



‘LGBT Content in Relationship Education’ – Westminster Hall Debate - March 2024

Understanding anti-rights arguments is critical to defending LGBT Content in Relationship Education.

LGBT inclusive sex and relationship education plays a vital role in the health and well-being of young people. Despite 30 years of evidence of the benefits of sex education¹ it is increasingly attacked by anti-rights actors on the basis that it advances ‘gender ideology’ and the sexualisation of children. One of the main arguments used against inclusive sex education is the right of parents to decide what their children learn at school. This briefing explores how the concepts of ‘parental rights’ and ‘gender ideology’ are used to limit the rights of children and the LGBT community.

Anti-rights actors instrumentalise existing human rights protections, such as the Convention of the Rights on the Child² (CRC, which the UK has ratified) and advocate for a new set of rights, such as ‘parental rights’ which has no support in human rights standards.

Anti-rights actors approach children’s rights by dividing them into ‘protection rights’ (good) and ‘autonomous rights’ (bad). Protection rights are ‘essential for the well-being of children and should be secured and promoted,’ while ‘autonomous rights’, are used to ‘sexualize children and to indoctrinate them in radical ideologies and behaviours.’³ Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it’s clear that rights are inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. There are no good and bad human rights.

‘Parental rights’

Opponents of inclusive sex and relationship education are attempting to construct a legal category of ‘parental rights’. However, this notion has no support in existing human rights standards. Paradoxically the concept of ‘parental rights’ uses protections that are conferred to children through the CRC to exert control over children.

‘Parental rights’ are used to justify opposition to inclusive sex and relationship education, portrayed as indoctrination rather than education which undermines the ‘traditional’ family by promoting immoral content and poses a risk to children’s safety. According to the Alliance for Defending Freedom, a US advocacy and lobby group which helped overturn Roe v Wade, sex and relationship education undermines ‘parental rights’ by ‘teaching children they have a right to privacy from their parents’.⁴ Everyone, including children, has the right to privacy, including from private actors such as other members of the family.

Anti-rights actors assert that parents know what is best for their children by making choices for the child, thus instrumentalising the right of the child to have their best interest taken as a ‘primary consideration’ (Article 3) in any decision-making process.

¹ [A systematic review of scientific literature from 1990](#) is clear of the many benefits of sex education, including the prevention of violence in interpersonal relationship and child sexual abuse.

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

³ Family Watch International, Protecting Children, 2015

⁴ Alliance for Defending Freedom, [Parent’s Toolkit on Critical Theory](#)

Establishing what is in the best interest of the child is not a top-down process. The child's participation is necessary for their best interest to be determined. All children have the right to express their views, and for their views to be heard, otherwise their best interest cannot be determined. Article 12 of the CRC is clear that listening to the child is not sufficient but that their views must be taken seriously. The child's participation in all processes to determine their best interest is a right, not a permission.

All children have the right to education, to freedom of expression and non-discrimination. Using 'parental rights' to ban inclusive sex and relationship education results in some parents controlling not only their child but other children and parents too, discriminating against LGBT children and their parents, LGBT parents and others who respect their child's right to education.

Parents do have a role which is recognised by the CRC, they have rights and responsibilities to provide direction and guidance to their child. However, 'this is to enable the child to exercise his or her rights and requires that direction and guidance are undertaken in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child'⁵. The principle of the 'evolving capacities of the child' is also misrepresented by anti-right actors to claim that there is an age below which children cannot be heard. However, children have equal rights, regardless of age.

General comment 14⁶ on the best interest of the child is clear that the more the child knows, has experience and understands, the more parents 'have to transform direction and guidance into reminders and advice and later to an exchange on an equal footing'. There is no fixed age stage for this transformation, it must increase 'as the child is encouraged to contribute her or his views'. The role of parents is therefore to enable the child to exercise their rights, to increasingly take on an active role in their life rather than being controlled according to the parent's wishes, often couched in freedom of belief.

Gender Ideology

The term 'gender ideology' is a construction deployed by anti-rights state and non-state actors to restrict the rights of women and LGBT people to bodily autonomy, including the right to abortion. Across the board, these narratives rely on provoking uncertainty and fear and are often combined with misinformation and sensationalism.

'Gender ideology' is a catch-all term that encompasses different concerns, it is used transnationally but deployed in a context-specific way. Actors privilege their specific issue and make it relevant to their context (for example abortion or the rights of trans and gender non-conforming children or domestic violence) while at the same time, they find a coherent narrative in the global fight against 'gender ideology'.

Of course, creating a threat means also creating an enemy: the human rights, social justice and feminist movements are portrayed as a gender/transgender lobby, powerful and dictatorial, seeking to undermine the institution of the family and to indoctrinate children.

These are some of the key tactics deployed by anti-rights actors⁷:

- Twisting legitimate concerns to serve anti-rights agendas: for example, anti-rights actors take a legitimate and important issue such as the right of disabled people and use it to rally against

⁵ [CRC General Comment No. 12 \(2009\) The right of the child to be heard](#)

⁶ [CRC Committee General Comment No. 14 \(2013\) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration \(art. 3, para. 1\)*](#)

⁷ Adapted from the Observatory on the Universality of Rights

women's right to bodily autonomy and abortion. A joint statement ⁸between the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has clarified that disability rights and gender equality are two parts of the same human rights standards, not in opposition with each other.

- Developing a parallel human rights narrative: this consists of purposefully mystifying human rights concepts and interpretations. 'Parental rights' is an example of this tactic. This allows anti-rights actors to infiltrate and influence human rights spaces and to gain political support.
- Provoking moral panic: concepts and tropes such as 'transing children', the idea that feminism has gone too far and men are now discriminated against are all used to stock panic and build political support.
- Obstructing human rights education: anti-rights actors decry school education about human rights, diversity and discrimination as 'indoctrination'. Inclusive sex education is a target, but more recently anti-rights actors have attacked approaches such as critical race theory and the teaching of colonial history. In the US such movements have successfully banned a number of books from school libraries.

Funding for anti-rights movements

Anti-gender actors talk about a 'gender lobby' or 'transgender lobby' as an all-powerful entity infiltrating every institution in society, from politics to education to the health system. However, if we compare the resources of anti-gender actors with those advocating for the rights of women and LGBTI people it is immediately clear that the opposite is true.

The European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights has estimated that annual anti-gender spending in Europe has increased by a factor of four starting from USD 22.2 million in 2009 to reach USD 96 million in 2018⁹.

The ADF established a London office in 2017 and almost doubled its spending between 2020 and 2022, which amounted to more than £370,000 in 2017–18 alone. This is about as much money as ADF invests in lobbying the European Union¹⁰. In comparison Rosa¹¹, the main grant-making charity for women and girls in the UK, has distributed about £1.7 million in the years 2022-23 and LGBT Consortium¹² has distributed over £1.75M in onward grants to diverse LGBT+ organisations from across the UK.

In addition, most funding for human rights organisations is short-term and tied to specific projects and objectives rather than flexible and long-term, something anti-rights actors can count on¹³.

To conclude, gains made to win the rights of women and LGBT people are increasingly under attack. We are witnessing a mainstreaming of extreme views, an increase in funding and concerted attempts to roll back protections. 'Gender ideology' is increasingly used to justify new policies, such as the school guidance for Gender Questioning Children¹⁴ or to change existing ones as in the case of inclusive sex and relationship education. Being knowledgeable about the narratives and tactics of anti-rights actors, their global nature and funders is critical to be able to anticipate and resist such attacks.

⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2018/09/stop-regression-sexual-and-reproductive-rights-women-and-girls-un>

⁹ European Parliamentary Forum for sexual and reproductive rights, [Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality & Reproductive Health in Europe](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-us-anti-lgbt-hate-group-dramatically-increases-uk-spending/)

¹⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-us-anti-lgbt-hate-group-dramatically-increases-uk-spending/>

¹¹ <https://rosauk.org/>

¹² <https://www.consortium.lgbt/>

¹³ <https://equalrightscoalition.org/documents/anti-gender-movement-background-paper/>

¹⁴ [Gender Questioning Children Non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England](https://www.equalrightscoalition.org/documents/anti-gender-movement-background-paper/)