Development of curricula and training

→ SE content should be **mainstreamed** across subjects in the school curricula drafted by the Ministry of Education or other relevant authorities.

→ **Minority groups should be represented in SE content** included in school curricula, according to the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education or other relevant authority, including racial, national and religio-cultural minorities, young people and especially girls with disabilities, sexual minorities and especially young lesbians.

→ State authorities should make sure that the provision of sexual and reproductive health services to young people and especially young women reaches racial, national and religio-cultural minorities, girls in State institutional settings, people and especially girls with disabilities, sexual minorities and especially young lesbians, victims and suspected victims of VAWG. Whenever State interventions are lacking or deficient, **the EU should support the provision of SRHR services by NGOs** and other organisations holding special expertise in this field.

→ The Ministry of Education, or other relevant authority of Member States, should make sure that **higher education** courses for primary teachers **are accredited only if they provide adequate training for SE as a compulsory part of their curriculum**. The quality of this curriculum should be monitored by national women's rights organisations, and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

→ The Ministry of Education, or other relevant authority of Member States, should make sure that **higher education courses for other professionals** that encounter children and young people in their everyday work and might be required to answer questions on relationships and sexuality, and/or have to be able to respond to suspicions/cases of abuse (e.g. medical professionals, nurses, school nurses, psychologists, school psychologists, social workers) **must include adequate curricula on SE**.



Campaigns, tools and resources

→ European institutions should (continue to) implement and resource **Europe-wide campaigns and awareness-raising** on SE, SRHR, HIV/AIDS and other STIs, VAWG, sexual violence and harassment, prostitution and sexual exploitation, bullying (especially sexualised and homophobic bullying), body image, and sexist gendered stereotypes and expectations. In terms of SE, campaigns should be directed at the demand to establish a shared basis in SE across Europe that involves the approaches and subjects outlined in the previous section. Such campaigns should involve timely and funded consultation with women's rights and other civil society groups as appropriate.

→ National and European **resource databases should be established to share good practice**, relevant resources and tools in order to enable educators and interested parents to train themselves on SE and equip them with useful methodologies. Key material should be translated into different languages. Materials should also

include knowledge on recognising, communicating about, handling and referral of sexual harassment and abuse cases in schools and at home, and provide sample intra-institution policies and protocols.

→ Civil society **collaboration across Member States** in campaigning on this issue is crucial: national-level expertise is clearly exemplified in country-specific reports and **there is significant potential in international mobilisation** to further share best-practices, challenge misconceptions and build momentum and solidarity for national and European-wide action.



Funding

The European Institutions and the various funding initiatives of the Commission should take a clear stand on the importance of SE and introduce it as a **funding priority**. Member States must also ensure resourcing is committed to specifically ensure **robust provision of feminist SE**. Such investment should:

→ **Support SE projects, initiatives and organisations** (including core funding) in countries where access to SE is scarce and NGOs bear the brunt of the work as the state refuses to engage, and where school SE can be outsourced to NGOs, but they do not have the capacity to cover the demand; and do so without requiring state partners from applicants.

→ **Support SE projects and initiatives providing training** for teachers and conducting Training of Trainers (ToTs).

→ **Encourage the exchange of good practice** and joint regional advocacy efforts between civil society organisations across Member States in awareness raising as a core aspect of educational opportunities where the EU may engage.

→ **Finance translation of EU-endorsed materials** on SE to national languages.

→ **Research on SE-related subjects** should be a funding priority (see below).

→ Member States should **provide sustained funding for NGOs to whom the task of SE is officially outsourced** or that cover this need in the absence of state efforts.



Research

→ European research institutions should **adopt SE and SE-related subjects as research areas** in relation to assessments of violence prevention and health provision (E.g. Eurobarometer, FRA, ERC, Marie Curie Actions).

→ **Common standards for data collection** should be adopted to ensure a coherent system for collecting statistical data on violence against women and girls periodically in the EU. In order to ensure a coherent system for collecting statistical data, **definitions** for statistical purposes might be considered such as femicide.

→ So long as large-scale data is not generated, **meta-analyses should be funded** that synthesize existing, isolated research on these subjects.

→ In particular, there is **urgent need for international research** into, and (sex-disaggregated) data on pornography; experiences and impact of stereotyping; the SE needs of specific communities; benefits and long term impact of SE; sexual violence and abuse against children, as set out above.

→ Regular up-to-date **international policy overviews should be commissioned** to caption the status quo concerning SE and SRHR of children and young people in all European countries over time; special overviews by region (e.g. CEEBBS) should be commissioned with the involvement of regional

networks working on related subjects, with the purpose of establishing solid monitoring and impact measurement practices of SE in Europe.

→ The European Commission should **adopt new indicators for SRHR**, compel Member States to measure them, and make it a European competence.

→ The EWL notes the concerns over research ethics when examining underage subjects, and encourages **careful and ethical research methodological design** in order to obtain the data on these crucial issues.

By learning about their anatomy, women can lose the shame surrounding sometimes their own body and can embrace their sexual pleasure and sexual freedom, without guilt and prejudice. This type of education could create the needed space to explain how and why slut-shaming is a manifestation of hate-speech against women.

Romania

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The European Women's Lobby (EWL)

brings together the women's movement in Europe to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women's human rights and equality between women and men.

We are the largest European umbrella network of women's associations representing a total of more than 2000 organisations in all EU Member States and Candidate Countries, as well as 18 European-wide organisations representing the diversity of women and girls in Europe. EWL envisions a society in which women's contribution to all aspects of life is recognised, rewarded and celebrated - in leadership, in care and in production; all women have self-confidence, freedom of choice, and freedom from violence and exploitation; and no woman or girl is left behind.



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