



# FALSE PRETENSES:

The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education  
Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights

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# Summary

On January 22, 2023, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation<sup>1</sup> (OIC) tweeted<sup>2</sup> that Ambassador Tariq Ali Bakheet, their assistant secretary-general for humanitarian, cultural and social affairs, had delivered a statement at the opening session of Family Watch International's twelfth annual global policy forum in Arizona, US. There, Bakheet outlined how the OIC was working to counter "outlandish ideologies" like comprehensive sexuality education.<sup>3</sup>

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. Misinformation on CSE and intersecting forms of stigma around adolescents' sexuality create challenges for children and young people to access age-appropriate information and services. Evidence shows that parents and teachers are willing to implement CSE programs, but lack resources and training support and social stigma creates additional barriers. When these key stakeholders are involved<sup>4</sup> in the curriculum development and programming, they understand the need and value of CSE in protecting children. CSE is not only a human right and key to gender equality, but it is intentionally designed to keep children safe and to build inclusive societies.<sup>5</sup>

Despite CSE's proven positive impact<sup>6</sup> on the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of adolescents, there is a growing movement opposed to the curricula based on moral or religious grounds. Over the last decade, with a rise in the mainstreaming of CSE, key international anti-rights

stakeholders based mostly in the U.S. have been mobilizing activists from the Global South, particularly from Africa and Latin America, to advocate in United Nations (UN) spaces against women's and youth rights to SRHR information and services. They are also engaging with national and regional movements to shut down CSE programs. Silencing these topics contributes to stigma,<sup>7</sup> shame and ignorance, and may increase risk-taking as well as create help-seeking barriers for marginalized populations.

In September 2022, the UN Transforming Education Summit issued a Call to Action<sup>8</sup> to promote cooperation and transformative activities to advance gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women through education. In response to this call, anti-rights groups ramped up their activities against CSE. As the movement against CSE increases, it is imperative to spotlight empirical and scientific evidence proving the effectiveness of CSE, as well as the fact that governments around the world are making programs of sexuality education a national priority.

The anti-CSE movement seeks to impose a hetero-centric, colonial view of the family, promote conservative morals and life choices, and prevent access to sexual health information and services, especially for adolescents and youth. The movement encompasses a range of actors including religious and politically conservative international groups like the OIC and Family Watch International (FWI), as well as conservative governments.

The OIC describes itself<sup>9</sup> as the “second largest organization after the United Nations,” with 57 member states, and the collective voice of the Muslim world. In contrast, FWI is an ultra-right-wing Mormon U.S. nongovernmental organization (NGO) with a modest budget that lobbies against CSE and related issues at the UN and with countries around the world. The two organizations would seem to have little in common except for their shared antipathy for CSE. Yet, this common cause was sufficient to bring them together in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in December 2022, where an OIC subsidiary organization, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, signed a memorandum of understanding with FWI<sup>10</sup> to address the “problems of contemporary life.”

Opposition to CSE plays on fears and false assumptions on topics like abortion, contraception, gender equality, and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). The 2022 meeting in Jeddah concluded with an outcome document<sup>11</sup> that stated that the challenges to families “include Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), SOGI and rising trend of adopting relationship out of wedlock.”

The false narratives advanced by opposition groups, conservative and far-right governments, and their networks have a secondary impact—delegitimizing the United Nations and human rights norms and frameworks, including those enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It should be noted that the

United States is the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. U.S. Republicans, backed by right-wing groups, object to ratification over fears of the diminishment of parental rights<sup>12</sup> and that Americans would have to “obey the legal standards created by the UN.”

Understanding opposition to CSE is particularly pressing as 2023 presents many opportunities to advance educational initiatives at the global level. This includes the 67th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March, and the 56th Session on the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) in April. This report outlines why CSE is vital to children’s rights, shows how it addresses the gaps in child protection and gender equality, and provides examples of how CSE succeeds in different contexts with the input of concerned and invested adults. It then outlines the main actors in the anti-CSE movement and the disinformation they perpetuate, as well as how they link to each other, UN member states, and other anti-rights trends. This detail gives us insight into who these groups are, their agendas, and who is driving their narratives. It informs the debate on CSE by showing how the anti-CSE movement does not reflect lived experiences on the ground but rather is a funded movement with a specific agenda: a neocolonialist effort to destabilize a pedagogical tool that was developed in partnership with families, teachers, and government officials.

# CSE is vital, human-rights based education

High rates of pregnancy, HIV infection, and sexual violence affect children and adolescents globally and make access to comprehensive information and education about sexuality crucial to their development, health, and well-being. World Health Organization statistics from 2021 indicate that the average global birth rate among 15 to 19 year olds is 42.5 per 1000 girls,<sup>13</sup> and complications from pregnancy and child birth are among the leading causes of death for girls.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the highest annual HIV incidence in any subpopulation is among adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24, which is two to seven times higher than their male peers. Further, pregnant girls are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence and drop out of school, which negatively affects their ability to get a job and participate in their country's development.

Children and young people's access to comprehensive sexuality education is grounded in international conventions<sup>15</sup> on health, gender equality, and education, as well as a range of regional agreements that include specific commitments on the implementation of sexuality education. This evidence-informed and curriculum-based approach<sup>16</sup> is about reinforcing healthy and positive values, providing life-saving skills, and contributing to keeping children, especially girls, in school. Through a school-implemented curriculum, children learn to treat one another with respect early on and understand how their decisions and actions affect their own wellbeing and that of others. Children and adolescents learn to talk

to trusted adults about topics like their bodies, relationships, and values; they learn to think about their personal safety around coercion, early and unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; and learn to identify different forms of violence. CSE, unlike abstinence-only education,<sup>17</sup> is proven to have a positive impact on the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of adolescents and helps reduce unintended pregnancies,<sup>18</sup> delay initiation and frequency of sexual intercourse, and prevent unsafe abortions.

A 2020 systematic literature review of three decades of school-based CSE programming<sup>19</sup> looks beyond pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease prevention, in the United States and throughout the world. The review provides evidence that CSE is most effective when it is positive, affirming, and inclusive of human sexuality—leading to students' appreciation and awareness of "sexual diversity, dating and intimate partner violence prevention, development of healthy relationships, prevention of child sex abuse, improved social/emotional learning, and increased media literacy." Other systematic reviews validating the importance of CSE have been conducted by the United Nations,<sup>20</sup> European Parliament,<sup>21</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control's Adolescent and School Health,<sup>22</sup> and the Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing.<sup>23</sup> They are joined by government and independent evaluations that have examined the effectiveness of adolescent and youth interventions and how to develop appropriate curricula.

**Despite claims that CSE is promoted and developed by a cabal<sup>24</sup> of UN agencies, CSE curricula are in fact developed with and by national governments, call for the engagement of parents and communities, and rely on globally developed evidence-based guidance.**

In 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned an independent review of its International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education<sup>25</sup> (ITGSE) which included input from researchers, ministry of education officials, young people, and NGO partners. This stakeholder revision process also involved target group discussions at the country level. The guidance and implementation of any CSE curricula is only relevant with national and regional government support and policy, and through school leadership and management.

UN agencies, like UNESCO and the UN Population Fund, work in partnership with governments to implement CSE<sup>26</sup>, both in schools and outside of schools through community-based training and outreach. The UN Population Fund also promotes policies for, and investment in, sexuality education programs that meet internationally agreed-upon standards. UNESCO has additionally developed a toolkit<sup>27</sup> for governments, civil society organizations, and UN agency program designers to design and review CSE programs for the national and local levels. Other complementary programs, like 2021-2025 Education Plus Initiative<sup>28</sup> of Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, which is aimed at helping girls achieve gender equality

by supporting them to stay in school, has a CSE component.

Progress has been made in countries all over the world<sup>29</sup> in recognizing the importance of CSE. Since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, CSE has become popular, with implementation of CSE programs steadily increasing.<sup>30</sup> Around 85 countries throughout the world have policies or laws<sup>31</sup> relating to sexuality education. In December 2021, 20 countries from East and Southern Africa<sup>32</sup> reconfirmed their 2013 joint commitments on sexuality education and youth-friendly SRH services. While important strides have been made to improving SRHR outcomes among adolescents and young people, significant gaps and barriers still exist in the region. Commitment to CSE does not always translate to children and young people receiving it in practice, nor how comprehensive it is.

The programs and implementation of CSE works only with national government commitments and community level buy-in. In some cases, there is demonstrable limited capacity for some governments to create the necessary spaces for partnerships and collaboration between civil society, UN agencies, and other stakeholders to ensure the provision of holistic education for children and youth in a safe and supportive learning environment. However, limited government political will for CSE in other cases represents a lack of consistency between their human rights obligations and the actual policies and practices that result in human rights violations, including violation of children's rights health and educational rights.

# Drivers of the anti-CSE movement

In countries where communities, including parents, school officials, religious leaders, media, and young people themselves are involved, there is a favorable environment for CSE.

**If CSE is an effective, proven tool to protect children from violence and abuse that leads to better outcomes for young people, and improves gender equality, why is there such opposition and mass disinformation? Simply put, the anti-CSE movement is not concerned with child protection.<sup>33</sup> Their goal is to maintain hetero-centric, patriarchal systems; deprecate the educational system; destabilize multilateralism; and prioritize “parental rights” and national sovereignty over international human rights norms.**

National stakeholders, foreign influencers and NGOs, and some governments target CSE to advance their own agendas that have little to do with protecting children but rather maintain power dynamics and advance their regressive world views. CSE is, in effect, their latest bogeyman. According to the disinformation propagated by this opposition, CSE allegedly:

- Desensitizes children to sexual material, sexualizes children,<sup>34</sup> and promotes promiscuity.
  - Challenges and changes the sexual and gender norms of a patriarchal (and often Western and Christian) perception of society and marriage by supposedly promoting homosexuality and advocating for abortion.<sup>35</sup>
  - Jeopardizes children’s health<sup>36</sup> and well-being.
  - Prioritizes what they call the “sexual rights of children”<sup>37</sup> and denies “parental rights,”<sup>38</sup> a term that does not exist in international human rights law.
  - Advances a Western agenda<sup>39</sup> that goes against local culture and traditions, which is ironic given that it is Western, Christian nationalist groups based in the United States and Europe who are objecting to CSE.
- To this last point, American anti-CSE activists are inserting themselves in national and regional spaces where they have no mandate. For example, in 2022, FWI president Sharon Slater spoke at the African Bar Association annual meeting in Malawi—it should be noted she is neither a lawyer nor African. In her keynote address<sup>40</sup> she claimed that UN agencies, including United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, UN Population Fund, UNESCO, and the World Health Organization, have been “hijacked by Western donor countries and have a hidden sexualized agenda to sexualize children, to legalize and destigmatize abortion, and to mainstream homosexuality and transgender ideology.”



She and others claim that the UN promotes an agenda that is anti-family, promotes homosexuality and abortion, and removes parental rights, pushing ideology to infiltrate governmental systems worldwide. They use this language and anti-UN rhetoric to block or limit CSE through advocacy at the UN, national and regional campaigns, program bans, and recruitment, training, and capacity building of regional, national, and local leaders. Slater's participation at a professional setting like the bar association suggests they are reaching out to new audiences who can advance their agenda in new spaces.

These arguments are false, baseless, and constitute disinformation that in many cases amount to hate speech against LGBTI populations. In fact, [FWI](#)<sup>41</sup> and many of their partner organizations have been identified as extremist anti-LGBTI hate groups by U.S. far-right watchdog and human rights organizations, such as the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#),<sup>42</sup> [Equity Forward](#),<sup>43</sup> and the [Global Project Against Hate and Extremism](#).<sup>44</sup>



## KEY INTERNATIONAL ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS AGAINST CSE

The following are some of the main organizations against CSE; most are based in the United States and Europe. They promote and fund national, regional, and global anti-rights strategies and campaigns, leveraging their networks and political connections. They also are connected to domestic anti-rights groups, particularly anti-abortion and anti-LGBTI civil society, think tanks, and far-right lobby groups.

**Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF)**<sup>45</sup> is a highly influential far-right legal advocacy and training group. ADF has supported the criminalization of consensual sexual relationships between LGBTI adults and works to develop “religious liberty” legislation and anti-LGBTI and anti-woman case law in both the [United States](#) and abroad.<sup>46</sup>

**The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam)**<sup>47</sup> is a U.S.-based anti-LGBTI organization with consultative status at the UN that gained significant access to U.S. policy at the UN during the Trump administration. C-Fam publishes and promotes anti-SRHR research, including in advance of CSW, a January 30, 2023 piece on “[Why Comprehensive Sexuality Education is Not the Answer](#).”<sup>48</sup> C-Fam was founded by the anti-rights group [Human Life International](#)<sup>49</sup> and was instrumental in founding the [World Youth Alliance](#);<sup>50</sup> more below.

**CitizenGO**<sup>51</sup> is a Spain-based far-right Christian platform for global cyber-activism with a focus on regional and in-country work. They use CSE as a gateway to oppose other SRHR issues. Their strategies include media coverage, UN lobbying, [online disinformation campaigns](#),<sup>52</sup> and promoting shocking anti-abortion images and props, including the use of an anti-abortion, anti-trans bus outside UN events.

**Family Watch International (FWI)**<sup>53</sup> is arguably the lead U.S.-based organization that has been instrumental in influencing conservative countries, largely targeting African states and now working with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to promote anti-rights language at the UN. They leverage parliamentary and other regional policy and legal spaces, host trainings for policymakers, promote SRHR-related disinformation, and develop thematic anti-rights websites. FWI has lobbied against CSE<sup>54</sup> since 2010 and promotes the “natural family.”<sup>55</sup>

**UN Family Rights Caucus**<sup>56</sup> is a coalition of organizations who are advocating for protection of a hetero-centric, patriarchal definition of the “natural family,” and is co-chaired and founded by FWI. Caucus members include individuals, government, religious and civil society leaders, and NGOs.

**World Youth Alliance**<sup>57</sup> was developed to assist the anti-SRHR lobby at the UN and elsewhere with the aim of curtailing reproductive freedom for young people. Using language around international human rights and youth empowerment, World Youth Alliance hosts trainings and brings young people to international conferences to advocate against CSE and promote the “natural family.”

## Opposition advocacy at the United Nations

Conservative UN member states and NGOs view the 1994 Cairo International Conference for Population and Development (ICPD) Program of Action,<sup>58</sup> the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action,<sup>59</sup> and the outcome documents of their review conferences as the starting point

for significant threats to traditional family models.<sup>i</sup> The narrow definition of the family<sup>60</sup> promoted by these actors goes against socio-cultural norms and values of what families look like in diverse parts of the world.<sup>ii</sup> Despite the progress ICPD meant in terms of the recognition for SRHR, the opposition influences the approaches taken in negotiations. Since 1994, we find that in diplomatic spaces, anything related to gender, diversity, and increasingly discrimination, equality, and women and girls’ political participation, are targets of opposition.

A recent example of CSE pushback from member states took place at the 75th World Health Assembly<sup>61</sup> in June 2022, where disagreements played out over a draft text on global health strategies around HIV, viral hepatitis, and sexually transmitted infections. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Nigeria led the criticism,<sup>62</sup> opposing the inclusion of references to SRHR and a reference to the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE). Nigeria’s objection to SRHR and ITGSE in this UN space was inconsistent with its national policies: Nigeria is one of the few countries<sup>63</sup> in Sub-Saharan Africa where a government-led school-based sexuality education has been scaled up nationwide. This, unfortunately, is not unusual and in fact reflects the hypocrisy of UN spaces where member states may not align diplomatically with their own national values, priorities, or programs. While they failed in stopping the strategies’ approval, the clear lack of consensus meant the only solution was resorting to a vote. In a forum where consensus is highly valued as part of

i The Cairo and Beijing conferences and their programs of action recognized that SRHR, women’s empowerment, elimination of discrimination, and gender equality are cornerstones of human rights as well as population and development programs.

ii This so-called “natural family” was imposed on colonized countries, which have had a long and rich understanding of family, community, clan, or tribe. The nuclear family, functioning as a dissociated self-contained unit, is a Western, patriarchal, colonial construct that goes against many traditional forms and definitions of family.

the negotiation mechanism, forcing a vote set a dangerous precedent that prior to this session had never happened on the adoption of a technical strategy.

Pushback from conservative UN member states and their NGO allies is now an established part of the UN negotiating dynamic, and it continues to multiply, even in unlikely diplomatic spaces. This includes the 50th Plenary Session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS);<sup>64</sup> the Transforming Education Summit,<sup>65</sup> convened by the UN Secretary-General in September 2022; and the 50th Human Rights Council,<sup>66</sup> to name a few. Member states that oppose gender equality and human rights have been corralled in the last decade by Russia, Egypt, and the United States during the Trump administration, with growing leadership from Hungary and Nigeria—all of which affects their respective regional voting blocs. Some of these countries additionally have authoritarian, populist leadership, domestic anti-LGBTI and anti-abortion laws, and particularly in Europe, growing far-right, anti-democratic trends.

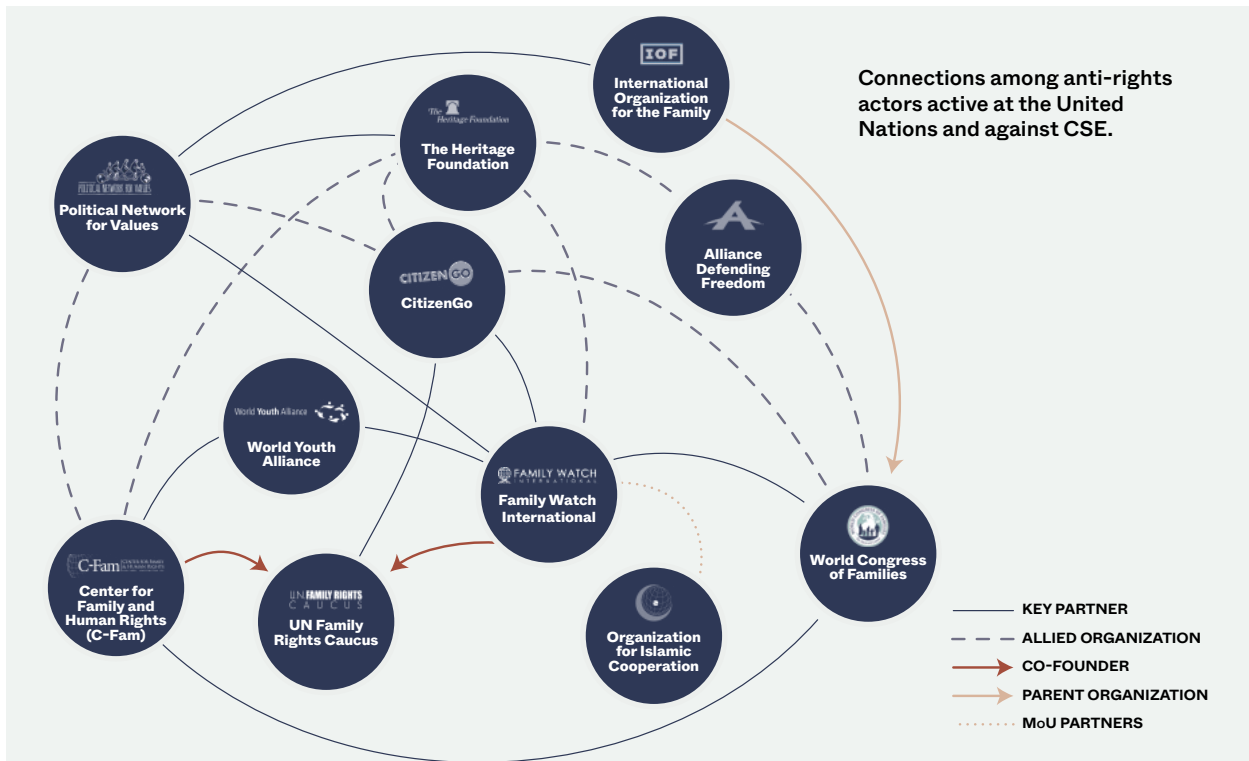
These member states are supported by opposition NGOs who have successfully advocated at the UN to shut down or stall work promoting information and education about SRHR. They often organize through a C-Fam and FWI initiative, The Group of the Friends of the Family (GoFF), which includes a rogues' gallery of member states.<sup>iii</sup> Created by C-Fam in February 2015,<sup>67</sup> the GoFF describes itself<sup>68</sup> as “a coalition of UN Member States that reaffirm that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. The GoFF believe that

genuine and effective sustainable development may not be achieved without the family.”

While FWI may have just inked a deal with the OIC, their work together is not new. As early as 2008, FWI was giving private briefings<sup>69</sup> to the UN delegates including the OIC and members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)—a political and economic union of 15 Caribbean member states, and the African Group—another UN regional group of 54 states. The institutionalization of these briefings has led to the subsequent preparation of delegates in these blocs to “protect the family” in further UN negotiations.

These organizations and countries use CSE as an entry point to attack other SRHR and human rights, particularly language that addresses discrimination and diversity. U.S.-based anti-rights groups have gained access to member states and implemented their strategies, in part by establishing consultative status at the UN and working in coalition through caucuses and groups to directly influence policymakers. They use provocative anti-abortion videos and images, organize protests, and target member states to spread disinformation about CSE and block SRHR and other measures at the UN. A 2019 report on CSE<sup>70</sup> published by the pro-abstinence Institute for Research and Evaluation<sup>71</sup> is being disseminated to UN member states. An examination of the report in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*<sup>72</sup> found fundamental flaws and errors in the framework underpinning the analysis, lack of adherence to standards of scientific review, and other concerning discrepancies. Nevertheless, FWI, among other anti-rights group, is using the study to deliberately sow doubt and disinformation about the effectiveness of CSE.

iii As of 2021, member states in the GoFF include: Bangladesh, Belarus, Comoros, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Yemen, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.



FWI often takes a leadership role<sup>73</sup> at the UN. At the 2021 54th Commission on Population and Development, FWI successfully mobilized countries<sup>74</sup> of the African Group to fight against the inclusion of progressive language—including words and phrases like “comprehensive sexuality education,” references to “sexual rights,” or language “understood to promote LGBT policies”—in the outcome document that reflects global commitments. Earlier, at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2018, FWI organized a protest against<sup>75</sup> sexuality education outside UNICEF’s New York office; they objected to UNICEF signing the ITGSE and joining “a global campaign to promote...controversial ideas for children like abortion, masturbation, and homosexuality.” In fact, it is well-known that ITGSE covers a large range of knowledge, skills, and values designed for different age groups, using an approach that builds on prior learning.

In September 2022 FWI reported<sup>76</sup> on the “disturbing” Transforming Education Summit that promotes an “LGBTQI agenda.” The

Heritage Foundation—a U.S.-based ultra-conservative think tank that has hosted its own 2020 summit on anti-CSE, “Protecting Children in Education,”<sup>77</sup> also criticized the 2022 UN Summit in its online news forum, *The Daily Signal*, publishing an article by the Christian legal organization Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF). In the article,<sup>78</sup> ADF calls the Transforming Education Summit a “red flag,” noting with alarm that ten African countries committed to “a five-year plan allowing the U.N. free reign to spread its radical sexual agenda across local schools.” They also raised concerns about the Education Plus Initiative, mentioned above, which FWI highlights in their presentations on CSE.<sup>79</sup> All these strategies draw attention to anti-CSE messages, spread consistent disinformation, and use graphic images to rally support against CSE and other SRHR measures.

In FWI’s 2023 agreement with the OIC’s subsidiary the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, the document condemns UN agencies, “UN treaty bodies, regional organizations and all other

entities” that “promote SOGI norms which are contrary to universal human rights, offensive to religious values as well as potentially harmful for the physical and psychological health of the child.” This is despite the fact that the stigmatization, erasure, and criminalization of SOGI diversity in many previously colonized countries is itself a legacy of colonialism.<sup>80</sup>

There is a trend at the UN where disparate regional blocks will align to go up against issues and language they collectively reject; for example, CARICOM usually works with the African Group at CSW against CSE. As regions vote as unified blocks in UN negotiations, this risks further tipping anti-CSE partisanship during CSW and CPD, especially with added support from Russia, who, interestingly, has observer status with the OIC.<sup>81</sup> Among OIC member states, Saudi Arabia,

Egypt, and Nigeria have been very vocally anti-SRHR, anti-SOGI, and have targeted language around CSE in other fora, for example as mentioned earlier in 2022 at the World Health Assembly and the Human Rights Council. They’ve also generated discord on resolutions that are generally uncontroversial such as female genital mutilation<sup>82</sup> and girls’ political participation.<sup>83</sup>

With formal partnership between U.S.-based organizations like FWI and the OIC, there is concern that anti-gender and anti-rights UN member states will double down during negotiations at the UN,<sup>84</sup> as well as in their own countries. It is well known that failure to support CSE and other best public health practices leads to higher risk taking and vulnerability for marginalized populations, including women, youth, and LGBTI people.

**IIFA and FWI USA Sign a Memorandum of Cooperation**  
21 December, 2022

Seeking to build strategic partnership relations with scientific and research institutions and centers active in the field of protecting and nurturing the family institution in modern societies, and desiring to enable these institutions and centers to make the most of the resolutions and recommendations of the Academy that include effective solutions to many of the problems of contemporary life and its emerging issues, His Excellency Prof. Koutoub Moustapha Sano, Secretary General of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), and Her Excellency Ms. Sharon Slater, President of the Family Watch International in Arizona, USA, signed a memorandum of cooperation between the two institutions, on Tuesday 26 Jumada Al-Awwal 1444H corresponding to 20 December 2022G at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the Academy in

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21 February, 2023

Sharon Slater, president of FWI, and Professor Koutoub Moustapha Sano, Secretary General of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, signed a memorandum of cooperation<sup>85</sup> on December 20, 2022 at the academy in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (last accessed February 24, 2023).

## Anti-CSE tactics at the regional and national levels

International opposition groups are also actively supporting regional and national campaigns against CSE, gender equality, and the right to abortion. They advance initiatives to support so-called “parental rights,”<sup>86</sup> as opposed to parental responsibilities, which go against the fundamental rights of children to education and information. These anti-rights groups often test out anti-CSE initiatives in one region or country, then export them to others, and are promoted and accompanied by U.S.-based or European organizations.

Since its introduction in 2021, global anti-rights organizations have continuously campaigned against the East African Community Sexual and Reproductive Health bill, which aims to include SRH information and services as part of universal health coverage in the seven East African Community partner states. Organizing against the bill gained momentum in 2022, notably in Uganda<sup>87</sup> through its parliament.<sup>88</sup> Anti-rights civil society groups mobilizing domestically against the bill are increasingly being accompanied by international support. Parliamentarians in Uganda and other countries have ties to anti-rights groups like FWI and the Political Network for Values,<sup>89</sup> and they are making inroads. Recently, activists in Uganda had to resort to using the courts<sup>90</sup> to ensure access to CSE. Previously, the 2013 development of ministerial commitments<sup>91</sup> in East and Southern Africa on CSE was also a process highly influenced by the opposition, with FWI calling it a “deceptive” sets of tactics<sup>92</sup> being implemented across the 20 countries in the region.

This dynamic also plays out at the national level. In Guatemala, on March 8, 2022,

International Women’s Day, the Guatemalan Congress approved a law<sup>93</sup> that included the “protection of life and the family,” establishing harsher penalties for abortion, the prohibition of same-sex marriage, and restrictions on sexual diversity and CSE. In Nigeria, on November 3, 2022, the Federal Minister of Education ordered the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council to remove sexuality education<sup>94</sup> from the Basic Education Curriculum. Brazil has waged similar campaigns<sup>95</sup> against ‘indoctrination’ and ‘gender ideology’ in schools, with lawmakers at the federal, state, and municipal levels introducing more than 200 legislative proposals since 2014 to ban gender and sexuality education and ‘indoctrination’ in schools. Human Rights Watch has confirmed that at least 21 laws directly or indirectly banning gender and sexuality education<sup>96</sup> were in force as of May 2022.

These initiatives often use children’s safety as a basis for derailing social progress and they use rhetoric and narratives developed by U.S.-based organizations to defend their positions. At the November 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference in Mexico,<sup>97</sup> speakers advocating for supposed child protection used narratives that demonized sexuality education and LGBTI people.<sup>98</sup> One movement that has had success deploying this rhetorical framing is *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (CMHNTM), a phrase that loosely translates to “don’t mess with my children.” Started in Peru in December 2016, CMHNTM opposed the Ministry of Education’s National Curriculum for including sex education and gender equality. Instead, they wanted to preserve the nuclear family and fight against “gender ideology” and LGBTI rights. In early

2017, CMHNTM helped organize the March for Heterosexual Pride<sup>99</sup> as a response to Peru's Pride parade and other women's and LGBTI rights movements. CMHNTM is part of a larger trend against gender equality in the region that is expanding into other countries including Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Paraguay. This despite the fact that Argentina, Chile, and Mexico have positive legal frameworks for CSE.<sup>100</sup>

CSE has also faced growing disinformation and media-led outrage in Francophone West Africa in the last few years. A controversy unfolded following a December 2021 UNESCO workshop on CSE in Senegal after teachers' unions and Islamic and religious

family organizations called on the intervention of President Macky Sall. Sall complied, stating that "Neither UNESCO nor the United Nations can force us to change the programs in our schools." Less than a year later in Mali in September 2022, a similar workshop was met with a comparable outcry by the media, who called it an *attempt by Westerners*<sup>101</sup> to "introduce the virus of homosexuality into the minds of students through the promotion of gender." These efforts fail to reflect a real engagement with CSE program implementation and the necessary roles that families, teachers, and communities play in the health and educational needs of young people. Instead, they further follow the trend of attacks to delegitimize the UN and its institutions.

### WHAT IS "GENDER IDEOLOGY"?

"Gender ideology" was created by hard-right religious activists and used as a catchall phrase to promote an anti-rights narrative against women and LGBTI individuals. The term is a rallying cry for conservative activists to lobby against CSE, women's rights, and bodily autonomy, claiming that LGBTI individuals and groups seek to destroy traditional marriage, family structures, and Christian patriarchal values.

## International anti-rights recruitment, training, and capacity strengthening

A key anti-CSE and anti-UN strategy is the recruitment and training of local leaders by international opposition groups, with an eye to sustainability and building the capacity of youth leaders in particular. Notably, the World Youth Alliance<sup>102</sup> trains young people during its annual International Solidarity Forum. This event is hosted at the UN and brings together youth from around the world to engage in international policy debates. World Youth Alliance also hosts regional youth summits and trainings<sup>103</sup> in North America, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

These trainings operate under the guise of upholding human rights and "dignity for all"—meaning anti-abortion—while grooming youth to promote conservative values, influence global policymakers in high-level international meetings, and carry anti-CSE and anti-abortion messages back to their home countries.

CitizenGO, Political Network for Values, FWI, and others similarly recruit and engage with national leaders to promote anti-rights, anti-CSE and anti-human rights agendas through

providing trainings and forming international partnerships. Political Network for Values, for instance, has been instrumental in gaining support from members of parliament, from both the global North and South, to influence not only their domestic policies but also in regional spaces.

In advance of CSW, FWI hosts an annual training, the Global Family Policy Forum in Arizona,<sup>104</sup> where it is based, flying members of parliament, diplomatic staff, and like-minded allies, including staff from CitizenGO, to network. It was here that on January 18, 2023, Ambassador Tariq Ali Bakheet, the assistant secretary general for humanitarian, cultural and social affairs of the OIC, made his remarks against CSE. Past participants<sup>105</sup> included former State Secretary of Family Affairs for the Brazilian government, Angela Gandra; Zambian ambassador to Ethiopia and the Permanent Representative to the African Union, Emmanuel Mwamba; Sarah

Flood-Beaubrun, Minister for External Affairs for Saint Lucia; and former U.S. government officials under the Trump administration.

Building off their networking momentum with high-level stakeholders, opposition groups are organizing in force with their partners, including youth and local leaders, in crucial UN and international spaces like CSW, CPD, and the Organization of American States, advocating against human rights and SRHR measures. The International Organization for the Family, a conservative, anti-LGBTI group, also organizes the World Congress of Families<sup>106</sup> and regional meetings. Like the Conservative Political Action Conference mentioned above, this forum brings together members of the far and Christian right to promote the patriarchal, colonial concept of the “natural family” and the fearmongering, hate-based “dangers” of homosexuality, and to train others to use comparable anti-rights rhetoric to subvert regional and international human rights institutions.

## Conclusion

Children and youth need the opportunity to build self-confidence and healthy decision-making skills around reproductive choices, including information on how to access contraception and abortion care—information that is available through comprehensive sexuality education programs. Providing this education alongside access to health services breaks down community stigma around adolescent and youth sexuality, thus helping all of us keep them safe and help them develop into confident and contributing

citizens. It also ensures that teachers and school authorities received the training they need to improve learning outcomes by having healthy learners. It increases parents’ ability to engage in vital conversations with their children and make sure that both their children and their communities receive life-saving SRHR information, education, and services from experts. It also means increased political support for SRHR and CSE with increased funding for safe services and stronger multi-lateral decision-making spaces.



**To effectively counter disinformation on CSE and the false arguments promoted by these groups and certain member states, advocates should consider:**

- Reminding key stakeholders and decision-makers that the family, in all its diversity and traditional values is not counter to CSE or indeed SRHR in general. Mutual respect, dignity, bodily autonomy, and shared humanity are essential values espoused by SRHR advocates and inherent in the implementation of CSE programs for children and young people.
- Educating, with evidence, country representatives to the United Nations and in other fora on the goals of CSE, what internationally developed guidance by the UN and others recommend, how implementation works in practice, and the regional and national level initiatives that support it.
- Reminding country representatives, ministries of health and education, and other key stakeholders that FWI, C-Fam, and others are neocolonialist foreign organizations that have agendas of their own. Fundamentally, their proposed policies and actions perpetuate public health crises, including unintended pregnancies and HIV. They have no practical understanding of education or health, let alone CSE, nor how program implementation is done in partnership with countries, communities, teachers, parents, and young people.
- Highlighting that these anti-rights groups are not grassroots, local movements. While some do exist at the sub-national level, many organizations or movements that appear to be “local” are exported by actors and groups from other countries.



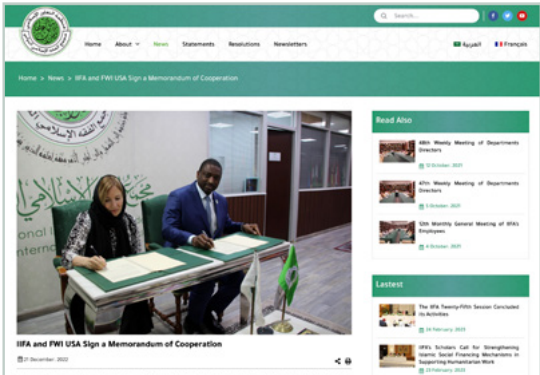
- Linking how the efforts of these anti-rights organizations are part of a wider anti-rights, patriarchal movement, that it is not just about CSE, but a wider pushback on human rights, gender equality, and democracy.

Opposition to CSE and child protection takes place in bad faith. Denying children and young people the necessary information and skills to develop safely and healthily should not be a political strategy. However, for those against CSE, it is just one weapon in an arsenal against human rights and democracy; it is not simply about children’s education and the involvement of their parents and communities, because that is what CSE implementation does in practice. For anti-rights groups, it is about reinforcing an agenda that limits the rights of vulnerable groups and privileging Christian right, white supremacy, hetero-centric values and ideas of a binary family— which is out of touch not only with many modern families, but those throughout the world that raise children in community. Being aware of the larger strategy, tactics, and presence of anti-rights actors allows advocates, UN representatives, and key decision-makers to continue standing strong for CSE, access to comprehensive SRHR that includes safe and legal abortion, and bodily autonomy for all.

It is critical to remind ourselves that the principles of democracy, plurality, and an intersectional, rights-based approach to development is necessary to advance gender equality and the rights and wellbeing of everyone. Fostering inclusive societies where children and young people are healthy and educated allows them to reach their full potential and take informed decisions and in turn, allows countries to socially and economically develop.

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