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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL  
OF COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY  
EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING GENDER  
EQUALITY IN THE ITALIAN  
LANDSCAPE

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## ABSTRACT

Gender inequality and discrimination is still a widespread phenomenon across the Italian Peninsula, one that touches upon several spheres of life as well as having a considerable impact on the perpetuation of negative and wrongful gender norms. According to international and European standards and guidelines, one of the most effective and extensive ways to narrow the gender gap is to recognize the transformative potential of education, namely comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), in equipping children and adolescents with age-appropriate, information-based, and scientifically accurate school and out-of-school programmes. At present, Italy is one of the seven countries in the EU that does not provide for a compulsory, continuous, and institutionalized sexuality and relationship education, a shortcoming that is partly justified by the country being divided into regions having very diverse political affiliations and unequal economic potential, as well as having a deep-rooted religious tradition. All these factors, together with an obsolete mindset that relegates the world of sex, romance, and relationships to the private sphere and considers them subjects to be discussed only in the family unit instead of treating them as issues of public concern, have made Italy an insidious landscape in which to implant the seeds for a successful and continuous CSE in the school system. In this context, advocating for a mandatory national plan that treats CSE as a general process of learning through a non-judgmental and constructive exchange of values between experts and students, represents not only one of the most effective paths through which the internationally recognized human right to sexuality education can be guaranteed, but it also serves as a way to trigger positive externalities on the Italian society to help bridge the existing gender gap in the country.

**Key words:** gender equality, sex education, human rights.



# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Introducing gender equality in analytical perspective

The term ‘gender’ refers to «the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other».<sup>1</sup> However the concept of gender can overlap and interact with that of ‘sex’, it differs enormously from it. Indeed, while sex refers to a series of biological attributes and physical differences between individuals whose genitals assigned at birth fall into the categories of either male, female, or intersex<sup>2</sup>, gender is on the contrary a social construct which is «learned through socialization processes».<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, gender norms are always associated with a specific socio-cultural context, since «different societies and cultures may have different understandings of what is ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’».<sup>4</sup> Moreover, norms and expectations related to gender that are learned and interiorized by individuals in a society, both in the private sphere (i.e., the family) and in public spaces (i.e., the school), do have an impact on the way humans experience the world they live in, and in the way they engage in relationships with others. However, precisely because it is a social construct, gender is not a fixed but a dynamic and hard-to-define concept, since gender norms can change overtime and depend largely on the culture in which they are developed as well as the broader context in which individuals interact. Likewise, ‘gender equality’ is also a challenging term to delimit within the confines of a specific definition, because even if it draws from the concept of gender, it extends the focus well beyond the set of issues described in the definition of gender itself. Gender equality refers to «the equal rights,

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<sup>1</sup> “Gender and Health,” WHO, accessed July 27, 2022, [https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1).

<sup>2</sup> An intersex person is someone born with a combination of male and female biological traits, and for this reason does not fit into the typical binary notions of male or female, but it includes both.

<sup>3</sup> “Concepts and definitions,” UN Women, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> “Sex and Gender,” CoE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sex-and-gender>.

responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, and girls and boys».<sup>5</sup> This short definition already implies something fundamentally important, that both men and women deserve to enjoy equal rights, and to be offered the same opportunities and responsibilities, without associating the latter to the fact of being either male or female. Notwithstanding this, the large-scale use that has been done of the terms gender, gender equality, and gender discrimination, has been framed around a dichotomous thinking. Put differently, these concepts have almost exclusively been discussed and analyzed with specific reference to, and focus on, the differences and inequalities between men and women only. This kind of approach, however useful to unravel the core issues related to hierarchical and unequal relationships between the two sexes, has proven unsatisfactory to truly understand how gender influences society and relationships far beyond the binary. In this regard, the first international human rights document to contain a definition of gender is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), which in Article 3 describes gender as the «*socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men*».<sup>6</sup> However, this definition fails to look at gender beyond the gender dichotomy man/woman, and for this reason cannot be considered a comprehensive and adequate understanding of the concept in its inherent complexity. Indeed, to adopt a narrow definition of gender as well as of gender equality risks to overlook discriminations experienced by individuals who do not fit in either of the two categories. Hence, providing for an extensive and comprehensive definition of the issue is crucial to cover all the situations and target all the individuals that could be affected: only if gender equality is framed as a human rights issue it can truly be addressed in an holistic perspective. That is why efforts have been made over the years to draft, and consequently provide for, a comprehensive and extensive definition of gender.

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<sup>5</sup> “Concepts and definitions,” UN Women, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>“Sex and Gender,” CoE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sex-and-gender>.



The European Institute for Gender Equality articulated that:

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male and to the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as to the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context- and time-specific, and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed, and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, an attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of gender equality was undertaken by the Council of Europe, which by explicitly stating what it considers it to be, contributes to expand the issue even further. The Council of Europe remarked that gender equality is:

An equal visibility, empowerment, and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Gender equality is the opposite of gender inequality, not of gender difference, and aims to promote the full participation of women and men in society. It means accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society. Gender equality includes the right to be different. This means taking into account the existing differences among women and men, which are related to class, political opinion, religion, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation. Gender equality means discussing how it is possible to go further, to change the structures in society which contribute to maintaining the unequal power relationships between women and men, and to reach a better balance in the various female and male values and priorities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Glossary & Thesaurus,” EIGE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1141>.

<sup>8</sup> “Gender equality and gender mainstreaming,” CoE, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/gender-equality-and-gender-mainstreaming>.

This definition is noteworthy because it highlights the transformative potential of the term gender equality, since it links its achievement to a change in the structures, norms, and patterns characterizing gender-unequal societies. For this reason, to embrace gender equality means first to understand and examine it in its transformative capacity to more ambitiously strive for dismantling unequal power relationships. However, investigating the term gender equality through analytical lenses, and being devoted to achieving gender-equal societies, means making a more demanding conceptual effort. Almost paradoxically, striving for gender equality means keeping as a firm point the need to achieve equality between men and women while acknowledging that, since gender is «a continuous nonverbal dialogue with the world»<sup>9</sup>, adopting gender categorizations would be fully in contrast with the discursive and dynamic nature of the concept of gender itself. Indeed, a system that views individuals as belonging to fixed gender categories, even if it has achieved full equality between men and women, is a system that will not succeed in eradicating gender inequality to the core. That is why gender equality is also the concept that more than anything else embraces diversity by advocating for equal dignity and rights notwithstanding differences, while also recognizing that since gender expectations are a product of social construction, there is no baseline justification to foster unequal treatment along the lines of gender. In other words, gender equality requires an appreciation of differences precisely because individuals are not fixed beings with fixed natures, and to advocate for equal rights requires looking at people as individuals who develop over time as products of complex relations between their biology and their cultures<sup>10</sup>, in a continuous interaction between the two in which *ex-ante* expectations related to gender expression would be pointless.

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<sup>9</sup>M. Killian Kinney, “Learning to thrive in a binary world: understanding the gendered experiences of non-binary individuals and ways to bolster wellbeing” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2021).

<sup>10</sup>Michael Mascolo, “Time to Move Beyond Gender is Socially Constructed,” *Psychology Today*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/old-school-parenting-modern-day-families/201907/time-move-beyond-gender-is-socially-constructed>.

## 2. Gender inequality in Italy: setting the context

Italy represents a dense field of analysis for what concerns gender equality, since the country is still at the back of the queue compared to more ambitious European Member States. According to the 2021 report of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Italy ranks 14<sup>th</sup> in the EU, scoring 4.2 points below the average.<sup>11</sup> The results published by EIGE since 2013 through the Gender Equality Index<sup>12</sup> are based on the gaps between women and men and levels of achievement in six core domains: work, money, time, power, and health.<sup>13</sup> In the 2020 edition, the latter measured gender equality in three health-related aspects: health status, health behaviour, and access to health services.<sup>14</sup> Concerning the first aspect, the scores were drawn from data collected from self-perceived health, life expectancy at birth, and healthy life years at birth.<sup>15</sup> Data on behavior, instead, took into consideration people who did not smoke and were not involved in harmful drinking, as well as people doing physical activities and/or consuming fruits and vegetables.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, data on access to health services derived from the self-reported unmet needs of both men and women in relation to medical examination.<sup>17</sup> Seen from this perspective, the scores published by EIGE in 2020 did not offer an accurate and comprehensive picture of the state of gender equality in Italy because they did not include indicators on one of the most salient manifestations of gender equality in relation to health, namely the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This impasse was overcome a year later with the previously mentioned 2021 Index, when health was adopted as a thematic focus to further investigate gender inequalities in

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<sup>11</sup>“Gender Equality Index,” EIGE, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/country/IT>.

<sup>12</sup>The Gender Equality Index is a composite indicator that measures the complex concept of gender equality and, based on the EU policy framework, assists in monitoring progress of gender equality across the EU over time.

<sup>13</sup> “Gender Equality Index 2019: Italy,” EIGE, accessed September 18, 2022, [https://dc5k4hkhkzdgq.cloudfront.net/media/Gender\\_Equality\\_Index\\_2019\\_-\\_Italy.pdf](https://dc5k4hkhkzdgq.cloudfront.net/media/Gender_Equality_Index_2019_-_Italy.pdf).

<sup>14</sup>“Gender Equality Index,” EIGE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/health/IT>.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibidem.*

this field<sup>18</sup>, contributing to give more visibility to an area in need of improvement.<sup>19</sup> The urge to investigate gender equality in health derived from the acknowledgment, stated also in international guidelines and recommendations, that investing in sexual and reproductive health is key to advance gender equality. Nonetheless, while women's sexual and reproductive health is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right, and international bodies such as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have both indicated that women's right to health includes sexual and reproductive health<sup>20</sup>, their violation persists as a serious and systemic issue in Italian landscape. Here, evidence shows that violations of women's SRHR are varied and frequent, usually taking the form of hardship in accessing gender-specific services, and in the poor quality of services offered.<sup>21</sup> The reasons behind these shortcomings are multiple, including gender-negative beliefs and stereotyped expectations pertaining to women, together with a deep-rooted patriarchal tradition that fails to recognize women's sexuality and active role in reproduction. Notwithstanding this, data from the Gender Equality Index 2021 show that Italy's best performance among the domains considered is in the area of health, where the country ranks 11<sup>th</sup> among all Member States, reaching the 8<sup>th</sup> position in the sub-domain of access to health services which a general score of 88.4 out of 100.<sup>22</sup> However, the report published by EIGE seems to confirm that positive results must come from indicators other than the enjoyment of SRHR, since this domain continues to be heavily gendered.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, gender inequalities and gender norms intersect with socioeconomic, geographic and

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<sup>18</sup> "Gender Equality Index: Health (2021) in Italy," EIGE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/thematic-focus/health/country/IT>.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> "Sexual and reproductive health and rights," OHCHR, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/3447/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights>.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> "Gender Equality Index," EIGE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/country/IT>.

<sup>23</sup> Davide Barbieri, Antonio García Cazorla, Dr Laurène Thil, Blandine Mollard, Julia Ochmann, Vytautas Peciukonis, Dr Jolanta Reingardė, and Dr Lina Salanauskaitė. *Gender Equality Index 2021- Health*. Luxembourg, 2021.

cultural factors and create structural barriers when accessing healthcare.<sup>24</sup> Availability, access, cost, and stigma issues around contraception, as well as differentiated laws and policies on sexuality education, difficult access to safe abortion, and poor high-quality maternal care continue to foster the gender bias, a trend that Italy has been following for quite a long time.<sup>25</sup> In 2021, CEDAW published a periodic report based on Human Rights Watch's documentation of rights violation in Italy, with a specific focus on access to reproductive health care.<sup>26</sup> The findings suggest that Italy is failing to fulfill its obligations because of significant barriers to reproductive health care, especially for what concerns abortions. While according to Italian law women are eligible to request an abortion during the first 90 days of pregnancy, in practice burdensome requirements as well as an extensive use of 'conscientious objection' by medical personnel deny care to women and girls.<sup>27</sup> In addition, in Italy women have difficulties in finding services within the legal time, since multiple clinical visits and a seven-day waiting period are required for performing an abortion, the longest waiting period in Europe.<sup>28</sup> Other than this, Italy falls short also on the side of contraception: evidence shows that free contraception through the national health service stopped in 2016, and only six regions now provide free hormonal birth control.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, experts remarked that the discrimination in access for female contraception represents a big impasse towards the achievement of SRHR, since economically fragile women and adolescents have difficulties in bearing the high costs of birth control pills.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>“Gender and intersecting inequalities in access to health services,” EIGE, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2021-report/gender-and-intersecting-inequalities-access-health>.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibidem*, 18.

<sup>26</sup>Human Rights Watch. *Human Rights Watch Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on Italy's periodic report for the 80th CEDAW Pre-Session*. 2021.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup>“Da dove ripartire per garantire i diritti sessuali e riproduttivi delle donne,” Internazionale, last modified June 25, 2020, <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/claudia-torrisi/2020/06/25/italia-aborto-pandemia>.

<sup>30</sup>“Italy: Covid-19 Exacerbates Obstacles to Legal Abortion,” Human Rights Watch, last modified July 30, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/30/italy-covid-19-exacerbates-obstacles-legal-abortion>.

Besides this, in Italy gender inequality is also perpetrated through gender-based violence (GBV). This term was coined in feminist discourse, and has become of common use in public speaking to explain through gender lenses rape and non-consensual sexual acts, psychological domination, harassment, battering, homicides, serial murders, and even prostitution and pornography.<sup>31</sup> Italy is a country that still carries the weight of a deep-seated gendered and patriarchal culture which has long considered women inferior to men in several fields, a dangerous trend reinforced by real or perceived men's and women's unequal roles in familial and/or romantic relationships. In this regard, even though the task carried out by EIGE is fundamental to grasp the state of the art concerning gender equality in Italy, its work suffers of a serious shortcoming which impedes witnessing gender discrimination through a broader and more accurate picture. Indeed, data on violence in Italy have been insufficient to grasp the internal situation of a country in which reports of stalking, domestic abuse, and violent crimes against women are counted daily. Differently from the domains for which EIGE has been able to collect and publish scores in a gender perspective, indicators of violence in Italy have only been examined through the lenses of violence experienced by women, and have not been centered around differences in how, and how frequently, men and women experience violence. Nonetheless, explanations for female victimization and gender-based violence in Italy have been provided by several studies and interpretations made of available data, including those of Eures, the research center that stores detailed information regarding all cases of intentional homicide in Italy since the 1990.<sup>32</sup> A research conducted taking into account data collected by Eures in the period 2000-2005 unambiguously showed that women were almost always killed by men.<sup>33</sup> In this circumstance, it was observed that femicides committed were the result of paradoxically both low and rising gender equality.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, data reported that femicide victims were housewives, women who were

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<sup>31</sup>Daniela Bandelli, and Giorgio Porcelli, "Femicide in Italy. "Femminicidio," Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse," *Il Mulino* no. 2 (May-August 2016): 4.

<sup>32</sup>Consuelo Corradi, and Fabio Piacenti, "Analyzing femicide in Italy. Overview of major findings and international comparisons," *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies* no.1 (2016): 5, <https://journalofsociology.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/01-ArtConsuelo.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibidem*, 9.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibidem*, 10.

unemployed or in unskilled jobs, with a low level of education, and who were economically and/or emotionally dependent on their partners.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, there was evidence of victims being independent and economically autonomous women, with high levels of education.<sup>36</sup> The second situation is the one that appears the most illogical at first, however scholars explained it through the argument that a transformation of traditional gender roles is perceived as a threat because men are forced to reconsider traditionally acquired behaviours.<sup>37</sup> The two situations are equally problematic, because they both contribute to reinforce the gender gap. Indeed, both cases confirmed the power-gender gap from two opposite standpoints, one being that in which women occupy a socially lower status compared to men, and one in which women's real or perceived independency induces men to want to «keep women in their place».<sup>38</sup> Through this 'backlash effect', as the latter situation was labeled, femicide was understood as a means of exerting control, motivated by a wider loss of male control.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, femicide is an extreme act of control of a man over the integrity of a woman, usually with whom he has, or has had a close, family or intimate relationship.<sup>40</sup>

In more recent years, the state of gender inequality in Italy was taken into consideration by a 2016 Eurobarometer survey conducted in the form of questionnaire, which showed that answers from the Italian population changed considerably depending on the question asked. Indeed, when the question was about the perception of how much GBV is spread across the country, numbers were much higher compared to when interviewees were asked about the proximity of the issue, that is to say whether they knew someone within their circle of family or friends who had been a victim. In short, data showed that in Italy violence against women is seen as a very serious but not close issue<sup>41</sup>, a denial that further exacerbates the possibility of preventing femicide. In 2018, the National Department of Equal Opportunity and the Italian National Statistical

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>38</sup>*Ibidem*, 12.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibidem*, 14.

Institute (ISTAT) carried out a survey on ‘‘Stereotypes about gender roles and the social image of sexual violence’’, whose results allowed analyzing cultural models and factors that influence attitudes towards gender.<sup>42</sup>

The data collected confirmed that Italy is for the most part a country rooted in gender culture: on the subject of intimate partner violence, 7.4% of people think it is always or under certain circumstances acceptable that «a young man slaps his girlfriend because she flirted with another man», and 6.2% think that in a relationship a slap might occasionally occur.<sup>43</sup> More alarming results come from the issue of control, since 17.7% think it is always or under certain circumstances acceptable that a man habitually controls his wife’s/girlfriend’s cell phone and/or activities on social media.<sup>44</sup> On sexual violence, 39.3% of the population believes that a woman is able to avoid having sexual intercourse if she really does not want to, 23.9% think that women can provoke sexual violence by how they dress, and 15.1% believe that a woman who suffers sexual violence when affected by alcohol or drugs is at least partially responsible.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps quite surprisingly, the results collected in this research show that the gap between how men and women perceive sexual violence and gender roles is not that wide. For example, the idea that clothing can provoke sexual violence finds similar proportions among men (23.8%) and women (23.9%)<sup>46</sup>, although this varies more considerably across the lines of education and age. Indeed, of the population aged 18-74 interviewed, 54.6% agrees strongly or somewhat with at least one of the stereotypes on sexual violence considered in the survey.<sup>47</sup> This proportion increases with age (47.6% of those aged 18-29 and 61.8% of those aged 60-74), with lower levels of education (64.1% versus 42.4% of university graduates) and is greater among men (57.5% versus 51.7%).<sup>48</sup> All things considered, even if stereotypes on gender roles tend to be fostered more by men compared to women, the meager difference suggests that

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<sup>42</sup>Istat. *Stereotypes about gender roles and the social image of sexual violence- Year 2018*. 2019. [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2019/12/Report-Gender-Stereotypes-Sexual-Violence\\_2018\\_EN.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2019/12/Report-Gender-Stereotypes-Sexual-Violence_2018_EN.pdf).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibidem*, 1.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibidem*, 7.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibidem*.



the gender bias in Italy should not be viewed merely as a man's issue, but it concerns all individuals regardless of their gender.

Lastly, in Italy the impact of gender inequality is particularly problematic because institutionalized heterosexuality, as well as an entrenched patriarchal and sexist culture, constitute the standard for legitimate social and sexual relationships.<sup>49</sup> Patriarchal and sexist norms and behaviours shape gender inequality well beyond misogynistic attitudes and the unequal role occupied by women and men in society, because gender discrimination affects all sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) who experience cultural and social stereotypes. Indeed, toxic masculinity and stereotyped expectations on which gender inequalities and discriminations are grounded, contribute to create hostility towards anything that differs from what is perceived as culturally and socially appropriate in a given society. From this perspective, gender inequality is much more problematic than it appears to be, since it hinders not only women's existence in society, but it fuels episodes of homophobia and transphobia as well. In other words, while gender equality advocates for rights and co-existence notwithstanding differences, a gender-unequal society is one in which differences mark a point of rupture, a division between those who fit into the categories of what is deemed to be appropriate, and those who do not. As it was suggested in the first paragraph, adopting a comprehensive definition of gender equality helps spotting the issue in its deepest and most far-reaching expression especially in contexts such as the Italian one, where most discriminations directed towards gender nonconforming and transgender individuals are overlooked because they are not included in the fight against gender inequality. Several studies have depicted the Italian context as particularly unsupportive towards SGMs, since the latter experience high levels of oppression and victimization due to their non-heterosexual orientation and/or gender nonconformity.<sup>50</sup> Discrimination towards gender-diverse persons represents one of the foundations of the Italian sexist tradition, a pattern that prevents the possibility of cultivating and encouraging respect for gender

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<sup>49</sup> Cristiano Scandurra, Salvatore Monaco, Pasquale Dolce, and Urban Nothdurfter, "Heteronormativity in Italy: Psychometric Characteristics of the Italian Version of the Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 18 (2021): 637- 652, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-020-00487-1>.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibidem*, 639.

differences. Indeed, Italy's strong heteronormativity reinforces the gender hierarchy between heterosexual individuals and those not belonging to this category. A relevant example on this subject is the current law on civil unions which, although giving same-sex couples certain identical rights and duties to those granted to heterosexual couples, does not provide full equality of rights.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the most evident difference is represented by the prohibition of same-sex couples to resort to adoption as well as to donor insemination and surrogacy.<sup>52</sup> Transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are even more invisible in the eyes of Italian politics: the only existing law on gender affirmation process for transgender people dates to 1982 and establishes that a change of identity can only occur after a judge has verified that a psychological and/or psychiatric assessment attesting the presence of gender dysphoria allows for an affirming surgery intervention.<sup>53</sup> Notwithstanding a small step forward taken in 2015 with a sentence that permitted some Italian transgender individuals to correct their identity records at the civil registry without having undergone surgery, gender equality is still far from being accomplished. That is true also considering that the country completely lacks an anti-discrimination legislation that protects SGMs people from homophobic or transphobic hate crimes.<sup>54</sup> The lack of protection for all in the Italian country is particularly problematic because it prevents individuals from enjoying the positive effects that such laws and policies could have on health and wellbeing, as well as remarking Italy's unwillingness to give full applicability to its human rights obligations.

Having so far presented some aspects through which gender inequality manifests itself in the Italian context, especially those useful for the purpose of the current dissertation, the following chapters will be devoted to defending the argument according to which, based on international evidence, one of the most effective ways through which gender equality can be advanced in the country is by including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as a Ministerial Commitment. The first chapter of this thesis will open with an analysis of the human right to

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<sup>51</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>52</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>53</sup>*Ibidem*, 640.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibidem.*

receive a CSE, analysis that will be then followed by a paragraph focusing on the rationale behind the need to provide CSE to children and adolescents. After this, the third paragraph will focus on the state of the art concerning sexuality education in the Italian context from the standpoint of the shortcomings that characterize it, while the conclusive paragraph of this chapter will provide an historical overview of the attempts made over the years to include sexuality education as a curricular subject in the Italian education system. Drawing on the final part of the first chapter, the second one will open with a discussion on the main challenges to develop a curriculum-based CSE in the Italian territory, including the geographical division into regions with different political affiliations and economic potentials, and a deep-rooted religious tradition. The chapter will end with an analysis of what Italy's gap in sexuality education entails and why it can have negative repercussions on society. Based on what has been argued in the other chapters, the third and conclusive one will address how an efficient and effective CSE should be organized in the Italian school system.



## CHAPTER I

### Framing the need for comprehensive sexuality education in Italy

#### 1. The human right to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)

The brief overview on the level of gender equality in the Italian landscape provided in the introductory part has revealed how the current state of things does not allow us to consider Italy as a fully-fledged democratic country which values and respects fundamental human rights in their entirety. Indeed, Italy is a country in which gender discriminations, together with a common tendency to abide by international standards and to follow guidelines only partially, undermine the possibility for its citizens to equally enjoy their universally recognized human rights. This trend is also reinforced by a widespread lack of perception of gender inequality as a serious and destructive issue that has, and will have, repercussions on various domains of the social life if it remains unaddressed. The need to find strategies and solutions to strive for bridging the existing gender gap in the Italian society is also based on the fact that, while it is indisputable that gender equality should be pursued because it is a human right in itself, it is also inextricably intertwined with a series of other fundamental human rights (i.e., to life, health, non-discrimination, education, and information) whose enjoyment sets the ground on which a democratic society should build its values. On this note, denying or failing to adequately address the right to gender equality, erodes the possibility of establishing healthy and cohesive societies based on equal and enriching relationships between individuals. Moreover, realizing the right to gender equality is fundamental also considering the close bond it has with the already mentioned universally recognized right to sexual and reproductive health. In this regard, the World Association for Sexual Health views sexual rights as an integral component of basic human rights, and therefore as inalienable and universal.<sup>55</sup> The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, in an issue paper on “*Women’s*

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<sup>55</sup> “Declaration of Sexual Rights,” WAS, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Declaration-of-Sexual-Rights-2014-plain-text.pdf>.

*sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe*'' published in 2017, refers to sexual and reproductive rights as:

A body of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that are protected by international human rights law and standards and that apply throughout human beings' sexual and reproductive lives. These rights include – but are not limited to – the right to health, the right to life, the right to freedom from torture and ill-treatment and the right to privacy. Crucially, they also include the right to gender equality and freedom from discrimination in the enjoyment of rights, which obliges member states to respect and ensure the enjoyment of all rights by women and girls on the basis of equality.<sup>56</sup>

As it is highlighted in this definition, the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive rights is strictly intertwined with the attainment of gender equality, and the two are mutually reinforcing. Indeed, the ability of men and women to achieve sexual and reproductive health and well-being largely depend, among other things, on the level of gender equality in the delivery of comprehensive, good-quality information about sex and sexuality; the knowledge about the risks and vulnerability to adverse consequences of unprotected sexual activity; the ability to access sexual health care; and the fact of living in an environment that affirms and promotes sexual health.<sup>57</sup> Concerning the latter, the World Health Organization (WHO) has remarked that: «sexual health, when viewed affirmatively, requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence».<sup>58</sup> This definition, similarly to the one mentioned prior, links the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive rights to issues of discrimination and violence which lay at the ground of gender-unequal societies. Indeed, failure to respect and ensure equal sexual and reproductive health and rights is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality and discrimination. The aforementioned issue paper has

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<sup>56</sup>CoE, *Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe*, 17.

<sup>57</sup>WHO, *Sexual health, human rights, and the law*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> "Sexual Health," WHO, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health>.

highlighted how harmful gender stereotypes, systemic gender-based violence and coercive practices in sexual and reproductive health care settings, as well as shame and taboo associated with many facets of women's sexual and reproductive lives undermine not only individuals' personal development and well-being, but more broadly erode the development of democratic societies.<sup>59</sup> Seen from this perspective, advancing gender equality should be understood as a key component of a country's human rights obligations, public health commitments, and sustainable development objectives.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, sexual-health related issues are wide-ranging and directly, or indirectly, affect the way individuals learn about themselves and learn how to establish relationships with others, behaviors that depending on whether they are embedded or not with gender stereotyping will influence positively or negatively the wider social environment in which these interactions take place.

Among the different ways through which gender equality can be pursued in a country, international evidence has demonstrated that sexuality education is one of the most effective and far-reaching ones. The right to receive education on sexual-related matters derives from, and is protected by, several international human rights treaties. In a 2010 report on sexuality education, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education highlighted that: «sexual education should be considered a right in itself and should be clearly linked with other rights in accordance with the principle of the interdependence and indivisibility of human rights».<sup>61</sup> In this perspective, the right to sexuality education should be regarded as an inalienable right that, if respected and implemented correctly following international guidelines, can help achieve a number of other fundamental rights such as: the right to live free from violence and discrimination, the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, the right to receive and impart information, and most importantly the right to quality and inclusive

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<sup>59</sup>CoE, *Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe*, 5.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibidem*, 18.

<sup>61</sup>UN General Assembly, *Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, 16.

education, including human rights education.<sup>62</sup> Article 8 of the IPPF Declaration notes that: «all persons, without discrimination, have the right to education and information generally and to comprehensive sexuality education and information necessary and useful to exercise full citizenship and equality in the private, public and political domain». <sup>63</sup> Correspondingly, young people’s right to sexuality education is recognized by some paramount international human rights treaties, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The importance of sexuality education is acknowledged also in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where it is viewed as a means to pursue several goals included in the agenda, such as the achievement of good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10).<sup>64</sup>

Notwithstanding the existence of a shared agreement on the fact that education on sexual matters is not only needed, but it also constitutes a right that every person should be able to enjoy throughout their life, establishing the topics to discuss within a sexuality education programme has been all but an easy task. That is primarily because, although for years researchers in the field of sexology have committed to work on forging an agreed definition and conceptual framework of sexuality, the latter concept has been subjected to several interpretations. Sexuality is now understood as:

A core dimension of being human which includes: the understanding of, and relationship to, the human body; emotional attachment and love; sex; gender; gender identity; sexual orientation; sexual intimacy; pleasure and reproduction. Sexuality is complex and includes biological, social,

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<sup>62</sup> “Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society,” CoE, last modified July 7, 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/comprehensive-sexuality-education-protects-children-and-helps-build-a-safer-inclusive-society>.

<sup>63</sup> IPPF, *Sexual rights: an IPPF declaration*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” UN, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.



psychological, spiritual, religious, political, legal, historic, ethical and cultural dimensions that evolve over a lifespan.<sup>65</sup>

This thorough definition highlights the holistic nature of the term sexuality and consequently of the topics that sexuality education programmes should address. However, the path towards coining an accurate definition of sexuality has been all but plain, since even the terminology employed to refer to this specific field of education has changed considerably throughout the years and depending on the different contexts where it was applied. Terms like ‘sex education’, ‘sexual education’, as well as ‘life skills’, ‘family life’, or ‘HIV education’ have been used, with the downside of focusing on limited and peculiar aspects of sexuality, instead of adopting an umbrella term, and a related definition, that could have expanded the list of issues to deal with. A solution to this shortcoming was offered when the above-mentioned holistic definition of sexuality was coined, and the term ‘sexuality education’ was deemed more appropriate to tackle the issue in broader terms. That is why, following the necessity to both widen the area of analysis when dealing with sexuality education issues, and to provide a definition that paid justice to its vast application, an additional step was taken when the new term comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) was forged. The definition that better explains what this kind of education is, and how it should be addressed, is provided by the latest version of UNESCO’s International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (2018), which states that CSE is:

A curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach*, 17.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibidem*, 16.

The content of this definition rests on a broadly-agreed understanding of sexuality both as a subjective experience, part of the human need for both intimacy and privacy, and a social construct that derives from social meanings attributed to interpersonal and sexual relationships.<sup>67</sup> This definition therefore suggests that adopting an holistic approach to CSE requires addressing the relationship between sexuality, gender, and power in their political and social dimensions rather than considering sexuality only as part of a person's private and intimate life. In this regard, UNESCO's Technical Guidance acquires a fundamental importance in the establishment of the adequate conceptual framework through which learning about the appropriate ways to address and to teach comprehensive sexuality education. This importance originates by the guidance being grounded in numerous international human rights conventions highlighting the right of every individual to education and to the highest attainable standards of health and well-being.<sup>68</sup> In this context, UNESCO views sexuality as one of the several areas in which quality education should be provided and guaranteed, especially for children and adolescents. Indeed, CSE has been recognized as an important component of adolescent health interventions<sup>69</sup> since evidence has shown how sexuality education plays a protective and preventive role in limiting the vulnerability of young people of being exposed to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancy and gender-based violence, as well as navigating the internet and social media with no background information.<sup>70</sup> Among the different issues that an effective CSE program aims to address, sexual health is one of the main areas that when viewed holistically and positively can shed light on a number of interconnected human rights objectives. In this regard, the WHO has grouped in a document titled *“Developing sexual health programmes: a framework for action”*, key elements to consider for understanding the concept of sexual health. In this regard, a CSE programme is considered effective if it is structured around a positive understanding of sexual health, one that defines it as a general state of well-being instead as a lack of

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<sup>67</sup>*Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibidem*, 14.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibidem*.

infirmity or disease. From a human rights perspective, a compelling CSE should consider the right to sexual health attained when core human rights yardsticks such as respect, safety, and freedom from discrimination and violence are met. Indeed, sexual health largely depends on the fulfillment of human rights which are relevant to the achievement of a person's human potential. That is why including a debate on sexual health in sexuality education requires starting from the awareness that individuals are sexual beings throughout all their life, a shift in perspective compared to the widespread belief that sexual health, as well as anything sexual, is to be confined to the individual's reproductive years. Challenging this belief is key as it allows for better protection: if sexual health is recognized as a fundamental and ever-present part of a person's life, this expands the sample of people that will be protected throughout their lifespan, youngest and oldest fractions of the population included. Other than this, the WHO remarks that sexual health is met when the existence of diverse sexualities and forms of sexual expression is acknowledged as an inescapable precondition for the well-being of an individual.<sup>71</sup> Lastly, the WHO highlights how gender norms, roles, expectations, and power dynamics are all related to sexual health, in that harmful stereotypes and unbalanced sexual/romantic relationships undermine the possibility for individuals to reach their full potential. It must be said that all the elements outlined so far need to be examined taking into consideration the changing social, economic, and political contexts<sup>72</sup>, since some countries' cultural and social norms may serve as a hostile landscape for the implementation of CSE programmes. Indeed, since the latter strive to be more than a simplistic education about risk prevention and reproduction, delicate psychological, social, and emotional issues relating to sex and sexuality can be particularly challenging in certain circumstances. It is fundamental, therefore, that key discussions on healthy and respectful family life and interpersonal relationships, personal and shared values, cultural and social norms, gender equality and non-discrimination, violence, and gender-based violence, consent and bodily integrity, as well as

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<sup>71</sup>WHO, *Developing sexual health programmes: a framework for action*, 3.

<sup>72</sup>“What is comprehensive sexuality education? (CSE),” Health and Education Resource Centre, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/toolkit/what-comprehensive-sexuality-education-cse>.

sexual abuse and other harmful practices<sup>73</sup> are undertaken after an attentive investigation of the interested background.

### 1.1. Integrating a gender perspective in CSE

Before reaching the currently used CSE model, sexuality education had undergone many transformations in formal education curricula.<sup>74</sup> Two commonly adopted models were the moralizing model, and the biologicist model.<sup>75</sup> The former focuses on promoting abstinence, which is understood to be both a preventive strategy for contracting STDs and/or experiencing an unwanted pregnancy, and a way to discourage young people's sexual conduct.<sup>76</sup> However, abstinence-only programmes have proven ineffective to reduce the frequency of sex and in delaying the age of the first sexual intercourse, and have demonstrated to have potentially harmful effects.<sup>77</sup> Research has shown that they are more likely to provide medically inaccurate information and to withhold relevant sexual health knowledge, as well as to perpetrate negative gender stereotypes and stigmatization towards gender-diverse persons and people with different sexual orientations.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, even if programmes of this kind seek to prevent the youth from engaging in sexual intercourse, studies have demonstrated that abstinence-only approaches are particularly dangerous because they stigmatize young people who are already sexually active, pregnant and/or parenting.<sup>79</sup> These

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<sup>73</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>74</sup>Cunha-Oliveira, A., Camarneiro AP, Gómez-Cantarino S, Cipriano-Crespo C, Queirós PJP, Cardoso D, Santos DG, Ugarte-Gurrutxaga MI, "The Integration of Gender Perspective into Young People's Sexuality Education in Spain and Portugal: Legislation and Educational Models," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 22 (November 2021). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211921>.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibidem*, 20.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>77</sup>Advocates for Youth, *The Truth About Abstinence-Only Programs*.

<sup>78</sup> "New Expert Review Details the Negative Impact of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs," Planned Parenthood, last modified August 22, 2017, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/press-releases/new-expert-review-details-the-negative-impact-of-abstinence-only-until-marriage-programs>.

<sup>79</sup> "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs are Ineffective and Harmful to Young People, Expert Review Confirms," Guttmacher Institute, last modified August 22, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2017/abstinence-only-until-marriage-programs-are-ineffective-and-harmful-young-people>.

programmes, therefore, while claiming to protect children and adolescents from early approaches to sex and sexuality, foster false information about LGBTQIA+ people, self-pleasure, abortion, gender roles, HIV and other STDs, and contraception.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, the biologist model focuses on reproduction and sexual intercourse as well as on medical aspects of prevention, contents of teaching that, however useful in reducing risky behaviors, deal with sex and sexuality only through biological aspects.<sup>81</sup> Other topics pertaining to sexuality are contemplated in neither of the two models, reason why these programmes are considered obsolete and have been superseded by the noteworthy CSE model. The latter is deemed to be particularly effective from a human rights and risk prevention standpoint especially because, differently from any other programme, it incorporates a gender perspective to the discussion of sexual matters. Indeed, evidence has shown that teaching sexuality topics through the lenses of gender plays a fundamental role in the education of young people. In this regard, scholar Morgade has observed that a gender-focused programme «has more relevance to the work on sexuality issues at school»<sup>82</sup> compared to a gender-blind programme. That is because, by emphasizing issues of rights and gender, this kind of model can influence a much wider range of human rights outcomes, including: reducing gender-based violence, bullying, and discrimination; promoting safer schools that value and respect diversity; empowering young people to claim and advocate for their own rights; and promoting more equitable and healthy relationships between males and females.<sup>83</sup>

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in a 2015 document titled ‘*The Evaluation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programmes: A Focus on the Gender and Empowerment Outcomes*’ has remarked how rights and gender are

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<sup>80</sup>Kantor, Leslie M., Julien Teitler, John S Santelli, and Randall Balmer, ‘‘Abstinence-Only Policies and Programs: An Overview,’’ *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 5, no. 3 (September 2008): 11, doi: 10.1525/srsp.2008.5.3.6.

<sup>81</sup>Cunha-Oliveira, A., Camarneiro AP, Gómez-Cantarino S, Cipriano-Crespo C, Queirós PJP, Cardoso D, Santos DG, Ugarte-Gurrutxaga MI, ‘‘The Integration of Gender Perspective into Young People’s Sexuality Education in Spain and Portugal: Legislation and Educational Models,’’ *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 22 (November 2021). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211921>.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibidem*, 20.

<sup>83</sup>UNFPA, *UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Focus on Human Rights and Gender*, 10.

core components, and not an add-on to CSE, and that addressing and integrating a gender and power perspective throughout CSE curricula is integral to its effectiveness.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, integrating a gender dimension is relevant also considering the persistent sexual double standards and inequalities in the assumption of responsibilities for the prevention of STIs and unwanted pregnancies among girls and boys.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, adopting gender as a category of analysis is essential to identify the psychosocial determinants of sexual attitudes and behaviors that cause harm to personal health and well-being<sup>86</sup>: it has been found that programmes that examine affective/sexual interpersonal relationship in a gender perspective equip young people with the adequate tools to spot and prevent potential abuses. Since gender equality is interconnected with violence and power dynamics, a CSE that integrates a critical perspective on gender is one that stresses the importance of equal rights and powers within a relationship, and is therefore more likely to prevent gender-based violence. According to the UNFPA Operational Guidance, programmes that wish to incorporate a gender dimension to the teaching of sexuality education can either treat gender as a stand-alone topic within the curriculum, or discuss it through a series of interrelated sub-topics such as:

- a) defining gender and masculine/feminine gender norms;
- b) how boys and girls are socialized into gender roles, and how gender norms change;
- c) the impact of gender norms in young people's lives, particularly in the family and intimate relationships, and in education;
- d) messages about gender from the media and religion;

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<sup>84</sup>UNFPA, *The Evaluation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programmes: A Focus on the Gender and Empowerment Outcomes*, 12.

<sup>85</sup>Cunha-Oliveira, A., Camarneiro AP, Gómez-Cantarino S, Cipriano-Crespo C, Queirós PJP, Cardoso D, Santos DG, Ugarte-Gurrutxaga MI, "The Integration of Gender Perspective into Young People's Sexuality Education in Spain and Portugal: Legislation and Educational Models," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 22 (November 2021). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211921>.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibidem*.

- e) the nature and effects of gender inequality across society, for example, in access to employment, public space and treatment under the law.<sup>87</sup>

Other than this, a gender-sensitive CSE programme is considered to be both transformative and inclusive if it takes into consideration several areas of people's identities and experiences, including sex, sexual orientation, sexual behaviour, gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression.<sup>88</sup> In other words, inclusive and gender-based CSE programmes are those that organize their content with the aim of being beneficial and educational for the largest and most diverse audience possible. This means that both the content of teaching, and the actual discussion taking place in formal and informal educational settings, should be centered around three fundamental prerogatives: never make assumptions, make an effort to use an inclusive language, and always create a respectful place.<sup>89</sup> In practical terms, this means including scenarios and examples that acknowledge a wide variety of people and relationships, in order to give visibility and affirmation to all existing identities. Put differently, integrating a gender perspective in CSE means more than simply adopting a dichotomous thinking to investigate inequalities between the two sexes. As a matter of fact, expanding the range of issues that can be dealt with in a gender perspective is key in this regard, considering that even the most comprehensive, holistic, and ambitious CSE programmes often lack content targeting LGBTQIA+ youth and other SGMs in general. A programme that does not integrate a gender dimension to have sexual and gender minorities represented is one that fails comply with both Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): «everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin,

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<sup>87</sup>UNFPA, *UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Focus on Human Rights and Gender*, 11.

<sup>88</sup>“Gender, Sexuality, & Inclusive Sex Education,” Healthy Teen Network, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Gender-Sexuality-Inclusive-Sex-Ed.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibidem*.

property, birth or other status [...]»<sup>90</sup>, and Article 21 on non-discrimination of the EU Charter of the Fundamental rights: «1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited». <sup>91</sup> Indeed, the lack of representation for queer youth in sexuality education classes undermines their right to information, which in turn results in them not having their needs met and doubts explained when it comes to learning about healthy relationships, acknowledging the existence of different identities, and exploring safe sexual activities. It must be said, however, that failing to adequately address CSE through gender lenses is a lose-lose situation: straight and cisgender individuals who are not exposed to the basic language and knowledge they need to talk about, and respectfully interact with, SGMs, are less likely to unlearn assumptions and dismantle stereotypes they are endowed with. <sup>92</sup> From a human rights perspective, therefore, integrating gender into sexuality education means securing that all young people can enjoy the rights they are entitled to by interacting and learning in an accepting environment through honest, open, and judgment-free conversations that acknowledge and give visibility to the existence of all people.

## 1.2. Key components of CSE

According to the conceptual framework outlined by the 2018 Technical Guidance, to give applicability to the human right to receive a comprehensive sexuality education means providing an education, both in formal (i.e., the school) and non-formal settings (i.e., through out-of-school projects and activities carried out in community centers), that is:

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<sup>90</sup> “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” UN, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>91</sup> “EU Charter of Fundamental Rights,” FRA, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/21-non-discrimination>.

<sup>92</sup> “Gender, Sexuality, & Inclusive Sex Education,” Healthy Teen Network, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Gender-Sexuality-Inclusive-Sex-Ed.pdf>.



### *Scientifically accurate*

Providing a scientifically accurate CSE requires grounding the content of information on facts, evidence, and reliable data gathered through research relating to: human sexuality, sexual and reproductive health; sexual anatomy and physiology, reproduction, contraception, pregnancy and childbirth; STIs and HIV/AIDS; family life and interpersonal relationships; culture and sexuality; human rights empowerment, non-discrimination, equality and gender roles; sexual behavior and sexual diversity; and sexual abuse, gender-based violence and harmful practices.<sup>93</sup> Failure to accomplish this fundamental task is particularly dangerous since the information provided in sexuality education classes concerns delicate aspects of health and well-being that can be lifesaving for some individuals. Equipping young people with thorough and evidence-based information is key to allow them to enjoy their universally recognized human right to information, without which they cannot develop the capacity for healthy, safe, and gratifying sexual lives.

### *Incremental*

The adjective incremental refers to CSE being a continuous educational process that should ideally support individuals from an early age with foundational contents and skills.<sup>94</sup> The information provided should build upon previous learning using a spiral-curriculum approach that does not omit the different stages of development, but seeks to return to the same topics at a more advanced level each year.<sup>95</sup>

### *Age-and development-appropriate*

The just mentioned *modus operandi* is exemplified through the necessity for CSE to be age-and development-appropriate to be both effective for, and respectful

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<sup>93</sup>UNFPA, *UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Focus on Human Rights and Gender*, 6.

<sup>94</sup>UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach*, 16.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibidem*.

towards, the young audience it intends to target.<sup>96</sup> This means that topics related to sexuality need to be responsive to the changing needs and capabilities of young people as they grow.<sup>97</sup> In this regard, several studies<sup>98</sup> have tried to establish parameters to identify healthy and problematic sexual development in children. According to these guidelines, a CSE programme is faithful to the development of the child if organized in a way that includes the following characteristics, divided by age groups:

- i. Infancy (0-2 years): a CSE programme targeting this age group should include conversations on how to use correct names for body parts, explain basic differences between male and female anatomy, provide simple and prejudice-free responses to questions a child may ask about his/her body and bodily functions, and educate children to interact respectfully with peers;<sup>99</sup>
- ii. Pre-School Aged Children (2-4 years): at this stage, a tailored and sensitive CSE should provide basic responses about reproduction, as well as an explanation on the distinction between private and public and the adequate behaviors to be performed in both situations.<sup>100</sup> A discourse on the differences between wanted and unwanted touch should be initiated at this age, as well as a conversation on boundaries and consent, which implies normalizing the right to say ‘no’ and asking permission before establishing physical contact;<sup>101</sup>
- iii. Young Children (4-6 years): to expand previously acquired knowledge on intimacy and sexuality, at this stage an effective CSE should initiate a discussion on gender identity and sexual orientations.<sup>102</sup> Building on the already established distinction between appropriate and inappropriate

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<sup>96</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>97</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>98</sup>MNCASA, *Children with Sexual Behavior Problems: Improving Minnesota’s ability to provide early identification and intervention services through policy and practice recommendations.*

<sup>99</sup>MNCASA, *Sexual Development in Children.*

<sup>100</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>101</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>102</sup>*Ibidem.*

behaviors, educators should approach infant masturbation by explaining to children that self-pleasure is normal and healthy but should be performed in private.<sup>103</sup> Conversations on sexuality, reproduction, and bodies more in general should continue to be given simple and targeted answers.<sup>104</sup> Lastly, CSE programmes should focus on the importance of personal rights and responsibilities relating to bodies and sexualities;<sup>105</sup>

- iv. School-Aged Children (7-12 years): CSE programmes targeting this age group should revolve around basic explanations of human reproduction and pregnancy, including information on physical, social, and emotional changes that will occur during puberty as well as initiating a conversation on sexual intercourse.<sup>106</sup> The approach used to deal with these delicate issues should be centered on the empowerment and validation of the individual's needs and emotions.<sup>107</sup> A further detailed explanation of consent and boundaries in both friendly and romantic relationships should be included, together with an effort to help young people develop the adequate and necessary critical thinking skills to manage explicit media representations of sexuality.<sup>108</sup> In this regard, it is fundamentally important that the youth is supported with the information tools they need to be able to distinguish scientific facts from fiction, and to be able to spot abusive patterns when they see them perpetrated by the entertainment industry;<sup>109</sup>
- v. Adolescence (13-18 years): dealing with this age group requires designing programmes focused on providing detailed information about reproduction, pregnancy, and birth, in addition to educating about STDs and ways to prevent them through contraception.<sup>110</sup> Emphasizing the right

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<sup>103</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>104</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>105</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>106</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>107</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>108</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>109</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>110</sup>*Ibidem.*

to withdraw from unwanted sexual contact and to set personal boundaries for intimacy should also represent an essential component of education at this level, as well as discussing differences between healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships and providing guidance to understanding physical changes and societal pressure to abide by constructed gender roles.<sup>111</sup>

The evidence provided until now highlights how sexual experiences do not manifest themselves beginning with puberty, but they constitute an integral and inextricable part of a person's life since their early years. From this perspective, giving applicability to the human right to receive comprehensive sexuality education acquires an even greater meaning, since it implies protecting and respecting individuals over the course of their lives. It goes without saying that only a CSE programme that uses an approach tailored to the needs and developmental maturity of the subjects involved is a programme that respects and values human rights for all. Moreover, a CSE programme is appropriate if it addresses developmentally relevant topics when it is most timely for young people's health and well-being, taking into account also developmental diversity by adapting content when cognitive and emotional development is delayed.<sup>112</sup>

#### *Curriculum-based*

A CSE that is respectful of human rights is one that organizes its content in a curriculum, where key teaching and learning objectives are established, as well as the presentation of concepts and the delivery of clear structured messages.<sup>113</sup>

#### *Comprehensive*

The adjective 'comprehensive' was introduced in recent years to describe the need for sexuality education to be as inclusive as possible both in terms of content, and in the way of organizing and delivering classes.<sup>114</sup> In other words, a

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<sup>111</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>112</sup> UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach*, 17.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>114</sup>*Ibidem.*

comprehensive sexuality education programme is one that is not limited to a few yearly interventions or one-off lessons, rather it is delivered in a consistent and systematic manner.<sup>115</sup> Comprehensive refers also to the breadth and depth of topics discussed, which should not be tackled in a superficial and approximate way.<sup>116</sup>

*Based on a human-rights approach*

Discussing sexual matters through human rights lenses is key to make children acquainted to paramount concepts of human rights that will serve them to examine issues critically.<sup>117</sup> Evidence has shown that exposing children to concepts of human rights increases their ability to assert their own rights and the rights of others, as well as to spot abuses and recognize when rights are violated.<sup>118</sup>

*Based on gender-equality*

As mentioned extensively in the previous sub-paragraph, integrating a gender perspective into the teaching of sexuality topics represents an additional step forward in the provision of a CSE grounded in internationally recognized human rights. Organizing the content of CSE programmes taking into consideration a gender dimension is fundamental to address the different ways through which gender norms perpetuate inequalities, and how this prevents the enjoyment of a series of human rights.<sup>119</sup> That is why effective CSE programmes support gender equality by examining the role of gender in people's lives, by investigating how gender norms are shaped by cultural, social and biological differences and similarities; and by encouraging the creation of respectful and equitable relationships based on empathy and understanding.<sup>120</sup>

*Culturally relevant and context appropriate*

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<sup>115</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>116</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>117</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>118</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>119</sup>*Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibidem.*

Even if on paper human rights and gender equality are universal values recognized by the international community of States, practice reveals that divergences from these values are not infrequent. Indeed, cultural and social patterns shape the way individuals learn about sexuality and relationships. For this reason, to be effective and to bring about concrete results, CSE should shed light on the different perceptions and norms associated to, among other things: unequal power within intimate relationships and across society, gender-based violence, double standards concerning sexuality, harassment of queer youth, differential socialization of girls compared to boys, and sexual exploitation including sex trafficking.<sup>121</sup> The need for CSE to be culturally sensitive derives also from the acknowledgement that human rights violations and manifestations of gender inequality vary enormously across different settings. For instance, programmes aimed at educating on female genital mutilation, sexualization and trafficking of young girls, as well as on laws on child marriage may prove more necessary in some regions of the world than others.<sup>122</sup> In general terms, a CSE programme is culturally relevant and context appropriate when it supports learners as they examine, understand, and challenge the ways in which cultural structures, norms and behaviours affect people's choices and relationships within a specific setting.<sup>123</sup>

### *Transformative*

The transformative potential of CSE is perhaps the most revolutionary and future-oriented feature of this realm of education. International guidance has demonstrated that CSE programmes that do not strive to establish a fair and compassionate society through the empowerment of individuals and communities, as well as through the promotion of critical thinking skills, are less likely to bring about lasting and effective outcomes.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, a transformative approach to CSE is primarily an empowerment-based approach: it provides learners with

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<sup>121</sup>UNFPA, *UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Focus on Human Rights and Gender*, 14.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>123</sup>UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach*, 17.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibidem*.

opportunities to develop agency and self-esteem, and it entrusts them with responsibility for their own decisions and behaviours.<sup>125</sup> Lastly, a transformative programme helps build the skills and attitudes that enable young people to treat others with respect, acceptance, tolerance, and empathy, regardless of their ethnicity, race, social, economic or immigration status, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics.<sup>126</sup>

*Able to develop life skills needed to support healthy choices*

An effective CSE programme should endow young people with the necessary life skills to form respectful and healthy relationships with family members, peers, friends, and romantic or sexual partners.<sup>127</sup> These life skills include: the ability to reflect and make informed decisions, the ability to communicate and negotiate effectively, and the capacity to demonstrate assertiveness.<sup>128</sup>

## **2. The *rationale* behind the need for providing CSE to the youth**

As outlined exhaustively in the first paragraph of the present chapter, sexuality is a central, innate, and intrinsic part of being human. This evidence statement should already be considered a sufficiently important reason to justify the human right of all individuals to enjoy their sexual rights, including their right to receive CSE. Notwithstanding this, childhood sexuality is usually overlooked because it is associated with moral and ethical concerns. Indeed, most of the criticism is not directed against the right of persons to enjoy their universally recognized human rights, rather it is centered around a specific audience of right-holders: children and adolescents. This preoccupation is fueled by two equally problematic ideas: one that considers sexual rights as subversive rights and that views sexuality education as inappropriate and deviant for young people, and one that refuses to recognize the child as a subject of law endowed with rights and duties. Both positions should be contested before diving into a deeper analysis of the *rationale*

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<sup>125</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>126</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>127</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>128</sup>*Ibidem.*

behind the need to provide CSE to the youth. The first position can be easily refuted with the argument that interpreting children's actions through an adult perspective fails to both understand that infants do not think about sexuality in the same ways that adults do, and to recognize the incremental and progressive nature of childhood psychosexual development.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, this position fails to look at sexuality beyond sex, to consider it as a set of values, attitudes, feelings, interactions, and behaviours that touch upon emotional, social, cultural, and physical dimensions.<sup>130</sup> The second idea can be dismantled starting from the premise that children and adolescents are right-bearers and duty-holders from an international law standpoint, and for this reason they are also entitled to the right to receive an age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and to enjoy correlated rights. The link between the right to receive accurate and scientific information, the right to enjoy the highest standards of health, and the right to education is established in several articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The fact that an international framework for discussing the rights of children exists, and that young people not only deserve to, but most importantly are entitled by international law to enjoy a set of fundamental human rights, represents a valid and strong background against which to start a conversation on the responsibility States hold in the provision of CSE to the youngest fractions of the population. More precisely, the rights outlined in the UNCRC are particularly relevant to illustrate how a curriculum-based and mandatory CSE would play a key role towards their realization. For instance, Article 24.1 of the UNCRC explicitly states that: «states parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services».<sup>131</sup> Moreover, in Article 17, the right to the highest attainable standard of health is made conditional upon the enjoyment of the right to access adequate information to make informed decisions about

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<sup>129</sup>BZgA, *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe*, 22.

<sup>130</sup> "Sexuality," CoE, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sexuality>.

<sup>131</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child," UN, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.



health<sup>132</sup>, including, as Article 24.2(f) highlights, «[...] family planning education and services».<sup>133</sup> Other than recognizing the right of young people to receive accurate and up-to-date information on issues concerning their health and well-being, Article 12 states that «young people also have the right to be heard, express opinions and be involved in decision making»<sup>134</sup>, a fundamental right that is however often dismissed because children are perceived by most as incapable of expressing opinions and to take decisions for themselves. This paternalistic and protective approach is problematic because it undermines children's and adolescents' agency. Lastly, Article 29 makes an indirect reference to the right to receive a CSE by saying that young people «have the right to education which will help them learn, develop, and reach their full potential and prepare them to be understanding and tolerant towards others».<sup>135</sup>

Having said this, the background principle supporting the argument that CSE should be delivered from the individual's early years is based on the fact that gender norms and roles solidify during childhood<sup>136</sup> and that eradicating and unlearning gender stereotypes becomes much more difficult once an individual's personality is formed.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, young people go through several physical and psychological changes during the process of growing-up, and in this period they internalize most norms and values that will become part of their set of beliefs and attitudes towards life.<sup>138</sup> From birth, infants learn the value and pleasure of bodily contact, intimacy, and warmth as well as what is 'appropriate' and what is 'inappropriate'.<sup>139</sup> That is why recognizing children as sexual beings allows supporting their growth with the suitable knowledge to develop positive images, values, attitudes and skills related to the human body, intimate relationships, and sexuality.<sup>140</sup> Children often engage in the discovery of their body senses and develop a perception of their body image through both self-discovery and mutual

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<sup>132</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>136</sup>Population Council, *It's all One Curriculum*, 48.

<sup>137</sup> "Stereotypes and Gender Roles," MARICOPA, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://open.maricopa.edu/culturepsychology/chapter/stereotypes-and-gender-roles/>.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>139</sup>BZgA, *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe*, 13.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibidem*, 10.

exploration with peers, exploration that is usually conducted in the form of playing ‘doctors and nurses’, showing own body parts and looking at others’, and showing curiosity to adult bodies.<sup>141</sup> This means that children naturally engage in unconscious sexual behaviours well before knowing what sex and sexuality are. Reacting to this conduct in a pedagogical way as well as supporting children’s growth path through CSE is key to their development, as it strengthens self-confidence and self-determination, qualities that will enable them to behave responsibly towards themselves and others.<sup>142</sup>

Along with the major justifications provided thus far to prove that providing CSE to the youth is essential, international guidelines have gathered several other reasons that corroborate the argument even further. Children and adolescents must receive a holistic CSE because this helps achieve a series of positive outcomes and increases the likelihood of meeting human rights objectives, including gender equality. International evidence has shown that a curriculum-based CSE is useful to:

#### *Delay initiation of sexual intercourse*

The reason why late sexual debut is included among the arguments in support of CSE for the youth lies in early initiation of sex being considered a key health risk indicator.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, several studies have confirmed that early initiation increases a young person’s cumulative exposure to STIs and likelihood of unintended pregnancy.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, early sexual activity, especially if not preceded by an education on sexual-related matters, has been associated with a riskier developmental trajectory into adulthood because of its link with other health risk behaviours such as substance use, particularly cigarette smoking, and poor outcomes for adult sexual functioning and health, with increased risk of family

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<sup>141</sup>*Ibidem*, 35.

<sup>142</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>143</sup>Erkut, Sumru, Ineker Ceder, Alice Frye, and Allison J. Tracy, ‘Can Sex Education Delay Early Sexual Debut?’, *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 33, no.4 (2012): 482-497, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431612449386>.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibidem*, 483.

dysfunction, poverty, substance abuse, and incarceration.<sup>145</sup> This evidence shows how preventing and reducing early sexual initiation can have positive health and well-being benefits for the individual as well as public health and social welfare benefits for society as a whole.<sup>146</sup>

### *Reduce risk-taking*

Adopting a harm reductionist approach to CSE means providing safe ways to engage in risky behaviour by offering information tools to young people to both prevent unwanted teen pregnancies, and to reduce the transmission of STDs from unprotected intercourse. However, risk reduction does not imply embracing and promoting abstinence: existing evidence has highlighted that the main difference between a harm reductionist approach and an abstinence-based approach lies in the fact that, while the former considers information and access tools of protection, the latter instead seeks to emphasize the immorality of sex. In this regard, research has shown that to avoid exposing children and adolescents to misinformation and/or biased and moralizing teachings from the family, an effective CSE programme should be able to include parents in parts of the sexuality education curriculum to teach them how to deal with delicate subjects.

### *Increase use of contraceptives*

Evidence has shown that information provided by CSE programmes tends to increase the number of young people using contraceptives during the first sexual intercourse, as well as the number of those that continue using some form of male or female contraceptive over time. This represents a particularly important outcome of sexuality education programmes, because increased use of contraception enables individuals, and especially females, to gain control over their sexuality, health, and reproduction, thus empowering them to decide on family planning options. Moreover, a large-scale use of contraceptives helps reduce maternal and infant morbidity and mortality, while also contributing to

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<sup>145</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>146</sup>*Ibidem.*

achieving a satisfying sexual life without necessarily associating sexual intercourse to reproductive concerns. In other words, CSE should be delivered to the youth because it equips them with the necessary scientific and facts-based information on the positive implications of contraceptive use, including disease prevention and reduced likelihood of becoming pregnant. Providing this kind of information has proven more effective when done before adolescents engage in their first sexual activities, since it gives them the knowledge to navigate in a new situation. In addition, the importance of educating young people to contraceptive use also derives from the need to comply with international recommendations that push States to ensure timely and affordable access to good quality sexual and reproductive health information and services. In this regard, international guidelines highlight that the information provided should be delivered in a way that ensures fully formed decision making, respects dignity, autonomy, privacy, and confidentiality, and is sensitive to individual's needs and perspectives.<sup>147</sup>

#### *Educate on gender identity and sexual orientation*

Young people who receive a positive and affirming education on different forms of sexual expression and sexual orientations are more likely to develop a sense of respect for diversity. Indeed, by providing factual, non-stigmatizing information on sexual orientation and gender identity, and by treating them as normal aspects of human development, young people learn to respect gender diversity and to advocate for gender equality for all. This approach has proven effective in combating homophobia and transphobia in schools and out-of-school settings, and in creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment that can contribute to save lives. In this regard, the Istanbul Convention has remarked that providing CSE to the youth is a non-negotiable priority since it represents the most effective way to prevent gender-based violence and discrimination against women and other SGMs. In Article 14.1. on education, the Convention explicitly states that:

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<sup>147</sup>WHO, *Ensuring human rights in the provision of contraceptive information and services*, 1.

1. Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education.<sup>148</sup>

It is evident from the content of this article that the Istanbul Convention acknowledges the profound and detrimental impact that growing-up interiorizing and being exposed to negative and stereotyped norms has on children. Indeed, these features create a fertile, but dangerous, context for accepting and normalizing violence based on discrimination. Although the Convention targets women, it also plays a fundamental role in the inclusion of other SGMs in the discussion on violence and conflict prevention. Indeed, while the above-mentioned article is written and examined in the perspective of prevention of violence against women (VAW), and while inequality between men and women is understood as a fundamental context for VAW to occur, the Convention recognizes that this is not the only axis of inequality that produces violence.<sup>149</sup> Scholars Alldred and David have highlighted how the Convention, by adopting the concept of gender-related violence, recognizes that the latter is not only directed towards women, but it more generally affects all SGMs.<sup>150</sup> Likewise, scholars Jackson and Sundaram have remarked how the content and objectives of Article 14.1. can be examined in light of the fact that discrimination on multiple and interacting grounds produces different experiences of VAW compounded by racism, disablism, ageism, lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia or other forms of intersectional discrimination.<sup>151</sup> This perspective is fundamental as it considers the various dimensions that a gender-focused CSE programme could help tackle. Another reason why providing CSE to the youth is fundamental concerns the fact that educating young students, and especially young boys, on issues of gender

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<sup>148</sup>CoE, *Preventing violence against women through formal and informal education : Article 14 of the Instabul Convention*, 8.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibidem*, 11.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>151</sup>*Ibidem*.

equality and respect is key to prevent potential discriminations and abuses that they may perpetrate at the expense of women and other minorities.<sup>152</sup> The role of boys in playing an active part in preventing GBV is emphasized under Article 12, par. 4. of the Convention: «parties shall take the necessary measures to encourage all members of society, especially men and boys, to contribute actively to preventing all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention».<sup>153</sup> Indeed, research has shown that including young boys as allied partners in violence prevention can contribute to behavioural changes within a community.<sup>154</sup>

### *Help recognizing and preventing sexual abuse and violence*

One of the most important reasons why CSE should be delivered to children and young people relates to the fact that infants can be victims of abuse and violence. Thus, equipping children with the knowledge they need to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours is fundamental to help them spot early signs of abuse, and to prevent sexual exploitation. In this regard, the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (also called the ‘Lanzarote Convention’) incites States to: «ensure that children, during primary and secondary education, receive information on the risks of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, as well as on the means to protect themselves, adapted to their evolving capacity».<sup>155</sup> Similarly, the independent Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), has underlined the importance of CSE in teaching children and adolescents about freely given consent, personal integrity, and their relation with GBV.<sup>156</sup> As a matter of fact, discussing consent and personal boundaries with children and adolescents has been considered one of the most

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<sup>152</sup>*Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>153</sup>CoE, *Preventing violence against women through formal and informal education : Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention*, 7.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibidem*, 9.

<sup>155</sup> ‘‘Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society,’’ CoE, last modified July 7, 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/comprehensive-sexuality-education-protects-children-and-helps-build-a-safer-inclusive-society>.

<sup>156</sup>GREVIO, *Baseline Evaluation Report Italy*, 2020.

fundamental and non-negotiable aspects of CSE, an element highlighted also by recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism.

### *Improve self-worth and agency*

Research has shown that CSE has a positive impact on people's self-esteem and confidence, as well as on negotiating abilities and decision-making.<sup>157</sup> Likewise, the WHO has rightfully remarked how a holistic CSE helps build a sense of agency, which is the precondition for making informed and responsible choices concerning sexual health and well-being.<sup>158</sup>

### *Decrease frequency of sexual intercourse and number of sexual partners*

It is not clear why this feature should be considered a positive outcome of CSE programmes. On the one hand, at the foundation of its inclusion among the motivations that make CSE worth of being pursued lies the evidence that multiple and overlapping sexual relationships, as well as frequency of sexual intercourse, are usually considered risk-taking behaviors because they increase the likelihood of contracting STIs and STDs. On the other hand, however, in few international guidelines the link between high frequency/high number of sexual partners and risk of contracting infections and/or diseases is mentioned explicitly. An explanation should be provided on the fact that having several sexual partners as well as engaging with a high frequency in sexual activities is a personal choice and can be a healthy and pleasurable experience if it is preceded by an education on contraception use and prevention of STDs. Failure, or insufficient attempt, by international guidelines to exhaustively explain the reason why 'frequency of sexual intercourse and number of sexual partners' is included among the aspects that a good CSE can help prevent, risks passing the message that non-

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<sup>157</sup>IPPF, *IPPF Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)*,6.

<sup>158</sup>UNFPA, WHO, and BZgA, *Comprehensive Sexuality Education – Factsheet Series*, 10.

monogamous and/or casual sexual intercourse is not desirable and even inherently wrong.

It is evident from the reasons listed thus far that CSE is, and should be considered one of the basic actions States must take to give meaning to children's and adolescents' right to sexual and reproductive health. Moreover, the importance of supporting the youth with school based CSE derives from a number of other motivations. Most importantly, while young people receive great part of their information knowledge from their family and friends, these informal sources have been considerate inadequate to learn about human relationships and sexuality since they often lack the complex and technical information that experts in the field would instead provide for.<sup>159</sup> Secondly, since young people spend most of their young years in school, school-based sexuality education has been considered the appropriate strategy to reach a vast audience as well as to ensure a continuous and professional process of teaching.<sup>160</sup> The importance of adopting a professional approach is key even if, or perhaps precisely because, a considerable part of learning in the field of sexuality occurs through informal means of communication. Indeed, a commitment to endow an institutional setting such as the school with the important task of supporting young people's right to relevant, scientific, and information-based content on sexuality draws from the need to counteract and correct misleading, distorted, unbalanced, and often unrealistic and degrading messages and images conveyed through the media.<sup>161</sup> In order to perform this job successfully, teachers should have the necessary preparation level and expertise to deliver a good-quality and holistic education. International guidelines have stressed the importance of teachers to self-reflect their own attitudes towards sexuality and society's values and norms, as well as to make an effort to unlearn biased behaviors and beliefs they might have, before becoming role models for their students.<sup>162</sup> Although the school plays a fundamental role in the provision of sexuality education classes, evidence has shown that young

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<sup>159</sup>BZgA, *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe*, 21.

<sup>160</sup>UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach*, 19.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibidem*, 85.

<sup>162</sup>UNFPA, WHO, and BZgA, *Comprehensive Sexuality Education – Factsheet Series*, 36.



people need both formal and informal sexuality education, and that the two are not mutually exclusive rather they complement one another. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the right to receive CSE has been framed around a commitment to reaching out-of-school children and adolescents, who are usually more vulnerable to poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes.<sup>163</sup> In this perspective, the commitment to leaving no one behind and to reaching the furthest behind has made international actors reconsider the school as the sole and prime responsible in the provision of CSE. That is why out-of-school programmes should form an integral, and complementary, part of the commitment to give applicability to CSE: from a human rights perspective, this is fundamentally important as it enables disadvantaged people to receive information that would enable them to develop the knowledge skills they need to make informed choices.<sup>164</sup>

### 3. Italy's approach and limits to sexuality education

Notwithstanding the worldwide recognition of CSE as a fundamental human right, and the presence of a number of international standards and guidelines that offer the necessary information tools for States to give applicability to this right, as well as a clear and compelling evidence for the benefits of high-quality curriculum-based CSE, Italy is one of the six countries in the EU, together with Bulgaria, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania which lacks a mandatory CSE.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, Italy does not have a national law that obliges each region to provide CSE at all school levels: each educational institution can choose autonomously not only whether to provide sexuality education classes to students, but also the ideology behind the content of topics to discuss. For this reason, Italy's approach to sexuality education has been referred to as being 'at 20 speeds'<sup>166</sup>, meaning that there is no homogeneity and uniformity in how sexuality education is viewed,

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<sup>163</sup>*Ibidem*, 14.

<sup>164</sup>UNFPA, *Out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education*, 3.

<sup>165</sup>Samuele Damilano, "Un'Italia senza educazione sessuale: 'Non ho mai ricevuto un corso, ma ne sento il bisogno'", *Euronews*, June 14, 2022, <https://it.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/06/14/un-italia-senza-educazione-sessuale-non-ho-mai-ricevuto-un-corso-ma-ne-sento-il-bisogno>.

<sup>166</sup> Silvia Gola, "Educare alla sessualità," *Il Tascabile*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.iltascabile.com/societa/educazione-sessuale/>.

tackled, and delivered across regions. Each region rests at a different development level for what concerns the delivery and organization of meetings on sexuality. Moreover, in absence of a national legislation, sexuality education enters the Italian classrooms very rarely, and almost always in the form of short and sporadic interventions of a few weekly hours undertaken by either invited experts or teachers themselves. This situation marks a sharp contrast between good practice highlighted in international guidelines, where reference is made to the beneficial impact of supporting students with CSE throughout their school years over a consistent and continuous process of learning. Besides this, one of the main shortcomings of how sexuality education classes and meetings are delivered both in school and through out-of-schools activities across the country relates to them being almost always focused on a traditional and obsolete conception of sexuality, understood as risk prevention only. Most of the sexuality education the Italian youth receives during their school years is either limited to teachings on biology and anatomy, or to a protective discourse on prevention of STDs and unwanted pregnancies. As a matter of fact, the only formative moment on notions relating to sexual development is included within the topics discussed in the programme of science to students of the secondary school, education organized through the sharing of information on female and male anatomy, sexual reproduction, and use of contraceptives to avoid contracting STDs.<sup>167</sup> However an education on the latter is fundamentally important for young people to acquire the information needed to engage in safe sexual activities, only focusing on these aspects of sexuality risks overlooking the real meaning and usefulness of CSE. In addition, an excessive and almost only focus on disease and pregnancy prevention structures discourses and teachings on sexuality education for the most part in negative terms. This kind of approach, if not counterbalanced by sex positive conversations, risks perpetrating the message that sexual activities are risky and dangerous, something that may create an unbearable burden in young people's minds and that may cause them unnecessary anxiety and insecurity when they

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<sup>167</sup>“Educazione sessuale, Il MIUR continua a dire no ad un tema che i ragazzi hanno bisogno di conoscere,” Il Fatto Quotidiano, last modified January 16, 2020, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/01/16/educazione-sessuale-il-miur-continua-a-dire-no-a-un-tema-che-i-ragazzi-hanno-bisogno-di-conoscere/5667144/>.

approach their first sexual experiences. Indeed, most meetings organized in the Italian schools do not embrace a sex positive approach, which is deemed by international guidelines to be one of the prerogatives for a successful comprehensive sexuality and sexual health education. That is because sex positivity acknowledges and affirms each person's right to experience and define their sexuality throughout their lifetime in the way they prefer.<sup>168</sup> In this regard, when sex positivity is applied to the teaching of sexuality education, the education imparted is inclusive and respectful of a wide range of sexual experiences, expressions, consensual activities (including non-activity), and identities (including asexuality).<sup>169</sup> A sex positive approach has been considered the most appropriate framework through which delivering sexuality education classes targeting young audiences, because it stresses the potential life enhancing aspects of human sexuality, and views sexuality as something to be valued and celebrated.<sup>170</sup> More importantly, a sex positive approach is free of moral judgments, and it seeks to establish a genuine discourse between students and teachers. Other than this, sex positivity also implies a pleasure-centered approach to the teaching of sexuality education, a strategy that has proven to have an impact on dismantling gendered expectations and beliefs relating to sexual entitlement and ways of experiencing desire and pleasure. Having said this, a comprehensive, inclusive, pleasure-centered, and sex-positive sexuality education is precisely what lacks in the Italian school system. In this setting sexuality education is rarely, if ever, viewed beyond its biological manifestation to incorporate a discussion on issues like self-determination, body image, self-esteem, pleasure-seeking, gender norms and roles, communication of desires, fantasies, curiosities, and fears. On the contrary, a medical approach focusing predominantly on contraception, pregnancy, and STDs seems to be the commonly preferred option in the Italian schools, although this hinders the opportunity to discuss other equally important topics such as the above-mentioned ones. The limited and

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<sup>168</sup> ‘‘Sex-Positivity,’’ SERC, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://serc.mb.ca/sexual-health-info/the-basics/what-is-sexuality/sex-positivity/#:~:text=A%20sex%20positive%20approach%20realizes,positivity%20is%20not%20sex%20promotion.>

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibidem.*

insufficient attempt to address sexuality extensively in the Italian school system is problematic not only because it precludes the youth from receiving an inclusive and comprehensive education on sexuality, but also because it anesthetizes their critical thinking skills. Indeed, the existing meetings on sexuality do not equip students with the necessary information knowledge to analyze the broader context in which discrimination, queer phobia, as well as GBV are daily perpetrated as part of a deep-rooted culture. Moreover, Italy's approach to sexuality education is inadequate and outdated because it tends to shape discourses on sex and sexuality adopting gender dichotomy and heteronormativity as two structural backbones.

Another inherent shortcoming refers to the unwillingness to establish a real dialogue around sexuality-related topics. This lack undermines young people's agency and empowerment because even the little sexuality education they receive in school is almost always structured around a one-way teaching of previously agreed topics that students introject without the opportunity of shaping content based on their ideas and needs. Indeed, sexuality education is rarely seen as a real conversation where adolescents have a voice, a pattern that fails to both comply with international recommendations, and with international law on children's rights. Indeed, Art. 12.1. of the UNCRC specifies that «1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child».<sup>171</sup> To aggravate this situation even further, in Italy the poor and insufficient role occupied by the school in the provision of CSE to young people is not complemented by the presence of institutions dealing with this subject, due to the lack of a proper legislative framework on sexuality education. Indeed, the Ministry of Education is not directly responsible for centrally coordinating the delivery of the sexuality and relationship education (SRE) initiatives, and there is currently no Ministry for Equal/Gender Opportunities to take on this task.<sup>172</sup> The result is that in absence of a national homogenous plan for

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<sup>171</sup>“The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,” CoE, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/the-United-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>.

<sup>172</sup>“Mapping Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in Italy,” GENPOL, last modified October 22, 2018, <https://gen-pol.org/2018/10/mapping-sex-and-relationship-education-sre-in-italy/>.

delivering sexuality education classes, the Italian youth lacks common standards to deal with sexual-related matters, and is instead confronted with contradicting meanings and messages depending on the institutional actor, or the informal provider (i.e., family and peers) they interact with. The absence of a real dialogue on sexuality topics, which are still considered a taboo in the Italian society, is evident also considering the little research conducted taking into account young people's needs and requests for sexuality education. A representative picture of the state of the art on sexuality education in the country, as well as of its perception among young people, is offered by a project named "Studio Nazionale Fertilità" on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, promoted by the Ministry of Health and concluded at the end of 2018.<sup>173</sup> The national survey conducted in this project represents a valid overview of the gaps in sexuality education in Italy. The sample used is made of 16,000 students aged 16-17 and 14,000 university students, and the project collected a total of 20,000 interviews of people in their reproductive years, from age 18 to 49, including health educators.<sup>174</sup> The results published not only represent an important fact-finding heritage in the Italian context that offers the possibility to reflect on possible actions to undertake in the field of education<sup>175</sup>, but also contribute to corroborate the argument according to which a mandatory CSE is urgently needed across the Peninsula. The main findings of the research project shed light on some critical patterns: first, it emerges that the majority of adolescent students has answered 'the internet', when asked about their principal source of active information on sexuality and reproduction.<sup>176</sup> Even though the educational meetings organized at school are perceived as the best channel for sharing information on sexual-related topics, 90% of students refer to have resorted to the internet to fill their knowledge gaps or to search information on sexuality for the first time.<sup>177</sup> The results reveal a discrepancy between real and perceived awareness and knowledge of sexuality issues among all the fields tackled in the questionnaire. This means

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<sup>173</sup>Studio Nazionale Fertilità, *Principali risultati del progetto "Studio Nazionale Fertilità"*, 2019.

<sup>174</sup>*Ibidem*, 1.

<sup>175</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>176</sup>*Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>177</sup>*Ibidem*, 13.

that most students receive misleading, incorrect, or impartial information on sex and sexuality, information that is then interiorized and becomes part of their cultural and educational experience with no real counterbalancing effects. More importantly, the results show that 94% of students interviewed consider the school as the appropriate institutional and educational venue for the provision of information on sexuality and reproduction.<sup>178</sup> Additionally, 61% of them believes that school based sexuality education should begin from secondary school or even earlier, 22% would want to receive the necessary information from their teachers, and 62% would prefer having external experts performing this job.<sup>179</sup> From these results it appears evident how, although in Italy the school is not the main provider of information on sexuality topics, almost all young people want this gap to be filled. In absence of a national legislation pushing for the introduction of a mandatory CSE, in Italy most of the formative work is perseverated by local education authorities (regional or provincial), as well as private companies (i.e., Durex Italia), and local health units (ASLs). However they certainly play a fundamental role in the delivery of educational activities, their work is not sufficient to support the sexual development of children and adolescents. In this regard, international guidelines have highlighted the need of formal and informal education on sexuality to complement one another, however recognizing the leading role of school in providing such education.

#### **4. An historical overview of legislative proposals to include mandatory CSE in the Italian school system**

It has been thus far highlighted how Italy finds itself still at the back of the queue in the provision of a comprehensive, systematic, and mandatory sexuality education at all school levels. The current situation is even more worrying considering that Italian politics is not new on the matter. Indeed, Italy has a long history of being confronted with the issue of whether, and how, to introduce sexuality education as a curricular subject recognized in national educational

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<sup>178</sup>*Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>179</sup>*Ibidem*.

plans. Notwithstanding the fact that an agreed decision needs yet to be taken, the Italian political scene has dealt on several occasions with proposals to bridge the existing gap especially when the so-called ‘sex revolution’ that had started to interest the western world in the aftermath of the second world war came also to influence the Italian society since the 1960s. Those years were characterized by a change in costumes, traditions, expectations, and behaviors concerning sex, sexuality, and relationships through the recognition, among other things, of the legitimacy of sexual intercourse outside marriage, and the acceptance of sex as an end and not as a means for procreative purposes only. Favored by this context, several legislative proposals were advanced in those years by different political parties with the aim of advocating for, and potentially designing, projects on how to teach SRE at different school levels. Although the first legal document to mention the term ‘sex education’ was the 1967 parliamentary act, a more concrete step was taken with the first legislative proposal supported and promoted by the deputies of the Italian Communist Party in 1975 with the title ‘*Iniziativa per l’informazione sui problemi della sessualità nella scuola statale*’.<sup>180</sup> The latter represented an attempt to raise a public consciousness on the issue as well as to imagine how topics and subjects related to sexuality should be taught and addressed in the Italian public school. The proponents of this legislative initiative had a clear idea of what they were advocating for, because the text explicitly mentions that imparting and receiving adequate information about sex and sexuality should be doubtlessly considered as an integral and essential part of a person’s education and development.<sup>181</sup> This kind of consciousness was quite revolutionary for the time in which it was developed, and it was mainly motivated by the awareness that the profound social, cultural, and behavioral changes that were pervading the Italian society could not have been left without an appropriate educational support for children and adolescents.<sup>182</sup> The need to introduce a sexuality education plan was perceived by some political actors as even more urgent considering that those were the years in which capitalism made use of

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<sup>180</sup> Camera dei Deputati, Proposta di legge (Iniziativa per l’informazione sui problemi della sessualità nella scuola statale), n. 3584. VI Legislatura, March 13, 1975.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibidem*.

sexually explicit contents as a market strategy.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, the sharing and spreading of erotic messages, images, and alluring sexual content through the media, especially in advertisements, newspapers, and in public discourses more in general, became the natural *modus operandi* through which companies started to sell their products to attract the largest public possible.<sup>184</sup> In this context, the legislative text highlights how intervention through education was needed to counterbalance the sexually explicit content children and adolescents were exposed daily through national TV programmes, a practice that had become increasingly normalized.<sup>185</sup> However quite paradoxically, the Italian society was characterized in those years by a sort of schizophrenic dynamic: on the one hand, explicit sexual content and sexualized behaviors were displayed everywhere and were at the disposal of everyone to see; on the other hand, a strong culture of considering sex and sexuality topics as taboos to be repressed, rather than discussed with the appropriate language and tools, was still deeply rooted in many people's minds.<sup>186</sup> This situation, therefore, made it even more challenging to deliver the message that sexuality education was needed to reduce the gap between these two competing patterns. Notwithstanding this, proponents of the aforementioned legislative proposal highlighted how it could have been only through a reform and a renovation of education, aimed at the inclusion of programmes on sexuality education, that the groundbreaking changes that were affecting people's relationships and ways of living their sexuality would have found the recognition they deserved in an institutionalized setting like the school.<sup>187</sup> In this regard, one of the most revolutionary passages of the text concerns the justifications provided for the need to introduce a sexuality education targeting not only adolescents, but also children. The proponents had a strong baseline on which to advance their arguments, one that was grounded in the idea, supported by evidence from psychoanalysis as well as international evidence, that children are sexual beings and that a child sexuality exists and needs to be

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<sup>183</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>184</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>185</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>186</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>187</sup>*Ibidem.*



tackled.<sup>188</sup> In this regard, sexuality was seen as a fundamental part of a person's development which deserved to be discussed and addressed equally to any other aspect of life.<sup>189</sup> In the proponents' mind, to adopt this understanding of sexuality meant approaching and imagining the teaching of sexuality education like the school would normally approach the teaching of any other curricular subject.<sup>190</sup> However, the authors remarked how previous attempts and proposals to introduce sexuality education as a curricular subject had been dismissed with the argument that only a well-trained teaching personnel would have been able to discuss scientifically sexuality topics without resorting to moral explanations.<sup>191</sup> Although this rhetoric is certainly valid to some extent, the authors highlighted how it was adopted only when talking about sexuality matters, and not when the teaching involved any other curricular subject existing in schools.<sup>192</sup> Indeed, the discourse on the need to form highly prepared experts with the necessary knowledge and sensitivity to tackle a subject scientifically is for the most part applied to a potential teaching of SRE, while there is rarely a mention of the same requirement when dealing with law, biology, or history classes.<sup>193</sup> This kind of approach marks a true discrimination between what is considered a binding priority when dealing with sexuality matters, and what is instead taken for granted, or not even perceived as a problem, when approaching any other subject.<sup>194</sup> In addition, already more than forty years ago, at the time in which this legislative text was written and published, there was a strong awareness of the limits of school and out-of-school initiatives and projects in delivering accurate and facts-based information on sexuality. On this note, the text highlighted how in Italy the school represented an "*asexual pedagogic institution*" compared to other western countries where mandatory sexuality education classes had been considered part of the school curricula for years.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>188</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>189</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>190</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>191</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>192</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>193</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>194</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>195</sup>*Ibidem.*

Another important step that advocated for introducing sexuality education in the Italian schools was undertaken by hand of politician Celeste Costantino and fellow deputies, which in 2013 advanced a legislative proposal with the title “*Introduzione dell’insegnamento dell’educazione sentimentale nelle scuole del primo e del secondo ciclo dell’istruzione*”.<sup>196</sup> This proposal was presented approximately two months after Italy had ratified the Istanbul Convention, an event that reawakened the institutional debate on the state of gender equality and its relationship with gender-based violence in the country.<sup>197</sup> The text referred to evidence of good practice from schools that in those years had launched ambitious projects on SRE with the aim of transposing a similar approach to a larger national scale.<sup>198</sup> Proponents stressed the need to teach sexuality education in its widest sense, including conversations on emotions, desires, fears, and pleasure.<sup>199</sup> The willingness to advocate for SRE was moved by the necessity to put an end to a normalized culture of fixed and mostly stereotyped gender roles, with the aim of educating young people to mutual respect, recognition of differences, and validation of oneself and others.<sup>200</sup> In this regard, Article 1 of the legislative proposal stressed the urge to raise awareness on the decisive role that the school system would play in promoting changes to personal and social behaviors by removing prejudices based on gender-discriminations and gender-stereotypes.<sup>201</sup> Reference was made to the need of including, starting from the first cycle of instruction, themes covering: equality between sexes, non-stereotyped gender roles, non-violent resolution of interpersonal conflicts, gender-based violence and bodily integrity, and positive interactions based on communication and consent.<sup>202</sup> Similarly to the previously mentioned legislative proposal, the need to offer mandatory training programmes for the teaching personnel was highlighted as a fundamental step towards the teaching of SRE.<sup>203</sup> However worthy of praise, the

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<sup>196</sup> Camera dei Deputati, Proposta di legge ordinaria (Introduzione dell’insegnamento dell’educazione sentimentale nelle scuole del primo e del secondo ciclo di istruzione), n. 1510. XVII Legislatura, August 7, 2013.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>200</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibidem.*

proposal did not take into consideration the possibility of hiring sexologists and other relevant experts to perform this task, a suggestion included in most international guidelines. Besides this, sharing the same preoccupation of the antecedent legislative proposal, the text remarked the urgency to introduce SRE in a context like the Italian one with a large media tradition of unapologetically delivering stereotyped images of men's and women's roles, and in which objectified representations of the female body are normalized in the entertainment industry.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, demonstrating to respect and to be in line with international guidelines, this legislative proposal embraced an understanding of sexuality education that takes into consideration power dynamics, bodily integrity and autonomy, pleasure and consent, as well as affections and emotions, topics that while not inherently sexual are nonetheless part of a person's development.<sup>205</sup> In other words, it is evident that both this and the previous legislative proposal sought to raise awareness on the need to adopt a sex positive mindset as well as to always incorporate a gender dimension in the discussion of sexuality topics, an approach in line with international guidelines showing evidence of gender-focused programmes being more effective than gender-blind programmes.

A further expansion of Costantino's proposal came two years later, in 2015, with a legislative motion undertaken by the deputies of the political party Movimento 5 Stelle named "*Istituzione di percorsi didattici e programmi di educazione alla parità di genere, all'affettività e alla sessualità consapevole nelle scuole secondarie di primo grado e nei primi due anni delle scuole secondarie di secondo grado, nonché integrazione dei corsi di studio universitari*".<sup>206</sup> Interestingly enough, this legislative text opened with an examination of episodes of homophobia and gender bullying that were pervading the Italian schools in those years with a worrying frequency.<sup>207</sup> It was based on evidence of bias-motivated aggressions that the proposal was presented, with the aim of suggesting

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<sup>204</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>205</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>206</sup>Camera dei Deputati, Proposta di Legge (Istituzione di percorsi didattici e programmi di educazione alla parità di genere, all'affettività e alla sessualità consapevole nelle scuole secondarie di primo grado e nei primi due anni delle scuole secondarie di secondo grado, nonché integrazione dei corsi di studio universitari), n.2667. XVII Legislatura, October 15, 2014.

<sup>207</sup>*Ibidem.*

a plan through which the school, representing both the cradle of education and the institutional venue in which most gender-motivated violence happens, would have been the solution to transform dominant stereotypical behaviors into an opportunity to learn how to coexist with gender diversity in a constructive and enriching manner.<sup>208</sup> On this matter, the deputies shed light on the limited impact of the government's approval, in 2013, of measures to aggravate punishments for perpetrators of gender-based violence.<sup>209</sup> Almost paradoxically, the year in which the government legislated to worsen sanctions for GBV crimes was also the one with the highest reported rates of femicides committed in Italy, compared to previous years.<sup>210</sup> The supporters of this legislative proposal argued, therefore, that this evidence corroborated the thesis according to which gender-based as well as episodes of homophobic violence and discrimination cannot be entirely and adequately tackled by acting solely on the criminal code.<sup>211</sup> It became evident how the focus should have been placed on prevention of these violent conflicts, prevention that could have been pursued in a systematic and comprehensive manner in the school setting.<sup>212</sup> In this regard, the group of deputies proposed to design and to introduce an interdisciplinary subject to make students reflect together on gender stereotypes, distorted and biased gender roles, and homophobic/transphobic bullying and discrimination.<sup>213</sup> The proposal also emphasized the importance of establishing an active dialogue on these topics, a trend that if adequately followed could have transformed negative perceptions towards diversity that fuel bias-motivated hate crimes, into social interactions based on mutual respect.<sup>214</sup> In this context, the school was understood as a 'social gym' where «a fundamental part of the transmission of notions, principles, and behaviors that are necessary to the formation of an individual's private and public identity»<sup>215</sup> takes place. It is precisely for this reason that the proponents understood that notions such as gender equality, self-determination, and the

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<sup>208</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>209</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>210</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>211</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>212</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>213</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>214</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>215</sup>*Ibidem.*

acceptance of diversity had to be vehiculated by specially trained teachers to progressively establish a favorable climate in the classroom for the proliferation of gender-positive attitudes. However, the deputies remarked that their legislative proposal did not intend to include sexuality education as an additional subject in school curricula by adding one extra hour to the weekly schedule, but that themes dealing with gender equality, relationships, and sexual consciousness should have been addressed in the teaching programmes of teachers' respective disciplines.<sup>216</sup> According to them, modifying national guidelines on teaching programmes to include a gender perspective, without actually making sexuality education a new subject, represented an easy and financially affordable solution.<sup>217</sup> This example illustrates why, among other reasons, Italy still lacks a mandatory sexuality education curriculum at all school levels.

In the same year in which Constantino's proposal was presented to the Parliament, another important milestone signed the history of proposals on sexuality education in the country. When politician Matteo Renzi was Prime Minister, he sought to reform the school system by launching a proposal in which, among the other objectives it intended to pursue, a limited but nonetheless relevant space was dedicated to highlighting the role of schools in promoting and advancing gender equality. The legal text 107/2015, commonly known as “La Buona Scuola”, explicitly stated at comma 16 that: «the three-year plan of the educational offer ensures the enactment of principles of equal opportunities, promoting in schools of every level an education based on equality between the sexes, and prevention of gender-based violence and all related discriminations».<sup>218</sup> Even though a superficial reading could suggest that this section of the legislation complies with the international body of law on the matter, such as the reference made by the Istanbul Convention on SRE as a means to combat GBV, in reality it represented a shallow reformulation of what the Italian Constitution already recognizes as supreme principles to be respected and guaranteed. Therefore, the insertion of this part in the legislation had very limited relevance because it had neither a

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<sup>216</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>217</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>218</sup>Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, Legge n. 107. July 13, 2015.

transformative potential, nor it made mandatory to change the school educational offer to apply the above-mentioned principles. This condition shed light on a pattern common throughout the history of legislative proposals on sexuality education in the country, one that while aiming to design strategies to include discourses on sexuality and gender equality in the school setting, did not aspire to structure and develop them around a real curricular subject. In conclusion, although the second chapter will provide a detailed analysis of the challenges of the Italian experience with sexuality education, it is worth anticipating why after all the attempts and proposals Italy has not yet seen concrete results. Indeed, two aspects prevented, and still prevent, the possibility of effectively and systematically pursuing the principles established at comma 16. First, schools of all levels in Italy are left with a margin of discretion when it comes to deciding whether to organize teachings on sexuality, since there is not a national law in this regard. Moreover, since a decision to invest weekly hours to sexuality education requires the spending of a considerable amount of money, which in turn depends on the financial availability of the single school institutes, sexuality education classes have been very uncommon and/or limited to some sporadic meetings. Secondly, the dominant ideology in each school institute plays a great and decisive role, since considerations on whether to teach sexuality education depend almost entirely on the teaching staff's beliefs and set of values. Having said this, the upcoming chapter will expand these, and other related issues, through a more detailed and exhaustive analysis.

## CHAPTER II

### Challenges and shortcomings of the Italian experience

#### 1. An overview of challenges to implement CSE

The concluding part of the first chapter outlined some of the legislative attempts to design and implement an effective and curriculum-based CSE in the Italian school system. Building on the already acquired information, the introductory part of this chapter will serve as a broader, and more detailed analysis of the challenges that have shaped Italy's approach to sexuality education and that have prevented it from successfully including CSE among mandatory curricular subjects. In order to do this, a qualitative research conducted in December 2016<sup>219</sup> will be used as a point of departure to introduce some of the major challenges to implementation. The results collected reveal that the difficulty in raising the support needed for including CSE among ministerial commitments derives from two main obstacles: one is the widespread attitude of denying young people's sexual subjectivity, the other is the perpetuation of protective and preventive discourses on sexuality-related matters. Indeed, it is almost impossible to impart the idea that young people are sexual beings and for this reason they have a right to receive information that will help them discover their bodies, their emotions, and to establish healthy romantic/sexual relationships. Concerning the second obstacle, the challenge is represented primarily by a lack of understanding that protection derives from the transmission of knowledge, and not from its obstruction. In this regard, scholar Allen develops the concept of "protective discourse in sexuality education"<sup>220</sup> and confirms that it represents one of the major challenges in implementation. That is because, if sexual activity is considered a risky business and young people are deemed to be endangered by the

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<sup>219</sup>Alessandra Alloni, Maria Rosaria Centrone, and Francesca Viola, "Yes to Sexuality Education at School: Exploring the Voices of Italian Adolescents," *Revista de Asistență Socială* XVI, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>220</sup>Louisa Allen, and Moira Carmody, "Pleasure has no passport: re-visiting the potential of pleasure in sexuality education," *Sex Education* 12, no. 4 (2012): 455-468, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.677208>.

negative consequences associated with it, this creates a two-fold reasoning: first, it means that the only sexuality education that is worth of being delivered through school curricula is the one that aims to protect young people solely through abstinence and prevention, without mentioning any other themes; secondly, and perhaps even more worrying, that sexuality should not enter the classrooms at all because exposing young people to such a conversation would not contribute to their protection.<sup>221</sup> Other than this, another deep-rooted challenge to implementation deals with how the family unit is considered, and the influence of parents' role in taking educational decisions for their children. Although balancing the role of school with that of the family in the transmission of educational values represents a big challenge in most countries that are confronted with the choice of including sexuality education in national curricula, in Italy the issue of which educational authority plays a leading role in teaching children and adolescents about sexuality-related matters is even more problematic. Indeed, most of the criticism to the implementation of a national CSE programme comes from parents who are against the school taking their place in the delivery of information on sexuality-related topics. As a matter of fact, the most recurrent critique to include CSE in schools is centered around a schizophrenic thinking: parents defend their role in teaching sexuality education to their children, while claiming that discussions on sexuality should be avoided as they encourage young people's early sexual debut. Both positions threaten implementation, especially because in Italy they are endorsed by right-wing parties who are usually the most conservative and family-focused ones. Notwithstanding this, they can be dismantled from several angles.

To begin with, as it was exhaustively argued in the previous chapter when outlining the implications of an effective curriculum-based CSE, as well as the rationale behind the need to provide CSE to the youth, international evidence has repeatedly highlighted that exposing children and adolescents to age and development-appropriate content contributes not only to delay the age of the first sexual intercourse, but to approach it in the safest and most informed way possible. Moreover, even if parents claim they should be free to educate their

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<sup>221</sup>*Ibidem.*



children without the influence of the school system, in logical terms the same reasoning should be applied to any other subject taught in school. As a matter of fact, experts in the field of sexology, as well as international law and guidelines, have repeatedly pushed public (i.e., the State) and private actors (i.e., the family) to treat sexuality education equally to any other subject, since it represents a fundamental and integral part of an individual's education. In other words, if parents were concerned about their role in the education of their children, they should also be concerned with teaching them all the subjects that the school normally delivers, such as biology, mathematics, or literature. Since sexuality education is no different than the just-mentioned subjects, it follows that either parents recognize the school's authority in delivering sexuality education classes as it does with any other subjects, or they deny the role of the school in its entirety and decide to home-school their children. Besides this, even more paradoxical is the fact that parents claim to cover a leading position in the teaching of sexuality-issues to their children, while in practice they rarely do it, and when they do, the information they provide is for the most part incomplete, misleading, embedded in stereotypes, or influenced by moral concerns and religious beliefs. Indeed, several adolescents interviewed during the aforementioned research revealed how infrequently sexuality enters the family unit, and most of them are aware that this happens because of the denial of their sexual subjectivity. The lack of parents-children confrontation, and the reason why most parents stand against the inclusion of CSE in national schools' curricula, has to do with the common association adults make between sex, sexuality, and sexualization. This limited understanding of sexuality, which is usually followed by discourses on morality, loss of innocence, and obscenity, has the most negative repercussions on young people, because it prevents parents from sharing helpful information with them. In addition, failure to view sexuality as an integral and ever-present component of a person's life pushes parents to obstacle any ambitious proposal to include CSE in school curricula. From the research emerges that young people are aware of parents' contradicting positions with respect to sexuality education: most of them declare to not talk comfortably with their parents about sexuality because they are aware that sex is perceived as a taboo in adults' minds.

## 1.1. The influence of the Catholic Church and the role of religion

Another challenge to the implementation of a curriculum-based CSE, which is peculiar to the Italian case, is represented by Italy being a nation of public morality and traditional values influenced by the Church.<sup>222</sup> In this regard, a report named “Sexuality Education in Europe: a reference guide to policies and practices” published as part of “The SAFE Project: A European partnership to promote the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people”<sup>223</sup> confirmed that the Catholic Church has such a strong influence in Italy that both public opinion and official attitudes tend to be traditional and moralistic towards the possibility of implementing a curriculum-based and mandatory CSE. As a matter of fact, this was evident already at the time of the first legislative proposals and bills passed with the aspiration of incorporating some sort of education on sexuality in the Italian schools. For instance, a 1991 bill which aimed at making sexuality education a non-mandatory school subject incorporated into Biology lessons<sup>224</sup> was repeatedly weakened as a compromise to the Christian Democrat Party (CDP), and then further weakened to pass through the legislature.<sup>225</sup> Indeed, in Italy proposals and attempts at making sexuality education a mandatory curricular subject have always faced the resistance of conservative parties and of the Church.<sup>226</sup> Although Italy is officially a secular country, it always finds itself dealing with the presence and will of the Catholic Church, a situation that creates a stalemate for the implementation of fundamentally important programmes such as those regarding sexuality. This need of the State to weigh its legislative decisions with the opinions of the Church is based on a political agreement

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<sup>222</sup>Calandra Falacy, “Italy’s Sexual Contradictions: a deeper look into the clash of liberal and conservative sexual policies and practices in Italy” (2004), 16.

<sup>223</sup>Kay Wellings, and Rachel Parker. *A reference guide to policies and practices: Sexuality Education in Europe*. Brussels: 2006.

<sup>224</sup>Karolina Beaumont, and Marcia Maguire. *Policies for Sexuality Education in the European Union*. Brussels: 2013.  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/462515/IPOL-FEMM\\_NT\(2013\)462515\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/462515/IPOL-FEMM_NT(2013)462515_EN.pdf).

<sup>225</sup>Kay Wellings, and Rachel Parker. *A reference guide to policies and practices: Sexuality Education in Europe*. Brussels: 2006.

<sup>226</sup>Micaela Longo, “Educazione sessuale a scuola, in Italia non esiste: una petizione per rompere i tabù,” *The Wom Culture*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.thewom.it/culture/womfactor/educazione-sessuale-scuola-petizione>.

stipulated between the State of the Vatican City and the Italian Republic in 1984, commonly known as either ‘‘Accordo di Villa Madama’’, ‘‘Nuovo Concordato’’, or ‘‘Concordato bis’’. This agreement established that the Ministry of Education must take into consideration the views of the Catholic Church in its decision-making<sup>227</sup>, for instance when the Catholic Church disagrees with the implementation of a mandatory CSE. Over the years, obstacles posed by catholic organizations and/or catholic exponents confirmed the difficulty of gathering an institutional support big enough to implement a CSE. Indeed, if a considerable part of the Italian population and almost all right-wing parties endorse the values and visions of the Church, it follows that expecting a mandatory and curriculum-based CSE to become a reality in the Italian school system is close to utopian. For instance, in 2013 the catholic deputy Paola Binetti of the ‘Scelta Civica’ political party decided to present a parliamentary question on the WHO’s report on ‘‘Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe’’ defining it as a «handbook for the corruption of minors».<sup>228</sup>

Besides this, another feature that must be considered when analyzing the presence of the Church and the deep-rooted religious tradition in the Italian context is the meaning and value associated with the institution of the family. In 2011, in an annual address to foreign diplomats Pope Benedetto XVI even defined obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education a «threat to families’ freedom of religion»<sup>229</sup>, adding that such courses represent a peril for «the cultural roots which nourish the profound identity and social cohesion of many nations».<sup>230</sup> Indeed, the Church declared that young people can receive a sexuality education provided that «the normal and fundamental method is the dialogue between parents and children, in other words an individual formation within the family

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<sup>227</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>228</sup>Angelo Romano, and Andrea Zitelli, ‘‘Educazione sessuale a scuola: come funziona in Europa e perché in Italia è tabù,’’ *Valigiablu*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.valigiablu.it/educazione-sessuale-scuole/>.

<sup>229</sup>‘‘Pope says sex education an ‘attack on religious freedom’,’’ ABC News, last modified January 10, 2011, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-01-11/pope-says-sex-education-an-attack-on-religious/1900696>.

<sup>230</sup>*Ibidem.*

setting».<sup>231</sup> If such a large community like that of the Church supports a parents-led sexuality education, it follows that this undermines the possibility of establishing a widespread consent around the implementation of CSE in schools. Indeed, the Church as an institution is by definition against most of the concepts and values that international guidelines agree an holistic CSE curriculum should include: respect for sex and gender diversity, normalization of sexual intercourse outside marriage, promotion of sexual activity not necessarily accompanied by a desire to reproduce and form a family, discussions on forms of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) such as polygamy and polyamory, and conversations on different ways to experience love and sexual attraction beyond hetero-normative assumptions. Even if evidence suggests that there has been a slight evolution in the meanings attributed to sex within the hierarchies of the Church and among Catholic theologians and moralists, which have become more affective rather than merely procreative<sup>232</sup>, Catholic doctrine on sexual, marital, and reproductive behaviour has remained rather stable.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, in the Church's view sexual intercourse is allowed only between heterosexual married couples, which implies a non-recognition of alternative ways of getting pregnant, such as through donor insemination and in vitro fertilization.<sup>234</sup> Moreover, masturbation, homosexuality, and pornography are considered sins, while the dissolution of marital bonds through divorce is prohibited, and the existence of gender nonconforming as well as of queer individuals is neglected.<sup>235</sup>

Finally, another reason that hinders the implementation of CSE in the Italian public schools, although less evident, is connected to the issue of public morality. Indeed, in Italy there is a strong culture centered around the concept of the *bella figura*, which implies looking pious and moral in public.<sup>236</sup> In this scenario, since the Church considers sexual matters as morally wrong, obscene, and deviant

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<sup>231</sup> “Orientamenti per l’educazione alla sessualità,” *Psicologia e Vita Cristiana*, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.psicologiaevitacristiana.com/2022/03/orientamenti-pratici-per-educazione-alla-sessualita-chiesa-cattolica.html>.

<sup>232</sup> Marcantonio Caltabiano, and Gianpiero Della-Zuanna, “The end of ‘Catholic’ sexuality in Italy?,” *Genus* 77, no. 29 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-021-00140-8>.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>236</sup> Calandra Falacy, “Italy’s Sexual Contradictions: a deeper look into the clash of liberal and conservative sexual policies and practices in Italy” (2004), 13.

particularly for young people, it is unsurprising that proposals to discuss sexuality outside the individual's private and intimate sphere are hampered with the argument that they offend public morality.<sup>237</sup>

Notwithstanding what has been said so far, the presence of the Church and the existence of a deep-rooted religious tradition do not represent the principal obstacle to implementation. Indeed, two more insidious structural challenges have instead prevented, and still prevent, the implementation of a curriculum-based CSE across all the Peninsula. The following sub-paragraph will be devoted to exploring them in detail.

## **1.2. Political affiliation and economic potential across regions**

As anticipated in the previous chapter, in Italy the lack of a national homogenous and mandatory plan on CSE has led to an uneven geographical distribution in which each region has a substantial autonomy in deciding whether to introduce sexuality education classes, as well as how long they should be and which topics they should tackle. As a matter of fact, in absence of established national guidelines and teaching objectives by the Ministry of Education, each region rests at the mercy of both its political colour and economic potential. This situation is problematic because it allows for differential treatment of students attending schools in different regions of the same country. In this context, the predominant challenge is not that the sexuality education carried out in schools across the country is obsolete and not compliant with international guidelines, rather that even the little education provided varies a lot from region to region. Consequently, the regions' autonomy to decide on such delicate and fundamental matters for children's and adolescents' development contributes to aggravate existing inequalities because students are exposed to different and sometimes contradicting messages and meanings. In this perspective, granting too much autonomy to decide whether to fund projects on sexuality is counterproductive from a community wellbeing standpoint, because it precludes the opportunity of working jointly and effectively towards a shared goal, in this case that of achieving a gender-equal society through CSE. Notwithstanding this, a major

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<sup>237</sup>*Ibidem*, 14.

challenge to the implementation of a curriculum-based CSE is represented by the regions not wanting to cede their power to decide whether to devolve part of their money to organize school and out-of-school activities. Evidence that in Italy sexuality education is at the mercy of both the political colour and the economic potential of the different regions is found, among other things, in the unequal availability of contraception and of access to reproductive health services. In this scenario, the Italian regions that currently provide contraception for free are only six out of twenty: Apulia, Emilia Romagna, Piedmont, Lombardy, Tuscany, and the Marche. Apulia was the first one, already more than ten years ago in 2008, to launch the experiment of free contraception for people below the age of 24.<sup>238</sup> From 2017, Emilia Romagna started following the same example by providing contraception to people below the age of 26, to unemployed women, and to women affected by the economic crisis resident in the region and subscribed to the National Health Service.<sup>239</sup> However, evidence shows that not every health care company in the region guarantees such a service.<sup>240</sup> In Piedmont, free contraceptives are available since 2018 for people below the age of 26, and for unemployed women between 26 and 43.<sup>241</sup> In Lombardy, a document approved in 2018 allows everyone below the age of 24 to request any kind of contraceptive method to both public and private health clinics located in the region.<sup>242</sup> Following a similar example, from 2018 Tuscany encourages education on sexual health and access to free contraception in local health clinics, pharmacies, and doctors' offices for young people aged between 14 and 25, and for women between 26 and 45 who do not enjoy any exemptions.<sup>243</sup> Lastly, the Regional Council of the Marche adopted with an unanimous vote a motion on the free distribution of contraceptives in public health clinics to people below the age of 26, and to unemployed women or women affected by the economic crisis in the twelve months following a pregnancy.<sup>244</sup> Moreover, the region guarantees free

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<sup>238</sup> Sara Picchi. *Atlas italiano sull'accesso alla contraccezione 2020*. Rome: 2020. <https://aidos.it/atlas-italiano-sullaccesso-alla-contraccezione/>.

<sup>239</sup>*Ibidem*, 9.

<sup>240</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>241</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>242</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>243</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>244</sup>*Ibidem*.

contraception also to women between 26 and 45 in cases of a past experience with interruption of pregnancy.<sup>245</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that Apulia was the first region to provide contraception for free, the region represents an exception in the geographical area where it is located, as confirmed by a research conducted in 2020 named ‘Atlas italiano sull’accesso alla contraccezione’.<sup>246</sup> The antecedent Contraception Atlas 2019, which measured access to contraception in 45 European countries, had already revealed Italy’s poor compliance on sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls.<sup>247</sup> Indeed, Italy was occupying the 26<sup>th</sup> position, a worrying scenario that pushed researchers to further investigate the phenomenon by exploring regional practices on access to contraception.<sup>248</sup> In order to do this, the study conducted in 2020 took into account two parameters to examine good or bad practice of different regional policies: availability of adequate and diffuse information on contraception, and widespread and public offer of varied contraceptive methods.<sup>249</sup> From the analysis emerges a worrying discrepancy between Northern and Southern regions in granting access to contraception. This largely depends on the economic availability of the different regions, since high availability is associated with a higher probability of investing in experts in the field who can deliver more accurate and comprehensive sexuality education classes. Indeed, the presence of local health programmes dealing with sexuality education issues is an indicator of a region’s economic potential, since they include professional figures such as psychologists and specialized doctors whose costs are covered by the region. Moreover, higher availability facilitates the organization of numerous initiatives and for longer periods of time. On the contrary, regions whose economic potential is lower are more likely to devolve money to areas that are considered more ‘urgent’ compared to sexuality education. This lack of investment appears even more evident when considering data coming from Southern regions and from the two islands: taking into examination only the population below the age of 24, evidence shows that the highest number of births from underage mothers (0,6% compared to 0,1% from

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<sup>245</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>246</sup>*Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>247</sup>*Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>248</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>249</sup>*Ibidem.*

Central and Northern regions) is registered here, as well as the highest number of young people who declare not to use any protection during sexual activities (20% compared to 10% in the North-east).<sup>250</sup> Other than this, in situations of financial difficulty, scholastic institutes tend to accept cost-free lessons on sexuality education proposed by catholic organizations, which therefore are more competitive. Indeed, even though cost-free consultations on sexuality are guaranteed by Italian law through public health clinics (in opposition to private family health clinics), these are usually not well-known among young people. Moreover, while students must actively decide to go to a health clinic to receive information on sexuality as well as to ask for help and consultation, the school represents a familiar environment with whom students have more confidence. Other than this, the education that students receive at school matters enormously both because it is considered valid by most, and because the school is the space where they spend the most time. This creates a problematic situation because students who attend classes delivered by catholic organizations become endowed with very different messages and meanings compared to those receiving a secular education, a differential treatment that is unlikely to be adjusted simply by the intervention of local health clinics and/or other relevant experts. A similar inequality can be observed also considering the predominant political affiliation in the different Italian regions. Indeed, the 2020 research reveals that Veneto and Emilia Romagna regions, which are geographically adjacent and share a similar economic capacity, show instead very different results in terms of access to contraceptive offer, and information on contraceptive methods. On a sample including all Italian regions, Emilia Romagna occupies the highest position for both indicators with a total score of 88 out of 100, while Veneto ranks 11<sup>th</sup> with a total score of 59 out of 100.<sup>251</sup> The chart attached below provides a visual representation of, and a broader insight on, the score of each region.

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<sup>250</sup>*Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>251</sup>*Ibidem*, 18.



| Regione               | Indice finale | Regione               | Accesso all'offerta | Regione               | Accesso all'informazione |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Regione               |               | Regione               |                     | Regione               |                          |
| Emilia Romagna        | 88            | Emilia Romagna        | 86                  | Emilia Romagna        | 91                       |
| Toscana               | 81            | Toscana               | 78                  | Toscana               | 86                       |
| Puglia                | 72            | Puglia                | 67                  | Puglia                | 82                       |
| Valle d'Aosta         | 69            | Valle d'Aosta         | 57                  | Valle d'Aosta         | 81                       |
| Trentino Alto Adige   | 65            | Friuli Venezia Giulia | 56                  | Trentino Alto Adige   | 81                       |
| Marche                | 63            | Trentino Alto Adige   | 56                  | Marche                | 80                       |
| Lombardia             | 62            | Lombardia             | 54                  | Lazio                 | 79                       |
| Friuli Venezia Giulia | 61            | Marche                | 53                  | Sardegna              | 77                       |
| Lazio                 | 61            | Piemonte              | 52                  | Liguria               | 75                       |
| Liguria               | 59            | Liguria               | 50                  | Lombardia             | 74                       |
| Veneto                | 59            | Veneto                | 50                  | Veneto                | 73                       |
| Piemonte              | 57            | Lazio                 | 49                  | Umbria                | 73                       |
| Umbria                | 57            | Umbria                | 47                  | Friuli Venezia Giulia | 70                       |
| Campania              | 53            | Campania              | 46                  | Piemonte              | 66                       |
| Sardegna              | 51            | Basilicata            | 39                  | Campania              | 65                       |
| Basilicata            | 46            | Calabria              | 38                  | Basilicata            | 56                       |
| Calabria              | 44            | Sardegna              | 34                  | Calabria              | 55                       |
| Abruzzo               | 41            | Abruzzo               | 34                  | Abruzzo               | 52                       |
| Molise                | 34            | Molise                | 32                  | Sicilia               | 38                       |
| Sicilia               | 33            | Sicilia               | 31                  | Molise                | 36                       |

Tab.1. Access to contraception per region. Final index of sub-dimensions of analysis: access to supply of, and information on, contraceptive methods.<sup>252</sup>

Looking at this chart, it can be assumed that if such a difference between the two selected regions, Emilia Romagna and Veneto, cannot be justified by an unequal economic potential, there must be necessarily another reason behind this disparity. This cause is perhaps identifiable in the diverse political affiliation of the two regions. Indeed, since 1970 Emilia Romagna has been continuously governed by left-wing parties, while on the contrary the Veneto region has been predominantly governed by right-wing parties. By definition, left-wing parties support progressive policies centered around the need to achieve social equality and egalitarianism, as well as embracing values like equality, solidarity, justice, and freedom. In this scenario, sexuality education classes are more likely to be

<sup>252</sup>*Ibidem.*

organized in regions where the political majority embraces the just-mentioned values. Moreover, since left-wing parties care about social justice and equality, it can be assumed that a region in which this thinking prevails would be more incentivized to devolve money to sexual and reproductive health services. On the other hand, right-wing parties are usually the most conservative and traditionalist ones, as they support a patriarchal conception of the family and of women's role in society. Moreover, they establish their discourses on non-recognition of SGMs, an attitude that makes these people invisible in regions where the prevalent political thought considers minorities as second-class citizens for whom no social policy implemented for their wellbeing is sufficiently justifiable. Right-wing thought is also quite moralistic and narrow-minded, a feature that is incompatible with the possibility of implementing ambitious sexuality programmes, and that prevents expanding knowledge and information on sexual-related matters, in the case considered contraception. A similar reasoning can be done when examining the position of the other regions in the chart: it seems that higher or lower ranks depend either on political affiliation, economic reasons, or a combination of both. The first three positions in the chart are occupied respectively by Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, and Apulia. While ranks from Emilia Romagna and Tuscany are supposedly influenced by a long history of being governed by left-wing parties as well as enjoying good economic capacity, the same cannot be said for Apulia. It is probable that the reason why the latter has such a high rank derives from the fact of having been the first country to introduce free contraception, a move that gave Apulia a considerable time-advantage to strengthen those services able to ensure an adequate information on, and supply of, contraceptive methods.<sup>253</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> position occupied by Trentino-Alto Adige, instead, is most probably due to it being a Special Administrative Region, which therefore has a sufficiently big amount of money to invest in strengthening services in need of improvement. The lowest positions are occupied respectively by Abruzzo, Molise, and Sicily, all Southern regions who display lower economic capabilities compared to Central and Northern regions. The North-South divide emerges also from the already mentioned "Studio Nazionale Fertilità – Indagine Adolescenti" (2017-2018),

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<sup>253</sup>*Ibidem*, 16.

where data on participation in meetings/courses about sexuality and reproduction issues depict an uneven geographical distribution.<sup>254</sup> Indeed, in Southern regions participation is considerably lower than in Northern regions (with an increasing gap compared to early 2000s): the difference must be interpreted in light of the fact that the offer of courses/meetings on sexuality in schools located in the North is bigger than the one in the Centre/South.<sup>255</sup>

Having said this, the upcoming paragraph will provide two examples of good and poor practice in the design and implementation of initiatives on sexuality education in two geographically adjacent regions, Veneto, and Emilia Romagna.

## **2. A comparative analysis of good and poor practice: evidence from Veneto and Emilia Romagna**

### *Veneto region*

The Veneto region represents a positive example on the issue of GBV: within its geographical borders there are anti-violence centers, home shelters, and protected structures, for a total of 41 structures.<sup>256</sup> Moreover, the region invests a considerable amount of money to support these structures: in 2014, the region deployed 400,000 Euros to support anti-violence centers and second-level structures, while in the period 2015-2017 the money invested to contrast GBV reached twice this amount.<sup>257</sup> Notwithstanding this, a 2016 session of the Regional Council was convened to discuss, and find solutions to, the worrying increase of gender-based hate crimes in the region as highlighted in occasion of the inaugural speech of the President of the Venice Court of Appeal. When analyzing numbers of crimes against sexual freedom, crime of stalking, and crimes related to pornography, it was found that while in 2016 crimes against sexual freedom (-11,6%) and crimes of stalking (-6,4%) slightly decreased, a worrisome increase was registered for crimes of pedophilia and pedopornography

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<sup>254</sup>Istat. *La salute riproduttiva della donna*. Rome: 2017.

<sup>255</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>256</sup>“Veneto. Femminicidio, Donazzan: la prima arma è l’educazione affettiva,” *Quotidiano Sanità*, last modified June 10, 2016, [https://www.quotidianosanita.it/veneto/articolo.php?articolo\\_id=40550](https://www.quotidianosanita.it/veneto/articolo.php?articolo_id=40550).

<sup>257</sup>*Ibidem*.

(+67,9%).<sup>258</sup> Notwithstanding the large presence of structures dedicated to the support and protection of women, these data confirmed the need of undertaking urgent and capillary actions to prevent and contrast this phenomenon in wider terms. For the same reason, the region cannot further delay the introduction of a holistic, incremental, age-appropriate, and continuous sexuality education that begins in preschool and accompanies children throughout adolescence. That is because, since the main victims of pedophilia and pedopornography are children and young people themselves, it is essential to equip them with the information knowledge they need to be able to both spot early signs of abuse and/or violence and to protect themselves by seeking help. The need to act on prevention, rather than simply investing money in strengthening anti-violence centers and in launching initiatives which deal with the problem *ex post*, was highlighted also by Manuela Lanzarin, the Region's Health Minister. In this regard, she planned to convene a regional meeting involving the directors of anti-violence centers and refuge shelters as well experts in medical and emergency fields to discuss the issue of GBV in the region. She remarked that:

Di fronte alla recrudescenza dei femminicidi, che sono solo la punta dell'iceberg dei maltrattamenti e delle prevaricazioni di genere, non basta potenziare le strutture di accoglienza e assistenza alle donne. Dobbiamo sostenere le donne che hanno il coraggio di riconoscere e di denunciare comportamenti violenti, ma, prima ancora, dobbiamo lavorare di più e meglio per promuovere una cultura del rispetto reciproco tra generi, che sia universale e condivisa da tutti, indipendentemente da nazionalità, provenienza, appartenenza religiosa o reddito. Dagli esperti e dai professionisti che siedono al tavolo regionale ci attendiamo indicazioni e proposte per intervenire, con ancora maggiore efficacia, nelle scuole, nei servizi, nei luoghi di lavoro per promuovere il rispetto della dignità della donna, ad ogni età ed in ogni condizione, e contrastare fenomeni di subalternità o dipendenza fisica, emotiva, psicologica o economica che inducono le donne a subire in silenzio.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> President of the Court of Appeal. *Relazione del Presidente della Corte d'Appello sull'amministrazione della giustizia nel distretto di Venezia per il periodo 01.07.2014-30.06.2015*. Venice: 2016. <https://ca-venezia.giustizia.it/80015340278/news/YbbOmcorteappelloveneziaag20162.pdf>.

<sup>259</sup> "Violenza donne: assessore Lanzarin, "preoccupa aumento reati, prossima convocazione tavolo regionale," " Conferenza delle Regioni e delle Province Autonome, last modified January 30, 2016. <http://www.regioni.it/dalleregioni/2016/01/30/veneto-violenza-donne-assessore-lanzarin->

A similar emphasis on prevention, and the need for this cause to be endorsed by schools of all levels, was found when the Veneto region took into consideration the possibility of providing contraception for free. In this regard, Lanzarin amended the region's public health plan presented by council members Piero Ruzzante and Patrizia Bartelle, which aimed to facilitate free access to contraception in the field of actions on women's sexual health.<sup>260</sup> The justification provided by the assessor is quite revolutionary considering that she belongs to the right-wing political party "Lega Nord", from whom traditional and conservative views would be expected. In this regard, she claimed that: «the region's public health system is involved in the strengthening of initiatives and campaigns on sexuality education and prevention of STDs, and not of ensuring free contraception».<sup>261</sup> Although the latter represents an admirable initiative in regions and countries which already have a solid and long tradition of delivering effective and accurate sexuality education classes, in this regard the assessor saw the proposal as an easy, although not incisive and transformative solution compared to the set of issues that an efficient sexuality education would help prevent.<sup>262</sup> Proving to have a valid point, the assessor argued that the region should invest money to support the prevention work undertaken by family counselling offices, and to commit territorial services as well as local health clinics to promote educational meetings/interventions in schools with the aim of favouring conscious, respectful, and responsible sexual behaviours.<sup>263</sup> That is because providing free contraception without background information on the various

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[preoccupa-aumento-reati-prossima-convocazione-tavolo-regionale-441768/](https://www.preoccupa-aumento-reati-prossima-convocazione-tavolo-regionale-441768/).(Translation: Considering the increased number of femicides, which represent the pinnacle of gender-based abuses and prevarications, it is not sufficient to strengthen structures that welcome and help women. It is instead essential to work towards the promotion of a culture of mutual respect between genders, which must be universal and shared by all independently of national origin, religious belief, and income. We expect that experts and professionals that will sit in the regional meeting will be able to provide guidelines and proposals to intervene with more efficacy in schools, services, and workplaces to promote the respect of women's dignity, at whatever age and in whatever condition, as well as to counteract episodes of emotional, physical, psychological, and financial dependency that induce women to cope with violence in silence).

<sup>260</sup>“Contracezione gratuita veto Lanzarin: «meglio l'educazione sessuale»,” *Il mattino di Padova*, last modified December 21, 2018, <https://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/regione/2018/12/21/news/contraccezione-gratuita-veto-lanzarin-meglio-l-educazione-sessuale-1.17585001>.

<sup>261</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>262</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>263</sup>*Ibidem*.

aspects of sexuality, including the risks deriving from misusing contraception, could have even been counterproductive rather than be of help.<sup>264</sup>

Even if at regional level there have been some advancements concerning sexuality education, in practice each school remains free to propose or not projects on SRE: initiatives have usually been the result of the decision of ambitious scholastic institutes and/or of experts like psychologists or sexologists. In other words, not only in the entire country the uneven geographical distribution of sexuality education meetings and classes represents a considerable *impasse* for the achievement of gender equality, but even within the borders of a specific region it is hard to find a well-established, homogeneous, and effective plan on sexuality education which follows the same structure and teaching objectives in each school. This is the case of deliberation n.1310 published on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019, which approved and financed a call for both primary and secondary schools to present projects on SRE to be developed during the scholastic year 2019/2020.<sup>265</sup> Here it was stated that the region allows schools to present projects on how to tackle in the classroom themes such as: gender equality, promotion of a culture of mutual respect and recognition, women's rights in the familial context as well as in sexual/romantic relationships and in friendships, and in general conversations on how to dismantle prejudices and deep-rooted conceptions of women's and men's role in society that can contribute to exacerbate gender discriminations and violence. However, even small but ambitious steps like this one very rarely translate into concrete actions by schools which are truly interested in educating their students on such themes. More importantly, the large margin of discretion enjoyed by schools undermines the possibility of proposing a univocal and homogenous teaching plan: the absurdity of this situation is that two schools in the same city can adopt completely different approaches and have contradicting plans on SRE because of the school personnel's different willingness, political affiliation, or relationship with religion, moral and ethical values. For this reason, to measure good or bad conduct it is not sufficient to consider the quantity of

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<sup>264</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>265</sup>"Interventi in materia di pari opportunità – Bando per progetti di educazione all'affettività e alla relazione di genere," Regione del Veneto, last modified August 11, 2020, <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/lavoro/2019/dgr-1310/interventi-pari-oppunita>.

projects proposed, rather what should be investigated are the differences among them. In this context, it is evident that even admirable and ambitious projects could never have a satisfactory impact if they remain the exception, and more importantly if they are weakened by misleading and/or insufficient information offered by less committed projects. Notwithstanding this, some laudable examples are worth to be mentioned, that will offer a brief overview of the state of sexuality education in the Veneto region.

In the region, it is usually local health clinics that decide to launch projects and initiatives on sexuality education. An example is represented by the project ‘‘Affettivamente’’ introduced by ULLS8 in the province of Vicenza. This project is born with the idea of having experts working in family counselling educating secondary students on sexual matters. In this regard, it seems that in the region past and existing projects on sexuality education have almost always resulted from the initiative of local health clinics and/or family counselling offices, rather than from ambitious teachers. The project ‘‘Affettivamente’’ is designed to achieve two targets: a first objective is to train groups of 15-20 peers/tutors (students in their last years of secondary school) for approximately three hours of insightful and detailed information on sexual matters.<sup>266</sup> The knowledge acquired during this class will serve them to educate younger students on the presence of, and access to, local health clinics (i.e., Spazio giovani)<sup>267</sup> and on the opportunity of benefitting from online tools (i.e., website giovane6, and youngmail specialist program)<sup>268</sup> that offer information and support relative to themes like affection, sexuality, and contraception.<sup>269</sup> Tutors are supported by local health clinics’ operators and a representative teacher. Perhaps because the project is designed

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<sup>266</sup>‘‘Progetto per la scuola secondaria di II° grado: Affettivamente,’’ ULSS 8 Berica, last modified July 5, 2022, <https://www.aulss8.veneto.it/nodo.php/4117>.

<sup>267</sup>Spazio Giovani is a section of family counselling which dedicates weekly hours to young people aged 14-21 to have autonomous access, for free, and without an appointment to services related to counselling for sexuality and affection issues.

<sup>268</sup>Website Giovane6 provides information on services offered by family counselling as well as on ways to access these services. The website also provides education on themes concerning sexuality, contraception, affection, and relationships. It avails itself of an interactive specialist programme named Youngmail, which offers online counselling on issues affecting the youth. Access to this specific service is given only to students who take part in the project. This represents an integration to the project that students can continue to make use of once the meetings in school have ended. ‘‘Sportello Spazio Giovani,’’ Spazio Giovani, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.giovane6.it/>.

<sup>269</sup>*Ibidem*.

and promoted by a local health clinic, there is a disproportionate conception of sexuality in medical terms, whereas fewer attention is dedicated to other areas of sexuality and affection. This appears evident also by examining in which order the project objectives are listed, a peculiarity that needs to be mentioned because it will later be opposed to how project objectives are instead listed in the main project active in Emilia Romagna. Indeed, “Affettivamente” presents its teaching objectives in the following order:

- a) Education on the risks connected to early sexual activity, which usually derive from a lack of relational and emotional competences;
- b) Education on STDs;
- c) Education on early and/or unwanted pregnancies;
- d) Education on abortion, especially for underage girls;
- e) Education on the risks of repeatedly making use of emergency contraception, and consequent discussion on how to choose adequate and tailored contraceptive methods;
- f) Education on respect, diversity, and uniqueness in an optic of prevention of discriminations and violence.<sup>270</sup>

From this list it can be easily noticed how nearly all the objectives deal with issues that are almost exclusively medical and related to prevention of, and protection from, the risks connected with sexual activity. The sole objective that seeks to include conversations beyond the sexual aspect only is listed at the end. This decision can have both positive and negative implications: one the one hand, educating on sexuality from a medical standpoint might be seen as less subversive and more appealing for schools with different political/religious affiliations because it is in general less divisive as there are no (or at least very few) moral and ethical issues involved. This aspect can play a huge role in the decision of which sexuality education projects to implement, considering, as mentioned in multiple occasions, that schools are free to choose which projects to give applicability to. On the other hand, a medically centered approach is not what

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<sup>270</sup>“Progetto per la scuola secondaria di II grado: Affettivamente,” ULSS 8 Berica, last modified July 5, 2022, <https://www.aulss8.veneto.it/nodo.php/4117>.



makes sexuality education holistic and comprehensive, since it only deals with one of the several aspects related to sexuality. Notwithstanding this, the project for how it is designed on paper could be expected to have a positive response considering that the costs would be borne by the local ULLS.

Besides this, other initiatives and projects undertaken in the province of Vicenza should be mentioned, however of smaller scale and less incisive. The first project is named *Using a Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Community Development - Educhiamoci alla Sessualità*. The project was first designed in the Eighties by biologist Anna Verde to fill the persisting educational gap in school on the awareness of the interdependence between mind, body, and social relations.<sup>271</sup> Moreover, not only the approach adopted and contents tackled are in line with the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, but the methodology used is based on Cooperative Learning where the youth interacts with experts trained to answer their questions and doubts in a dialogic and constructive way.<sup>272</sup> This project represents an exception in the Italian and regional landscape, since it acknowledges that education can only be effective if it is carried out overtime. All this was translated into practice for the first time through the realization of an interdisciplinary school course on sexuality and affectivity for students enrolled in the second year of high school in Thiene (VI), a result made possible by the close collaboration between a group of teachers and experts of the “teenagers’ space” of the Family Counselling Office (ULSS 4 “Alto Vicentino”). In 2017, the first edition of this project was realized in Vicenza targeting the SOS Centre, a village dealing with hospitality for unaccompanied minors with difficult backgrounds. The project, which was delivered following the spirit and objectives included in the manual of UNESCO Comprehensive Sexuality Education, was then renovated for a second edition which took place a year later.

Besides this, in the province an admirable work is also done by psychologist and clinic sexologist Anna Zanellato, who delivers teachings in schools and organizes out-of-schools projects and meetings for a vast range of audiences including

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<sup>271</sup>Club for UNESCO Vicenza. *Using a Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Community Development – Educhiamoci alla sessualità*. Vicenza: 2018.

<sup>272</sup>*Ibidem*.

educators, families, teachers, children, and adolescents. Her work as an educator focuses on the promotion of sexual wellbeing to achieve sexual awareness and emancipation. The approach and method she uses is particularly innovative in the Italian landscape, as she strives to do more than just unilateral teaching on prevention of unwanted pregnancies and/or STDs. Drawing on international guidelines and good practices, the psychologist organizes her sessions with a practical-oriented and participatory approach, using tools inspired by the so-called *active pedagogy*.<sup>273</sup> The aim is to discuss issues related to sexuality, romance, and relationships through non-conventional ways of teaching such as recreational activities (grounded in scientific and evidence-based notions) followed by a *meta-cognitive reflection*, which is helpful to analyze and draw conclusions on the content of the laboratories.<sup>274</sup> These activities seek to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible, both in terms of topics discussed, and in terms of the audience they want to achieve. Some primary schools in the territory (i.e., Giacomo Zanella Primary School in Vicenza) have welcomed the approach used by psychologist Zanellato and have invited her to deliver a series of meetings in class, where pupils engaged in a progressive path of learning about human emotions, healthy relationships, and the human body. Moreover, the psychologist has also organized meetings for 40 educators at the SOS Centre in Vicenza, with the aim of training them on how to provide good quality sexuality education to the most vulnerable children and teenagers who are not able to attend regular schools. An interesting project in which psychologist Anna Ferrari has taken part, together with educator Daniela Ferrari, is named “SexTeen”.<sup>275</sup> The project aims primarily to diffuse scientific and facts-based information on sexuality in its most comprehensive and multidimensional way, through Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube. Themes tackled by the project include gender identity, sexting, pornography, homosexuality, and in general all the doubts, curiosities, and needs adolescents may have. The peculiarity of this project is that the topics are

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<sup>273</sup> “Attività di formazione,” Studio Zanellato, accessed September 21, 2022, <https://studiozanellato.com/servizi/formazione-educazione-sessuale/>.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>275</sup> “I giovani e il sesso nell’era dei social: col progetto SexTeen sinergia di professionalità vicentine e molfettesi,” ViPiù, last modified November 22, 2018, <https://www.vipiu.it/leggi/i-giovani-e-il-sesso-nellera-dei-social-col-progetto-sexteen-sinergia-di-professionalita-vicentine-e-molfettesi/>.

analyzed and discussed from several standpoints thanks to the collaboration of philosophers, secondary school teachers, experts in art history, filmmakers, doctors, lawyers, linguists, psychologists, and educators. Even though the merit of this project lies in its intercultural and interdisciplinary nature, as well as representing a useful and educational way to make use of the internet, its narrow application and little influence is found mainly in it lacking recent updates and not having its own website.

To conclude, it can be said that however ambitious and forward-thinking these projects are, there are common shortcomings identifiable in all the above-mentioned initiatives. First, the meetings are usually very limited in length and number, with the most ambitious ones consisting of barely 30 hours a year. Secondly, out-of-school projects are almost always subject to registration and payment, something that may discourage participation. Thirdly, since both in-school and out-of-school projects are not mandatory but depend on the willingness of teachers, majors, and other public authorities, it is hard to monitor development and progress when there is no consistency in delivery. A shortcoming which is peculiar to the case of inviting experts like psychologists to deliver classes on sexuality education is that most young people are raised with negative stereotypes on the role of psychologists: there is a considerable stigma that a psychologist should be visited only in cases of serious mental health conditions. Moreover, schools inviting specialized experts need to consider the financial burden of such a decision. In this regard, it is very unlikely that the work carried out by psychologists and other experts can truly be beneficial if multiple factors hinder the possibility for the youth to make a valuable and enriching use of such services. In addition, it is interesting to note that, however past and existing projects undertaken in Veneto are worthy of praise even if they present many faults, the fact that they are considered major achievements by several community stakeholders reveals enough about the state of the art on SRE in the region and in the Peninsula in general. Another shortcoming which can be found in almost all projects in Veneto is that beneficiaries are usually adolescents who have already hit puberty, whereas the needs and desires of children are often, if not always, overlooked or poorly addressed. Moreover, while it is true that experts play a

significant role in the delivery of sexuality education meetings, the main problem is the limited duration and narrow view offered of complex phenomena like sexuality and affection. In addition, it can be argued that the region's poor conduct on sexuality education has a lot to do with the prevailing political colour. Indeed, the region has almost always been governed by political figures embracing right-wing values, who have on several occasions influenced and/or hindered the implementation of sexuality education programmes in schools. The two most recurrent arguments used by right-wing parties to obstacle or terminate meetings on sexuality education in schools were: parents have a primary role in the education of children, and contents discussed are problematic from a moral and ethical standpoint. One of the most alarming examples is the motion, presented in 2015 to the Regional Council of the Veneto Region by the council member Sergio Berlato of *Brothers of Italy* (a well-known right-wing political party in the country), that explicitly requested schools to avoid discussing topics embedded with dangerous ideologies for students' development. The reason why this motion was presented was the introduction, in the same year, of the already mentioned legislative proposal named "La Buona Scuola", which envisioned the opportunity for the school to become the venue where to build a supportive network for the prevention and reduction of gender-based discrimination and violence. According to the Regional Council which approved the motion, and according to assessor and representative of *Brothers of Italy* Elena Donazzan, in Italy «there is a worrying and dangerous ideology concerning the gender issue»<sup>276</sup> and the Veneto region «has already stated clearly that it is against the introduction of gender-focused programmes in schools».<sup>277</sup> In this regard, council member Berlato even spoke of «educational emergency» when referring to the presence of SRE classes in schools across the region.<sup>278</sup> In the opening discourse of the motion presented, Berlato unapologetically stated that:

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<sup>276</sup>«Gender. Il Consiglio Regionale approva a larga maggioranza la mozione Berlato», Belluno Press, last modified September 1, 2015, <https://www.bellunopress.it/2015/09/01/gender-il-consiglio-regionale-approva-a-larga-maggioranza-la-mozione-berlato/>.

<sup>277</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>278</sup>«Regione Veneto, ok a mozione anti-teoria gender nelle scuole: 'Favorisce abusi sessuali e pedofilia'», Il Fatto Quotidiano, last modified September 4, 2022, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/09/04/regione-veneto-ok-a-mozione-anti-teoria-gender-nelle-scuole-favorisce-abusi-sessuali-e-pedofilia/2008001/>.

In alcuni casi purtroppo l'educazione all'affettività è diventata sinonimo di educazione alla genitalità, priva di riferimenti etici e morali, discriminate per la famiglia fatta da un uomo e una donna. In Paesi dove simile strategie sono state applicate, come in Inghilterra e in Australia, questo ha portato ad una sessualizzazione precoce della gioventù, con conseguente aumento degli abusi sessuali (anche tra giovani), dipendenza dalla pornografia, all'attività sessuale prematura con connesso aumento di gravidanze ed aborti già prima dell'adolescenza e all'aumento della pedofilia.<sup>279</sup>

He then continued the attack, endorsed by most participants to the Council, by saying that:

L'ideologia gender non è solo pericolosa, in quanto porta alla disintegrazione della personalità con conseguente fragilità psichica, instabilità emotiva ed affettiva, bassa autostima e senso di inadeguatezza ma anche totalmente inutile [...]. Esiste un paradosso che dimostra come nei Paesi in cui si è maggiormente investito nella cosiddetta impostazione di genere paritario, quali la Norvegia, le differenze uomo – donna, sono molto più accentuate.<sup>280</sup>

The motion also criticizes educational books and materials where the concept of family, understood as necessarily composed of a male figure and a female figure, is put under discussion with the aim of making children and adolescents aware that different forms of love, and different forms of families, exist and deserve equal value and recognition. Both statements, however, are not supported by facts.

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<sup>279</sup>*Ibidem.* (Translation: in some cases, relationship education has become a synonym for education on genitals, which lacks ethics and morality and is discriminatory for families composed of a male and a female figure. In countries where similar strategies have been applied, such as the UK and Australia, this approach has led to early sexualization of the youth and to early sexual activity, increased number of pregnancies and abortions experienced even before adolescence, and exposure to episodes of pedophilia).

<sup>280</sup>*Ibidem.* (Translation: the gender ideology is not only dangerous, because it leads to the disintegration of personality with consequent psychic fragility, emotional and sentimental instability, low self-esteem, and a feeling of unsuitableness [...]. There is a paradox that demonstrates how in countries that have invested in programmes dealing with gender equality, such as Norway, differences between men and women are instead more accentuated than in other countries).

On the contrary, international evidence clearly demonstrates that sexuality education is key because it prevents children and adolescents from experiencing the above-mentioned risks.

A similar negative reaction was shared by the mayor of Venice Luigi Brugnaro, who even publicly declared to have sent a letter to the school personnel of a kindergarten in the province of Venice requesting to withdraw 49 textbooks that discussed the issue of discrimination with the aim of educating children to respecting and valuing diversity in all its forms. The mayor explicitly stated that: «nessun bambino sarà discriminato o trattato diversamente e sarà incoraggiata qualsiasi integrazione, ma va riconosciuta la maggioranza delle persone che hanno una mamma e un papà».<sup>281</sup> This criticism draws from a wider resistance that has interested the Italian context in recent years, and which has been perpetrated for the most part by right-wing and conservative parties. Indeed, most opponents of SRE programmes tend to view every initiative and project as an attempt to divulge on a large-scale the so-called ‘gender ideology’. The latter is however a hollow term that has been manipulated by conservatives to pass the idea that educating on gender equality and sexuality risks undermining the development and wellbeing on children and adolescents.

### *Emilia Romagna region*

The Emilia Romagna region represents a unique example in the Italian landscape concerning the teaching of sexuality education. Indeed, in 2013 the region launched a project named ‘W l’Amore’, based on its Dutch precursor ‘Long Live Love’ whose content and teaching objectives are fully in line with international guidelines on how a sexuality education curriculum should be designed. The project, while initially launched as an experiment respectively in Bologna, Forlì, and Reggio Emilia, has then successfully spread across the region.

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<sup>281</sup> ‘Gender, Brugnaro: «ho ritirato i libri dalle scuole perché i genitori devono avere voce in capitolo sull’educazione dei figli»,’ Il Fatto Quotidiano, last modified August 18, 2015, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/08/18/gender-brugnaro-ho-ritirato-i-libri-dalle-scuole-perche-i-genitori-devono-avere-voce-in-capitolo-sulleducazione-dei-figli/1955846/>. (Translation: no child will be discriminated against or treated differently, and integration will be encouraged, but it must be recognized that most people have a mother and a father, and this cannot be contested).

Moreover, although it was first designed to target secondary school students aged 13-14, the growing awareness that even younger people in the region urgently needed to be educated on their sexual health and wellbeing pushed proponents to present the project for primary schools and kindergartens as well. In this regard, the responsible for the project specified the following:

Il progetto nasce da due elementi, uno di carattere epidemiologico e ricerche che abbiamo fatto all'interno della nostra USL, ci dicono che una fascia di adolescenti, abbastanza significative, che si colloca sul 25%, dichiara di avere già avuto rapporti sessuali entro i 14 anni e quindi questo elemento ci ha fatto pensare che lavorare invece con le seconde superiori, come in genere facevamo prima, era insufficiente, perché si arrivava ad un'età in cui una grande fetta di adolescenti, una notevole parte di adolescenti, aveva già avuto rapporti senza aver avuto adeguate informazioni, perché altre ricerche ci dicono che più sono giovani meno hanno informazione e competenze per utilizzare delle precauzioni rispetto alle gravidanze o alle malattie sessualmente trasmesse. Questo è il primo elemento che ci ha fatto dire che arrivare in seconda superiore è troppo avanti e quindi abbassare l'età. L'altro elemento che ci ha fatto strutturare il progetto è stato quello che gli insegnanti che nel nostro progetto sono parte integrante dell'educazione affettiva e sessuale fanno fatica poi all'interno delle loro discipline a portare avanti una strategia coerente e riproducibile, in un qualche modo, cioè un'organicità.<sup>282</sup>

In this regard, “W l'Amore” was developed with the idea of targeting pre-adolescents, a different perspective compared to the Veneto region where most initiatives are designed exclusively for adolescents. Moreover, although it is true that in Veneto there are some initiatives and projects, there is not a bigger project which is incorporated by different schools located across the region. Indeed, “W

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<sup>282</sup>Ivo Colozzi, and Giuseppe Monteduro. *L'educazione sessuale a scuola nell'epoca del gender: una ricerca empirica in una scuola media statale di Bologna*. [https://osservatorioaffettivita.it/onewebmedia/ricerca\\_colozzi\\_monteduro.pdf](https://osservatorioaffettivita.it/onewebmedia/ricerca_colozzi_monteduro.pdf). (Translation: the need to give birth to this project was based on research conducted within the local USL, which revealed that 25% of adolescents had already engaged in sexual activity before the age of 14. This element has led us to think that introducing sexuality education only in secondary schools was insufficient as a considerable part of the youth had already approached sex and sexuality by that time, without the adequate information and competences needed to use protections against unwanted pregnancies and/or STDs. As a result, lowering the age of targets for sexuality education programmes was seen as the most reasonable action to undertake.

l'Amore'' in Emilia Romagna has its own website and is more structured and comprehensive both in terms of contents and in terms of audiences reached. The project seeks to be a guide, and a training opportunity, for teachers, parents, and students: on the website there is a specific section dedicated to adults, and one to adolescents, demonstrating to deliver age-appropriate information on sexual matters as international guidelines suggest. Moreover, the project is a noteworthy example of multidisciplinary teaching: of the five clusters of topics, four are to be discussed by teachers and trained educators, and one is of competence of experts working for ''Spazio giovani'', a section of the health clinic composed of gynecologists, psychologists, and obstetricians. The topics include:

- a) Discussions on puberty, and behavioural changes both with oneself and in the relationship with others that affect individuals during adolescence;
- b) Discussions on gender models, stereotypes, and prejudices present in familial, social, and media contexts;
- c) Discussions on the meaning of love and affection, and on the different ways of living sentimental experiences during adolescence. This cluster also discusses sexual orientation and what it means to be in a healthy relationship, how to engage in enriching and valuable relationships with other individuals, as well as how to end a relationship peacefully and respectfully without conflict or violence;
- d) Focus and emphasis on self-awareness and self-worth even in a relationship, as well as on the importance of communicating and understanding each other's sentiments and feelings. This cluster also includes discussions on safe use of the internet, including pornography;
- e) Education on safe sexual activities, preventing an unwanted pregnancy as well as undesired STIs and/or STDs, contraception, and dissemination of knowledge on the services available in the region for young people.<sup>283</sup>

What it is interesting to notice from the content of these clusters is that sexuality education for how it is understood in Emilia Romagna is an education that touches

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<sup>283</sup>''Presentazione progetto W l'Amore,'' Servizio Sanitario Regionale Emilia-Romagna, accessed September 18, 2022. <https://www.wlamore.it/preadolescenti/>.



upon themes that go well beyond simple information on sexual intercourse. It is indeed a truly CSE as international guidelines deem it should be. In this regard, while most projects in Veneto are drafted in a way that even visually gives priority to medical issues, therefore attributing fewer importance to issues of gender equality, healthy and safe sexual and/or romantic relationships, “W l’Amore” relegates pregnancy and STDs prevention in the last cluster, a choice that does not seem incidental considering how extensive and progressive the understanding of sexuality in this project is. The latter is also more far-reaching compared to projects in Veneto, which are usually restricted to the schools in the province area where they are presented. In Emilia Romagna, the number of students, parents, and teachers involved seem to be bigger than that of its neighbouring region: during the scholastic year 2019/2020, 46 scholastic institutes in 19 different districts have been reached by the project.<sup>284</sup> All health clinics in the region, beside the USL in Piacenza, have activated “W l’Amore”, for a total of 2.416 students and 1.163 adults (consisting of teachers, parents, educators, and health educators) involved.<sup>285</sup> USLs in the cities of Reggio Emilia and Ferrara have even presented the project in extra-scholastic settings, where educators work with sexually vulnerable adolescents.<sup>286</sup>

Having said all this, the following two charts provide a picture of compliance of projects undertaken respectively in Veneto and in Emilia Romagna. The aim is to show whether, and to what extent, these projects include the key components described in the first chapter and that international guidelines deem essential for a sexuality education programme to be effective and satisfactory. Although a detailed interpretation of contents and of learning results is not easy to define because of insufficient information after implementation and delivery, the presence/absence indicators used are based on declared objectives and on the design/organization of the project before being enacted.

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<sup>284</sup> Regione Emilia-Romagna. *Progetti di educazione all'affettività e sessualità svolti dagli operatori degli spazi giovani della regione Emilia-Romagna. 2019-2020.* [file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/Progetti\\_spazi\\_giovani\\_2020\\_2021.pdf](file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/Progetti_spazi_giovani_2020_2021.pdf).

<sup>285</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibidem.*

Tab. 1. Evidence of compliance for project: Veneto region.

|  | Project 1<br>“Affettivamente”  | Project 2<br>“Educhiamoci alla Sessualità”   |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Scientifically accurate</b>         | Present: the project relies on WHO’s recommendations and guidelines on adolescents’ health.  | Present: the project is based on the principles set out in the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.      |
| <b>Incremental</b>                     | Absent: the project is a one-off intervention of approximately 3 hours, although it is preceded by a period of training for tutors (who are peers from classes of one/two higher levels), who work together with experts from health clinics and a relevant teacher. However, the project aims to connect young people to services that are operating in the territory (i.e., family counselling). Students can also consult: Spazio Giovani, website Giovane6, and Youngmail. | Absent: the project organizes two cycles of meetings. The course programme is limited to 7 evening meetings of 2 hours each. |
| <b>Age-and development appropriate</b> | Absent/Present: the addressees are: students from primary and secondary schools, as well as teachers and parents. There is not an explicit mention of how the content would be taught to be age-appropriate, although we can assume that relying on WHO’s recommendations means that there is probably an attention in this regard.  | Absent/Present: the audience is composed of adolescents aged 15-17.  |

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|--|---|---|
| <b>Curriculum-based</b>                            | Absent: the project needs to be approved by scholastic institutes, but this does not imply that it becomes part of that school's educational offer.   | Absent: the project aims to fill the educational gap in school.   |
| <b>Comprehensive</b>                               | Present/Absent: although the project touches upon several themes, there seems to be an excessive focus on diseases/pregnancies prevention. This may also be because the project is undertaken by the local health clinic.   | Present/Absent: the structure of the course is molded on topics of students' interest. As a result, not all sexuality themes are covered, even though it still touches upon fundamental areas of CSE.   |
| <b>Based on HR and gender equality</b>             | Present: there is reference to the need of educating on discriminatory and violent behaviours, as well as to respect diversity. However, these objectives are listed at the end, perhaps denoting a lower importance attributed compared to disease/pregnancy prevention. | Present/Absent: there is a limited mention of the link between HR and sexuality education during the meetings. However, one meeting titled 'Rights and social participation' presents the relevant legislation and protection against sexual violence. When asked whether the crucial theme of GBV is tackled during meetings, the coordinator of the course Anna Verdi answered that there was not a meeting entirely dedicated to it but she had it planned for the future. |
| <b>Culturally relevant and context appropriate</b> | Absent: there is no mention of it.  | Present: one of the themes covered in the program are the social and cultural influences/differences related to sexuality.  |

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|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Transformative/Able to develop life skills to support healthy choices</b></p> | <p>Present: peer tutoring is encouraged to create dialogue and interaction among peers. Tutors are trained to inform and sensitize their peers on access and use of services offered by local health clinics.</p> | <p>Present: the proposed methodology is based on Cooperative Learning: participants are actively involved in the dimension of experiential know-how; they interact in heterogeneous small groups/ pair groups. This represents the appropriate climate to mutually exchange experiences with peers, and the group relationships strengthen self-esteem, awareness, and responsibility.</p> |
|---|---|--|

Tab.2. Evidence of compliance for project: Emilia Romagna region.

|                                       | Project 1<br>“W l’amore”  | Project 2<br>“L’amore a colori”   | Project 3<br>“Amore? Sicuro!”   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Scientifically accurate</b></p> | <p>Present: the content is based on international evidence and guidelines, and the project avails itself of the work of medical experts and local health clinics.</p>   | <p>Present: the content is based on international evidence and guidelines, and the project avails itself of the work of medical experts and local health clinics.</p>   | <p>Present: the content is based on international evidence and guidelines, and the project avails itself of the work of medical experts and local health clinics.</p>     |
| <p><b>Incremental</b></p>             | <p>Present: it can be assumed that an incremental approach is adopted considering that the project follows the Dutch example and adheres to international guidelines, however “W l’Amore” is specifically thought for adolescents aged 11-13.</p> | <p>Present: it can be assumed that an incremental approach is adopted considering that the project follows the Dutch example and adheres to international guidelines, however “W l’Amore” is specifically thought for adolescents aged 14-19.</p> | <p>Present: it can be assumed that an incremental approach is adopted considering that the project follows the Dutch example and adheres to international guidelines.</p> |

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| <b>Age-and development appropriate</b> | Present: it is mentioned on the website of the project that the contents tackled are tailored to the emotional and cognitive development of the audience.  | Present: it is mentioned on the website of the project that the contents tackled are tailored to the emotional and cognitive development of the audience.  | Present: it is mentioned on the website of the project that the contents tackled are tailored to the emotional and cognitive development of the audience.  |
| <b>Curriculum-based</b>                | Absent: the project is an alternative way to compensate for the educational gap in schools. Schools can freely and autonomously decide to implement this project. The idea is that of resembling a curriculum-based subject, although at present it remains an ambition. | Absent: the project is an alternative way to compensate for the educational gap in schools. Schools can freely and autonomously decide to implement this project. The idea is that of resembling a curriculum-based subject, although at present it remains an ambition. | Absent: the project is an alternative way to compensate for the educational gap in schools. Schools can freely and autonomously decide to implement this project. The idea is that of resembling a curriculum-based subject, although at present it remains an ambition. |

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| <b>Comprehensive</b>                   | Present: since the project is based on the Dutch “Long Live Love”, which has long been considered one of the most admirable projects for CSE and which is in line with international guidelines, it can be expected that topics will deal with several aspects of sexuality | Present: the project equips teachers with 7 units to be discussed in the classrooms. These include conversations on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- familial/romantic relationships;</li> <li>- gender roles;</li> <li>- anatomy and the sexual apparatus;</li> <li>- contraception;</li> <li>- STIs/STDs;</li> <li>- pregnancy/partum/abortion</li> </ul> . | Present: the project follows the same rationale of the other two.  |
| <b>Based on HR and gender equality</b> | Present: the content of the project is based on the major international HR treaties and guidelines on sexuality education.  | Present: one of the clusters explicitly mentions that it deals with discussions on defining gender stereotypes, identifying gender models in media representations, understanding gender equality, and validating other sexual orientations/gender identities other than heterosexuality and the binary.   | Present: the content of the project is based on the major international HR treaties and guidelines on sexuality education. |

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Culturally relevant and context appropriate</b>                            | Present: although this feature is expanded by the specific project ‘L’amore a colori’  | Present: the project is in fact addressed to adolescents and adults of recent immigration that attend Italian courses in the region. The aim is to learn a new language while also becoming educated on relationships and sexual matters.   | Present: although this feature is expanded by the specific project ‘L’amore a colori’   |
| <b>Transformative /Able to develop life skills to support healthy choices</b> | Present: the project foresees the use of interactive materials to help students learn in a playful and original way. Teachers can make use of films, videos, and factsheets. The approach used is that of peer education and learning through discovery. | Present: the teaching is structured in a dialogic, playful, and informal way. Besides the informative part, each unit begins with an exercise to let students express their views and be able to discuss them with the class. In this perspective the teacher is seen as a facilitator. | Present: there is a focus on students’ agency and active role in learning. The project aims at being more than unilateral teaching: it seeks to give students inputs and incentives through diverse activities that stimulate their desire of knowledge from several standpoints. |

### 3. Negative consequences of Italy’s gap in CSE

The need for a curriculum-based CSE in the Italian landscape can also be explained through an attentive examination of the negative consequences that failure to fill this educational gap entails. With the aim of providing an exhaustive overview of the issue, the concluding paragraph of this chapter will begin with an analysis of the detrimental impact Italy’s gap in CSE has on children and adolescents. Then, the argument will be expanded to explain why Italy’s poor conduct on sexuality education represents a problem not only for the youth, but for society in general. Put differently, the underlying argument of this paragraph

will be centered around the idea that removing barriers to the implementation of a curriculum-based CSE produces long-term beneficial effects on several spheres of life. It is precisely for this reason that it should be in the community's interest to advocate for designing and implementing a national education plan for CSE.

### *Internet fills the sexuality educational vacuum*

There are multiple negative consequences deriving from the lack of a mandatory CSE in the Italian school system. To begin with, in Italy the lack of educational alternatives has pushed children and adolescents to resort to the internet to fill their knowledge gaps on sexual matters, or even to get information for the first time. As a matter of fact, most young people actively search for sexually explicit content on the internet to satisfy their curiosity, or to compensate the little information they receive from peers and/or family members. International evidence has shown that this practice commonly begins way before individuals have a real grasp of concepts like sex and sexuality, and in most cases before having had the first sexual experience. This pattern is particularly problematic and represents one of the major challenges that an existing and mandatory CSE would help contrast by equipping young people with the necessary information tools to navigate content with a solid, scientific, and critical mindset. In most cases, children and adolescents are not adequately prepared to deal with the explicit, uncensored, and inappropriate sex content they find on the internet. To aggravate the situation even further is the fact that, even though in theoretical terms access and exposure to pornographic content is forbidden for people below the age of eighteen, in practice getting access to the most varied pornographic material is simple and free of charge. For this reason, pornography use has been labeled a 'mass phenomenon', one that due to lacking educational alternatives has become a source of information for the youth rather than representing a source of entertainment.<sup>287</sup> Although pornography could in theory be structured around an

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<sup>287</sup>Milena Gabanelli, "Adolescenti e dipendenza da pornografia online: cosa guardano, quanto, e i rischi che corrono," *Corriere della Sera*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.corriere.it/dataroom-milena-gabanelli/adolescenti-dipendenza-pornografia-online-cosa-guardano-quanto-rischi-che->



educational purpose, it is very rare that it does, and it is certainly not the reason why an industry in this field was created in the first place. Notwithstanding this, many adolescents risk taking much of what they absorb from porn as an educational opportunity, a dangerous pattern that needs to be demolished as most of the scenes depicted in porn are dense of gender stereotypes. In this scenario, resorting to pornography before having incorporated the adequate information knowledge to distinguish facts from fiction increases the likelihood of assimilating false and/or misleading information as well as of experiencing insecurities about body image, performance in sex, and ways of engaging in sexual activity in general. Indeed, while there is nothing inherently wrong with young people being curious about sexuality issues, it is evident that they should explore the world of pornography when it is healthy and safe for them, in other words when they have received an incremental, comprehensive, and age-appropriate sexuality education over the years.

As anticipated above, since pornography's role is not that of educating the youth, rather to provide a source of entertainment, most of the scenes depicted in porn follow a path that goes in the opposite direction of gender equality. This is not wrong *per se*, but it becomes dangerous for young people when standards that are normalized in porn, such as distorted conceptions of eroticism, pleasure, power, consent, and sexual roles become the only example that the youth have on sexuality and sexual relationships. For instance, the image that is offered of the female body and role in porn, as well as in the entertainment industry in general, is all but in line with a sex positive approach. In the porn industry women are usually portrayed as objects of desire for men with perfectly toned and standardized bodies with no body hair and/or imperfections. Moreover, there is little to no focus on women's pleasure, and the sex young people see performed in porn is very male-centered: pornography mostly depicts unbalanced power relationships between men and women, where the former is usually the one in control. Moreover, there is rarely a depiction of consent, rather there is an extensive representation of coercion and abuse, especially directed towards females. In this context, several international scientific studies have revealed that

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[corrno/457f3b16-e7b0-11eb-8f62-5849b2b6aae2-va.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3mTgQJagHHMSRN-XF965JBwrNWQNTkuJjD9Ba66iprUKpd9HqZ1gBvkuc.](https://doi.org/10.1080/10532528.2019.1644441)

globally 30% of children between 11 and 12 years old uses the internet to search for pornography online, a percentage that for the Italian case reaches 44% when considering young people aged 14-17.<sup>288</sup> A set of data collected on the relationship between adolescents and pornography shows that 9 adolescents out of 10 aged 10-17 are at risk of viewing inappropriate pornographic material online as they navigate the internet with a daily frequency.<sup>289</sup> Indeed, 3 out 10 children aged 10-11 has seen at least a porn video, a percentage that raises up to 5 out of 10 for adolescents aged 13-14, and to 7 out of 10 for people aged 15-16.<sup>290</sup> From a research conducted on “Online pornography: young people’s experiences of seeing online porn and the impact it has on them” emerges that 50% of boys and 25% of girls has voluntarily searched for pornographic content on the internet, even if the percentage of young people getting exposed is way higher considering the huge amount of pop-ups and sexual material that circulates through commonly used channels of communication like Whatsapp or Telegram.<sup>291</sup> The content that circulates is usually very violent and insulting from a gender equality standpoint: young people are often exposed to degrading images and/or videos where women are portrayed as being at the mercy of men.<sup>292</sup> In this regard, the aforementioned research, together with a number of other scientific studies, has registered and published the consequences on behavior that being exposed regularly to this kind of content has on adolescents. It emerged that adolescents that were precociously and regularly exposed to racy pornographic material were more likely to display sexist and aggressive behaviours.<sup>293</sup> Indeed, 70% of boys interviewed perceives women as sexual objects and agrees with statements such as: «women sexually provoke men and then complain from the attentions they receive from them».<sup>294</sup> Moreover, 34% of underage boys declare having pressured their partners to touch their intimate parts or to have sex, while 17% admit having resorted to coercion to achieve the same goals.<sup>295</sup> In 2020, 13 minors were charged with the crime of

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<sup>288</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>289</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>290</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>291</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>292</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>293</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>294</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>295</sup>*Ibidem.*

revenge porn, and 118 with the crime of pedopornography, with a general increase of 490% compared to the last five years.<sup>296</sup> Most adolescents, precisely 44% of boys and 29% of girls, confirmed that watching porn gave them ideas to replicate in real life.<sup>297</sup> This is particularly problematic considering that without an adequate sexuality education, the reiterated exposure and emulation of the content seen in porn risks undermining the youth's wellbeing as well as contributing to fostering negative and violent gender stereotypes. However, a solution to this problem is not to prevent young people from making use of these channels (i.e., parental control), because considering the enormous material present online, it is inevitable that children and adolescents will bump into sexually explicit content at some point. Even if throughout the years some political parties have claimed that obstructing access to pornography is the most efficient way to prevent the perpetuation of gender discrimination, abuse, and violence in real life, this does not represent an impactful and durable solution. On the contrary, international evidence has demonstrated that long-term beneficial effects come from education: a comprehensive and incremental sexuality education is successful in following the development of young people with the right information tools. In absence of a CSE, solutions should consider preventive measures to prepare young people to the dangers they may be exposed to.

To counteract possible risks deriving from an unguided and uninformed use of the Internet, and conscious that a sexuality education for how it is currently delivered across the Italian Peninsula is not able to fill such a gap, several projects and initiatives have been launched. For instance, Save the Children has developed, financed by the programme Rights Equality and Citizenship (REC) of the EU, a two-year project named DATE (Develop Approaches and Tools to End Online Teen Dating Violence) which aims at countering online teen dating violence (OTDV).<sup>298</sup> A definition for this term was coined by scholars Mulford and Giordano in 2008: «a variety of behaviours spacing from physical and sexual abuse to forms of psychological and emotional violence that happen among

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<sup>296</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>297</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>298</sup>“DATE: Develop Approaches and Tools to End Online Teen Dating Violence,” Save the Children, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/progetti/date-develop-approaches-and-tools-end-online-teen-dating-violence>.

adolescent couples». <sup>299</sup> Driven by the increasing and unsupervised use of the Internet and of social media by the youngest fractions of the population, and in light of the fact that most of the developmentally-inappropriate content adolescents are exposed online puts them in situations of high vulnerability, the project presents itself as an educational alternative to discuss with parents, adolescents, and educators the issue of gender-based violence in adolescents' intimate relationships, with a particular focus on abusive behaviours enacted through technology, such as revenge porn and pedopornography. <sup>300</sup>

### *Gender stereotypes reinforced through media sexualization and misrepresentation*

Building on previously discussed risks connected with a lack of sexuality education, an interrelated discourse can be made taking into account how this gap increases the likelihood of young people to become more sensitive to media misrepresentation. <sup>301</sup> As argued by scholar Kulik, the abundant sexism and sexual objectification of women in the media can have potentially negative repercussions on children's and adolescents' psyche if not mediated by formative discussions on sexuality and gender stereotypes either at school or in out-of-school settings. <sup>302</sup> This issue is particularly relevant to the Italian case, where the gender discourse broadcasted through the national media is based on a reinforcement of heteronormativity and of traditional gender roles. <sup>303</sup> This scenario is almost paradoxical considering that a society like the Italian one, which is so obsessed with sexualized media, is the same society that for the most part obstacles the implementation of a curriculum-based CSE by fear of exposing young people to sexual content too soon. <sup>304</sup> In this regard, Kulik states that: «censorship of our sexual education system is not aligned with our comfort with sexualizing women

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<sup>299</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>300</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>301</sup>Alessandra Alloni, Maria Rosaria Centrone, and Francesca Viola, "Yes to Sexuality Education at School: Exploring the Voices of Italian Adolescents," *Revista de Asistență Socială* XVI, no. 4 (2017): 19.

<sup>302</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>303</sup>*Ibidem*, 23.

<sup>304</sup>*Ibidem.*

in the media whatsoever».<sup>305</sup> As a matter of fact, a consistent body of research has shown the positive correlation between increased media sexualization and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Children's and adolescents' exposure to messages that sexualize and objectify women and girls through media programs, musical videos, advertisements, magazines, and cartoons<sup>306</sup> triggers a psychological reaction that pushes girls to believe that being sexually appealing to men is a core component of their own identity and role as females.<sup>307</sup> As a matter of fact, the internalized sexualization of women represents one of the negative consequences that Italy's gap in CSE entails. In absence of continuous educational support, the exposure to sexualized media and objectified representations of women leads to higher acceptance of gender role stereotypes and sexist attitudes by both males and females.<sup>308</sup> That is because young people construct cognitive representations of gender roles by observing the characteristics and behaviours that are considered as appropriate for women and men within the society they live in<sup>309</sup>: this means that if young girls are constantly exposed to messages that value women exclusively for their sexual attractiveness to men, they would most likely grow into thinking that being sexually appealing is a prerogative for being a female.<sup>310</sup> Moreover, a research on sexual objectification has shown that exposure to media sexualization not only shapes boys' and girls' biased understanding of gender roles, but it also increases their probability of displaying sexist attitudes.<sup>311</sup> Even more alarming is the evidence confirming that this sexism is ambivalent, meaning that it also reinforces girls' negative attitudes towards other girls, not only boys'. Components of ambivalent sexism triggered by media misrepresentation and inherent sexualization include: the idealization of traditional women's roles and men's dependency on women, the lower support for feminism, the enhanced women's tendency to accept the status quo as well as the

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<sup>305</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>306</sup>Silvia Moscatelli, Francesca Golfieri, Carlo Tomasetto, and Rebecca S. Bigler "Women and #MeToo in Italy: Internalized sexualization is associated with tolerance of sexual harrasment and negative views of the #MeToo movement," *Current Psychology* (2021): 6199-6211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01350-1>.

<sup>307</sup>*Ibidem*, 6199.

<sup>308</sup>*Ibidem*, 6201.

<sup>309</sup>*Ibidem*, 6200.

<sup>310</sup>*Ibidem*, 6199.

<sup>311</sup>*Ibidem*, 6201.

limited engagement in gender-based social activism.<sup>312</sup> Moreover, media's depiction of girls and women only as beautiful and perfect individuals for men's pleasure confirms the hypothesis, coming from several studies, that "beauty ideals are oppressive"(BIO).<sup>313</sup> According to this hypothesis, cultural beauty ideals and practices that are reinforced through the media represent a form of oppression of women, who feel a high pressure to appear in a way that enhances their sex appeal and attractiveness, an attitude that is a source of body scrutiny and body dissatisfaction.<sup>314</sup> Other works have highlighted a positive correlation between women's sexual objectification in media and tolerance of sexual harassment.<sup>315</sup> Indeed, it has been found that people exposed to sexualized images of women tend to attribute the blame and responsibility to rape victims.<sup>316</sup> This phenomenon can be observed even among children and adolescents. Research has shown that adolescent boys and girls displayed more tolerance of rape myths and sexual harassment after playing a video game with sexualized female characters, and sexualized appearances of women in the media have been associated to withdrawals to help women victims of violence.<sup>317</sup> Moreover, findings have shown that even among children sexualization reduces their ability to help a same-age female victim of bullying.<sup>318</sup> As already said, in Italy the entertainment industry is dense of sexualized images and messages, especially directed towards women, as well as of unapologetic representations of gender stereotypes. This is confirmed by an analysis carried out by the Italian Center of Social Studies and Investments (CENSIS) within the European project "Women and Media in Europe", which analyzed the content of 598 television programmes from the seven most popular Italian broadcast networks.<sup>319</sup> The research findings show that women in the Italian media are mostly depicted as "showgirls", such as actresses

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<sup>312</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>313</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>314</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>315</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>316</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>317</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>318</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>319</sup>Francesca Guizzo, Mara Cadinu, Silvia Galdi, Anne Maass, and Marcella Latrofa, "Objecting to Objectification: Women's Collective Action against Sexual Objectification on Television," *Sex Roles* (2017): DOI 10.1007/s11199-016-0725-8.

(56.3%), singers (25%), and models (20%).<sup>320</sup> Moreover, women's representations are more likely to be associated with fashion, entertainment, or physical violence, whereas men are usually portrayed in the contexts of politics, business, or culture.<sup>321</sup> Evidence reveals that in Italian TV programmes men are often the hosts, while women usually play a decorative role as background presenters, and are often dressed with revealing and provocative clothes.<sup>322</sup> A research on the same subject, named ‘‘*Sui generis*. Gender portrayals in the Italian television advertising’’, concluded that women's depiction in Italian programmes, commercials, as well as posters and print ads embraces two models: either the woman is represented in the role of housewife, with a discreet beauty and loving attitude and most importantly devoted to housekeeping and family; or it is the objectified and appealing sensual woman.<sup>323</sup> Indeed, the study confirmed the findings of the previously mentioned research: male characters in the Italian television commercials are depicted in major roles than their female counterparts; women are mainly represented in a housekeeping role, and less frequently in a professional role; and women are represented as beautiful and desirable more often than men.<sup>324</sup>

In light of what has been described so far, it can be rightly argued that a situation of this kind cannot be adequately contrasted through one-off interventions or isolated projects undertaken by the single regions. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive, incremental, continuous, and most importantly gender-focused sexuality education to eradicate and transform such a deep-rooted phenomenon in the Italian landscape.

#### *Increased risk-taking and exposure to misinformation*

Another negative consequence of Italy's gap in CSE is that a lack of scientific information on sexuality-related matters increases the risk for young people to

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<sup>320</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>321</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>322</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>323</sup>Paola Panarese, ‘‘*Sui generis*. Gender portrayals in the Italian television advertising,’’ *Anàlisi. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura* 50 (2014): 99-115, : [http:// dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i50.2274](http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i50.2274).

<sup>324</sup>*Ibidem*.

contract STDs and/or to experience unwanted pregnancies. The reason behind this correlation is logic and self-explanatory: without a satisfactory knowledge young people are more likely to engage in sexual risky behaviours because they are not adequately informed on the negative consequences deriving from them. Moreover, it is frequent that young people seek to compensate for the absence of CSE by resorting to unreliable sources of information that foster false myths on sexuality. According to UNESCO's Technical Guidance, this pattern represents a common problem in countries in which sexuality education is not taught in schools.<sup>325</sup> In this regard, alarming data on misinformation and poor conduct among young people come from the already mentioned report "Studio Nazionale Fertilità".<sup>326</sup> Data reveal that more than 10% of the adolescents' sample considers the day-after-pill a valid instrument against STIs, while 29% had resorted to *coitus interruptus* to avoid contracting STIs and preventing a pregnancy during the first sexual intercourse.<sup>327</sup> A report published by ISTAT, named "La salute riproduttiva della donna", has compared contraceptive use in several western countries as well as in countries of the Mediterranean area using two common indicators for international comparative analyses: the Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (which considers any contraceptive method), and the Modern Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (which instead considers only modern methods such as condoms, birth control, spiral, diaphragm, vaginal ring, contraceptive patch, and sterilization).<sup>328</sup> The study reveals that considering the first indicator the Italian's position is substantially in line with other European countries, even though it is surpassed by most ambitious ones.<sup>329</sup> Considering the second indicator, instead, Italy occupies the lowest position in the use of modern contraceptives, raking lower than Morocco and Egypt.<sup>330</sup> One of the main reasons behind the scarce use of contraceptives methods in Italy is due to young people's unawareness and lack of education on themes concerning sexuality. In this regard, an inquiry undertaken by CENSIS on a representative sample of 1,000 adolescents aged 12-14 who were

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<sup>325</sup>UNESCO. *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. Paris: 2009.

<sup>326</sup>Ministero della Salute. *Principali risultati del progetto: "Studio nazionale fertilità"*. Rome: 2019. [https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C\\_17\\_pubblicazioni\\_2823\\_allegato.pdf](https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_2823_allegato.pdf).

<sup>327</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>328</sup>Istat. *La salute riproduttiva della donna*. Rome: 2017.

<sup>329</sup>*Ibidem*, 23.

<sup>330</sup>*Ibidem*.



resident in Italy at the time of the interviews has unveiled a worrying scenario.<sup>331</sup> The results collected show that only 5,8% of the adolescents in the sample declared to have a good knowledge on sexuality-related topics.<sup>332</sup> Other data reveal that while 92.9% of people who engaged in sexual intercourse declared to take measures to avoid an unwanted pregnancy, this percentage decreases to 74,5% if the question includes a prevention of STIs and/or STDs.<sup>333</sup> Moreover, 19,5% of people interviewed declared to use protections occasionally, and not necessarily during every sexual intercourse.<sup>334</sup> In addition, there is a sort of ‘optimistic bias’ affecting young people who claim to be informed on STDs/STIs, while in reality very few of them are able to even name them: 89,6% of people interviewed mentioned HIV/AIDS among the possible risks of unprotected sexual intercourse, while only 23.1% mentioned syphilis, 18.2% vaginal candidiasis, and 15,6% HPV.<sup>335</sup> Other infections are mentioned in very low percentages, ranging from 13% to 11%.<sup>336</sup> Moreover, only 63,6% of young people interviewed is aware of the existence of HPV, and among these 7 out of 10 know that a vaccine for it is on the market.<sup>337</sup> Besides this, there is also a well-documented lack of education on the behaviours that may be considered at risk for contracting an infection or disease: 81,8% believes that the risk of transmission derives exclusively from penetration and not from oral sex and/or other sexual practices, and 33% thinks that HPV affects only women.<sup>338</sup> Even if there seem to be a higher awareness and wider knowledge on HIV compared to other diseases or infections, in 2014 Italy has registered 3,695 AIDS diagnoses, 84% of which was ascribable to unprotected sexual intercourse.<sup>339</sup> Moreover, until 2004 there has been an average of 4,000 yearly infections from either chlamydia, syphilis, or

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<sup>331</sup> ‘‘Giovani, sesso, e percezione dei rischi,’’ Universit  degli Studi di Padova, last modified March 3, 2017, <https://ilbolive.unipd.it/it/giovani-sesso-percezione-rischi>.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>339</sup> Lorenzo Di Pietro, and Francesca Sironi, ‘‘Agli italiani non piace il profilattico,’’ *Repubblica*, January 12, 2016, [https://www.repubblica.it/salute/prevenzione/2016/01/12/news/agli\\_italiani\\_non\\_piace\\_il\\_profilattico-131088406/](https://www.repubblica.it/salute/prevenzione/2016/01/12/news/agli_italiani_non_piace_il_profilattico-131088406/).

gonorrhoea, a percentage that has seen a 31% increase from 2005 to 2013.<sup>340</sup> In these cases, 46% of men and 48% of women admitted not having used contraceptives in the months preceding the infection.<sup>341</sup> Even in 2018, unprotected sexual intercourse was identified as the cause behind new HIV diagnoses in 80,2% of cases (41,2% of respondents were heterosexuals, while 39% were MSM<sup>342</sup>).<sup>343</sup> In this regard, evidence shows that in recent years the number of condoms sold in pharmacies or in drugstores in Italy have decreased from 11,1 million in 2007 to 9,3 million in 2014.<sup>344</sup> Moreover, a similar decrease has been registered also by looking at condoms sold in supermarkets: 42 million in 2013, 41.5 million in 2014, with an insignificant increase in 2015.<sup>345</sup> Findings from Ism Health and Nielsen confirm that the only increase has been observed with regard to low-cost condoms<sup>346</sup>, data that should however not be welcomed positively as cheap condoms are more likely to break during sexual intercourse. Even though data on number of contraceptives sold are certainly influenced in part by economic reasons, it is safe to assume that if adolescents were adequately educated on the importance and benefits of protecting themselves during sexual intercourse, they would be more incentivized to invest their money in contraception.

To compensate for the lack of sexuality education, several initiatives have been undertaken over the years. In 2019, the Ministry of Health, in accordance with Law 135/1990 titled ‘‘Programme of urgent interventions to prevent and fight AIDS’’ launched a series of activities to educate the population on HIV/AIDS prevention, information, research, assistance, and care.<sup>347</sup> In this context, an

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<sup>340</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>341</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>342</sup> Acronym: men that have sex with men.

<sup>343</sup> Lorenzo Di Pietro, and Francesca Sironi, ‘‘Agli italiani non piace il profilattico,’’ *Repubblica*, January 12, 2016, [https://www.repubblica.it/salute/prevenzione/2016/01/12/news/agli\\_italiani\\_non\\_piace\\_il\\_profilattico-131088406/](https://www.repubblica.it/salute/prevenzione/2016/01/12/news/agli_italiani_non_piace_il_profilattico-131088406/).

<sup>344</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>345</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>346</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>347</sup> ‘‘Campagna di comunicazione ‘Con l’HIV non si scherza’ #HIVriguardatutti,’’ Ministero della Salute, last modified August 1, 2019, [https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3\\_2\\_6\\_1\\_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=campagne&p=dacampagne&id=138#:~:text=La%20campagna%202019%20affronta%20i.adottano%20comportamenti%20responsabili%20di%20prevenzione.](https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3_2_6_1_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=campagne&p=dacampagne&id=138#:~:text=La%20campagna%202019%20affronta%20i.adottano%20comportamenti%20responsabili%20di%20prevenzione.)

advertising campaign named ‘‘You do not fool with HIV’’ was organized with the aim of holding the population responsible for their own health and the health of others by removing dangerous stigma and promoting regular HIV testing.<sup>348</sup> Another initiative concerning HIV/AIDS that is worth of being mentioned in this regard is the ‘‘Safe Book project’’ promoted by Durex Italia in collaboration with the Italian Red Cross and ANLAIDS, the national association for the fight against AIDS.<sup>349</sup> The project aims to support schools and parents in their role as educators, by equipping them with the adequate information tools that would help students become informed citizens.<sup>350</sup>

Notwithstanding evidence that educating the youth on the risks deriving from unprotected sexual activities is fundamental, especially considering the high incidence of cases of HIV in the country, various initiatives that sought to educate on the matter have been violently hampered. This was the case of cartoonist Guido Silvestri, to whom the Ministry of Health had entrusted the task of realizing a booklet to be delivered in all high schools to stimulate students’ awareness on the existence of HIV, booklets that were however withdrawn within a couple of weeks by order of the Ministry of Education.<sup>351</sup> To conclude, however, it can be said that one-off interventions such as the above-mentioned ones, are not as transformative and effective as a CSE would be.

#### *Increased gender discrimination and violence*

The lack of CSE is among the baseline factors that contribute to perpetuating gender discriminations and violence in the Italian context, a pattern that has negative repercussions on several domains. Data collected from ISTAT reveal that 31,5% of women has experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence throughout their life, with the most egregious forms of violence recorded

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<sup>348</sup>Ministero della Salute. *Principali risultati del progetto: ‘‘Studio nazionale fertilit ’’*. Rome: 2019.

<sup>349</sup> ‘‘Porta SafeBook nella tua scuola,’’ SafeBook, last modified December 14, 2018, <https://www.safe-book.com/>.

<sup>350</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>351</sup> Alessia Dulbecco, ‘‘Perch  non sostituiamo l’ora di religione a scuola con l’educazione sessuale?,’’ *The Vision*, November 19, 2021, <https://thevision.com/attualita/educazione-affettiva-scuola/>.

perpetrated by people close to the victim.<sup>352</sup> Indeed, 62,7% of rape episodes happen within a relationship, and are attributable to the male partner.<sup>353</sup> Latest data from 2022, published through a report of the central section of the criminal police, confirm that in 2021 199 of the homicides committed were directed against a female victim, with a slight increase in number compared to the previous year.<sup>354</sup> A similar increase was registered taking into account women killed in familial/sentimental contexts: in 2021, 70 women were murdered by hand of their male partners, compared to 68 in 2020.<sup>355</sup> These data confirm the already mentioned argument according to which GBV in Italy is not attributable to sporadic and isolated cases, rather it is a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon of perceiving women as covering a subsidiary role in society compared to men. This attitude, which is often internalized to the point of becoming normal, is founded in a patriarchal conception of society, conception that is endorsed by manifestations of toxic masculinity behaviors (which may result in gender-based discrimination and violence, particularly femicide), as well as by a degrading vision of women's role in many environments.<sup>356</sup> It follows that a phenomenon that is not sporadic should be contrasted in its cultural and educational roots, rather than through occasional and intermittent interventions which are not sufficiently transformative and effective. In this regard, investing in education targeting the young generations should be a priority for a country in need of an urgent lesson on gender equality, mutual respect, and rejection of GBV.

In conclusion, the need to include mandatory CSE in Italy is not only due to it representing a source of vital knowledge for children's and adolescents' development and wellbeing, but it is based on evidence that, when delivered in a holistic manner, sexuality education has positive repercussions on society and for this reason it should be in the interest of all citizens and stakeholders to promote

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<sup>352</sup> "Violenza sulle donne," Ministero della Salute, last modified March 7, 2022, <https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/donna/dettaglioContenutiDonna.jsp?id=4498&area=Salute%20donna&menu=societa>.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>356</sup> "Violenza di genere," Openpolis, last modified November 23, 2021, <https://www.openpolis.it/esercizi/la-violenza-contro-le-donne/>.

it. Indeed, sexuality education has been labeled “a vehicle for social change” because it gives the opportunity to activate the cultural shift needed to tackle misinformation, shame, and stigma around issues like reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ equality, sexual violence prevention, gender equity, and dismantling patriarchal and sexist norms.<sup>357</sup> In this perspective, sex education is of vital concern to the community because failure to act on it in preventive terms results in courts, jails, institutions, and hospitals having to socially adjust people’s misconduct at a later time.<sup>358</sup> Hospitals would not have to deal with patients affected from STDs/STIs if an education on the risks and responsibility of sex had been present, while anti-violence centers and family courts would not have to face the consequences of unhealthy and abusive relationships if the foundations for positive, respectful, and equal interactions had been laid during childhood and adolescence.<sup>359</sup> In general, social workers, ministers, doctors, and lawyers would not find themselves fighting with problems that a wise, scientific, and gender-focused sexuality education could have prevented.<sup>360</sup>

Having said this, the following and conclusive chapter of this thesis will outline how a CSE curriculum should be designed to be truly effective in achieving a gender-equal society in Italy. This ambitious task will make use of what has been argued throughout these pages so far, as well as of evidence and recommendations from the international community.

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<sup>357</sup>Christine Soyong Harley, “Sex ed is a vehicle for social change. Full stop,” *SIECUS*, September 1, 2022, <https://siecus.org/sex-ed-is-a-vehicle-for-social-change/>.

<sup>358</sup>Newell W. Edson, “Sex education as a community problem,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 8, no. 6 (February 1935): 361-370, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2960745>.

<sup>359</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>360</sup>*Ibidem*.



## CHAPTER III

### Conceptualizing a transformative sexuality education curriculum

This last, and conclusive, chapter of this dissertation will seek to gather, and examine, an *ensemble* of features that would make a potential CSE curriculum truly transformative for Italian society in general, and in particular for the Italian youth. Taking into consideration everything that has been argued throughout the previous pages, the following ones will outline an ambitious proposal to include in a potential CSE curriculum discussions and conversations on issues that have long been treated as peripheral concerns. In order to do this, the introductory part of this chapter will provide an exhaustive and analytical description of ambitious initiatives existing in the country that could be taken as an inspiration to begin conceptualizing and drafting a curriculum for the teaching of sexuality education in schools of all levels. The just-mentioned projects are born from the initiative of open-minded individuals, and are promoted principally through online platforms such as social media. The first of these noteworthy projects is named “Tabùemarmellata” (Taboos and marmalade) and was realized thanks to two young primary school teachers’ multiple experiences with the organization of laboratories for young adults on topics such as: sexual identity, the queer world, intersectional feminism, discussions on consent, inclusion, and conscious sexuality. It was by merit of the teachers’ combined knowledge obtained through a Master in Sexology and Sexuality Education concluded at SISES (Società Italiana di Sessuologia ed Educazione Sessuale)<sup>361</sup> and a passion for, and training on, the world of infant literature that this creative project took shape. The project represents an attempt to introduce CSE to the youngest audiences (namely to individuals aged 0 to 11), based on evidence from directives of both the WHO and the UNESCO, as well as on existing international guidelines, that sexuality education for children and adolescents represents a vehicle to achieve a series of other human rights goals. For this reason, the project aspires to be a guide for

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<sup>361</sup>Translation: Italian society for sexology and sexuality education.

teachers and educators on how to deliver comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education for the youth, a necessity that finds its justification in two main lines of evidence. First, the WHO recognizes that when SRE starts from kindergarten, and it is delivered in an incremental, age-appropriate, and inclusive way, it is capable of uprooting fears and prejudices that adults have when conversing on sexual matters with young people. Second, the project realizes that training teachers and educators on how to deliver SRE for children and young adolescents is fundamentally important, since an effective, consistent, and judgment-free sexuality education is helpful to: facilitate the sensorial development and the positive perception of one's body, improve communication skills, learn how to express emotions in a healthy and constructive manner, learn how to recognize and delimitate one's personal boundaries, strengthen self-esteem, and develop self-determination abilities.<sup>362</sup> In short, it is precisely because of the large body of evidence on the long-term benefits of teaching inclusive and mandatory sexuality education that the two teachers co-wrote with the brand 'F\*ck your label'<sup>363</sup> a so-called 'rainbow guide' for teachers and educators to discover, comprehend, and interact with individuals who are neither heterosexual nor binary, in other words with queer individuals. The guide is structured in a way that takes into special consideration the needs of non-binary and transsexual individuals, as well as the professional attitude that teachers and education should adopt when discussing sexual matters with sexual and gender minorities. The reason why the guide adopts this focus is due to a lack of guidelines, especially at national level, on how to teach sexuality education appropriately and inclusively to this specific group. The guide is composed of four main sections: privacy and consent (i.e., how to initiate and have a constructive dialogue); sexual identity (i.e., discussions on binary and non-binary individuals); pronouns (i.e., analyzing and discussing the practice of dead naming); and coming out and outing (especially in scholastic contexts).<sup>364</sup> However this guide cannot be compared to more lengthy,

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<sup>362</sup> Tabù e marmellata (@tabuemarmellata), Instagram post, February 23, 2021, <http://www.instagram.com/p/CLoMdOIMJQX/>.

<sup>363</sup>It is a brand that invented and launched a conversational card game useful for discussing and approaching sexual matters with the youth in a playful perspective.

<sup>364</sup>“Guida arcobaleno per Professor\* ed Educator\*: focus su transessualità e non binarietà,” Tabù e marmellata, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://linktr.ee/tabuemarmellata>.



comprehensive, and influential international guidelines and directives, it certainly represents a rather unique experiment in the Italian context. Indeed, it is a simple but scientific and facts-based roadmap which is helpful to avoid the dangers of uninformed and untrained teachers as well as to dismantle potentially existing stereotypes and misconceptions about this specific group of individuals. Notwithstanding the fact that the project is not well known, and the impact is limited because laboratories are organized only in the schools where the two teachers operate or are invited, it should be taken as an example of how to appropriately address sexual matters with children and young people in school. Moreover, the importance of the before-mentioned ‘F\*ck your label’ brand is worth being considered as it represents another useful example of how the teaching of sexuality topics should be structured. Indeed, the brand invented a card game with the intent of discussing sexuality through playful and interactive ways, an idea that could be borrowed by policymakers when considering the activities that a national plan for sexuality education could integrate to support and incentivize learning. In this regard, even international guidelines have confirmed the effectiveness of introducing a playful dynamic to this field of education, as this allows targeted students to begin exploring their bodies and emotions through active participation. The cards gather six different and wide-ranging categories of topics. The first cluster deals with aromanticism and iperromanticism and how to help students discuss and explore their romantic orientation as well as romantic and emotional attraction towards other individuals.<sup>365</sup> The second cluster deals with sexuality and the exploration of sexual identity.<sup>366</sup> The third cluster deals with relationships individuals have with themselves and others, with the aim of raising awareness on the link there is between how individuals perceive themselves and how this is reflected in the emotions they display towards others.<sup>367</sup> The fourth cluster deals with the different ways of being in a relationship other than monogamy, including polysexuality,

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<sup>365</sup> F\*ck your Label (@fckyourlabel), Instagram post, June 2, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPnve5XK3tM/>.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibidem*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CP3eIRzq3ox/>.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibidem*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQJmIjTIMUp/>.

and polyamory.<sup>368</sup> The fifth cluster deals with gender and its components: biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, and gender expressions.<sup>369</sup> The sixth, and last cluster, deals with fantasies, idealizations, and their differences.<sup>370</sup> Having said this, it seems evident how the approach used by the game is inclusive and holistic, reason why it would represent a logical addition to the teaching of sexuality education.

The examples presented so far represent a scientifically based, inclusive, and transformative attempt at making information on sexual matters more accessible to the largest audience of children and adolescents possible. More importantly, these initiatives are particularly relevant as they offer the opportunity to initiate conversations at the national level on how to design a sexuality education curriculum that strives not only to be a mandatory subject and continuous process of learning, but that also is structured in a way that can bring about real and enduring societal changes. Drawing on what has been argued throughout all the pages of this dissertation so far, the underlying argument of this concluding chapter seeks to stress the importance of implementing a sexuality education curriculum that is certainly fundamental and beneficial for the youth itself, but that is also able to deconstruct dangerous power structures, prejudices, and stereotypes that continue to undermine the coexistence and wellbeing of Italian citizens. Among the infinite reasons that could be listed when considering the *rationale* behind the need for a sexuality education curriculum to be as inclusive as possible, a simple yet essential one incorporates them all. Indeed, the argument is that if sexuality is truly a global issue, as pointed out by the WHO, it follows that sexuality education must necessarily target all individuals regardless of race, gender, ethnic origin, class, and physical and/or mental disability. In other words, striving for implementing a CSE curriculum requires making the effort of guaranteeing a safe, just, and equally representative sexuality education for all. This is primarily because the lack of representation plays a huge role in how individuals learn about themselves and others: when sexuality education fails to adequately represent the interests of all individuals, society is confronted with a

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<sup>368</sup>*Ibidem*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQbQmN5MYms/>.

<sup>369</sup>*Ibidem*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQtjF9zocUc/>.

<sup>370</sup>*Ibidem*, July 6, 2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ\\_hSQffBD/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ_hSQffBD/).

sexuality education that not only is not transformative but has serious shortcomings and deficiencies. Moreover, unequal representation among groups risks delivering the message that some groups deserve greater recognition than others, a dangerous pattern that can also translate in some individuals developing negative relationships with sex and sexuality simply because they are seen as aspects that do not concern their health, wellbeing, and in general that are exterior to their existence. All this makes clear how it is not simply a matter of designing and implementing a national curriculum for sexuality education *per se*, because what truly makes the difference is how inclusive and transformative the mandate behind it is. That is why in Italy there is an urgent need to develop and implement a sexuality education curriculum that should be even more ambitious than already existing noteworthy projects in Europe. That being said, this paragraph will be centered on a discussion and close examination of a list of features that should be taken into consideration when conceptualizing and designing a sexuality education plan for schools of all levels in the country. These features represent an extension, and in some cases a further elaboration, of the already-mentioned aspects that a CSE curriculum should include according to international guidelines. In other words, the idea is that considering the Italian social and political context in which a potential sexuality education curriculum would be implemented, it is only by conceptualizing transformative and far-reaching contents of lessons that a positive change can be triggered. A transformative and comprehensive sexuality education should be:

### *Queer*

Integrating a queer approach to sexuality education is fundamental because it would help students understand that sexuality, just like identities, is not fixed rather it is in progress. As a matter of fact, a queer sexuality education is transformative precisely because it views and interprets human sexuality not as a biological fact, but as a social and cultural concept, an approach that is practically absent in the dominant protective and preventive discourse that characterize the

little sexuality education done in the Italian schools.<sup>371</sup> In this context, advancing the proposal of drafting a sexuality education curriculum from a queer perspective means recognizing that individuals are plural and in process, in other words that children and adolescents are not born as fixed sexual beings but their sexual identities evolve and develop overtime. They are, indeed, *becomings* rather than *beings*, which means that sexuality education classes must not be structured in a way that assumes that all individuals share the same identity, sexual orientation, sexual experiences, and reference points. To clarify, a queer approach to sexuality education is essential not only because it would ensure representation for people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as for non-binary people and all those individuals that are neither heterosexuals nor belong to the gender binary. Indeed, a queer approach is essential because it teaches students how to be welcoming and accepting towards diversity, therefore allowing young individuals who belong to minority groups to feel seen and respected. Adopting this kind of approach means also delivering classes and providing examples that can be inspirational and informative not only for the heterosexual youth, but also for queer individuals. For instance, in Italy most classes and/or interventions on sexuality education that focus on aspects of medical prevention of STDs almost never discuss how queer individuals can engage in safe sexual activities and what are the risks associated to their health: this shortcoming risks isolating LGBTQIA+ youth and exposing them to higher sexual risks. Moreover, a queer approach is also fundamental to dismantle stigmas and taboos surrounding sexual behaviours, especially those of sexual and gender minorities. In this context, a queer education would enable marginalized groups to express their sexual identities and orientations freely without fear, and would give value to the vast expanse of sexual experiences people have.<sup>372</sup> In this regard, sexologist Marla Renee Stewart criticized the sexuality education delivered in most schools across the globe because «the emphasis on penis-in-vagina sex in sex education is

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<sup>371</sup>Alessandra Alloni, Maria Rosaria Centrone, and Francesca Viola, “Yes To Sexuality Education at School: Exploring the Voices of Italian Adolescents,” *Revista de Asistență Socială*XVI, no. 4 (2017).[https://www.academia.edu/36220186/Yes\\_to\\_Sexuality\\_Education\\_at\\_School\\_Exploring\\_the\\_voices\\_of\\_Italian\\_Adolescents](https://www.academia.edu/36220186/Yes_to_Sexuality_Education_at_School_Exploring_the_voices_of_Italian_Adolescents).

<sup>372</sup>Gabrielle Kassel, “When You’re Queer, What Does It Mean To Lose Your Virginity?,” *Well and Good*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.wellandgood.com/what-is-queer-sex/>.

incredibly disenfranchising and stigmatizing for queer people». <sup>373</sup> Indeed, excluding queer individuals from sexuality education prevents them from having access to the information knowledge they need to live healthier, more fulfilling, and enjoyable sex lives. <sup>374</sup> Moreover, a sexuality education that does not consider a queer dimension is a sexuality education that «undervalues pleasure, overvalues procreation, and completely erases all the other wonderful ways there are to have sex» <sup>375</sup> beyond heterosexual intercourse. Lack of queer sexuality education is also problematic because the only and most common representation queer individuals have of their existence and sexuality is stigmatizing, discriminatory, and judgmental, a situation that according to statistics make them 2.5 more likely than heterosexual people to experience depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. <sup>376</sup> That being said, a sexuality education curriculum must necessarily be queer to be bring about positive societal changes, especially in a country like Italy. Indeed, the level of discrimination and violence towards LGBTQIA+ individuals in the country is still worrying, also considering that the bill to prevent and combat discrimination and violence on grounds of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability, known as ‘DDL Zan’, was repeatedly obstructed by right-wing parties claiming that a law against these ‘hate crimes’ was an unnecessary addition to the pre-existing Mancino Law. <sup>377</sup> However, research data show that the situation is alarming and needs urgent measures to guarantee queer individuals full dignity, safety, and freedom of expression. Indeed, a research conducted as part of the ‘Niso project’ <sup>378</sup> against discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people revealed a dramatic picture of the Italian situation: for what concerns the level of

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<sup>373</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>374</sup>UNGIRLS (@weareungirls), “Sex positivity is for men too” Instagram post, July 12, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRO0CM0sYhk/>.

<sup>375</sup>Gabrielle Kassel, “When You’re Queer, What Does It Mean To Lose Your Virginity?,” *Well and Good*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.wellandgood.com/what-is-queer-sex/>.

<sup>376</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>377</sup>“Values and rights, rule of law, security,” Conference on the Future of Europe, last modified April 21, 2021, [https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/ValuesRights/f/12/proposals/993?component\\_id=12&locale=en&participatory\\_process\\_slug=ValuesRights&toggle\\_translations=true](https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/ValuesRights/f/12/proposals/993?component_id=12&locale=en&participatory_process_slug=ValuesRights&toggle_translations=true).

<sup>378</sup>The Niso Project (2011-2012) was led by the Province of Rome and brought together four organizations from Belgium, Estonia, Italy, and the Netherlands to develop a game for students about human rights and sexual diversity with the aim of helping them express their voice about human rights, and to fight homophobia in schools and in the media. “NISO-Fighting homophobia through active citizenship and media education,” Galeinfo, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.gale.info/niso>.

perception of discrimination towards queer individuals, participants mentioned frequently (49%) that the most discriminatory environment for LGBTQIA+ people is the school, followed by the family (42%), bars and clubs (33%), and media and the Internet (30%).<sup>379</sup> In general, 55% of students interviewed in this research strongly believed that gay and lesbians are discriminated against in Italy, and 43% of gay men surveyed declared that the school was the most common place where they experienced discrimination.<sup>380</sup> Narrations of episodes of discrimination and violence are frequent in the Italian television and newspapers: queer people are taunted, insulted, and assaulted for showing signs of affection to their same-sex partner, and even killed for their sexual preferences and gender identities.<sup>381</sup> Only the Gay Centre (a Rome-based association devoted to the protection of queer individuals) receives approximately 20,000 reports of discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people a year, 9% of which are severe.<sup>382</sup> These are only the reported data, considering that most people do not report because of fear of getting exposed, a pattern that suggests how the numbers of abuses may indeed be much higher.<sup>383</sup> In this regard, conscious of the unsafe environment where queer individuals have to live, Fabrizio Marazzo, spokesperson for the Gay Center, stated that: «school is a very important place for the growth of people and of youth. We have decided to concentrate our efforts in creating a school for all, where even gay boys and girls can live and grow serenely. The findings of the study that we carried out demonstrate that there is still very much to do to fight homophobia and how an ever stronger effort is necessary from the institutions». <sup>384</sup> However, efforts to prevent episodes of discrimination in the Italian landscape are almost insignificant, and only few ambitious individuals and scholastic institutes advocate for a curriculum-based

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<sup>379</sup>Marco Pasqua, ‘‘Italian Homophobia Study Reveals High Level Of Discrimination, Prejudice in Rome,’’ *HuffPost*, November 1, 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/italy-homophobia-study-rome\\_n\\_2059799](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/italy-homophobia-study-rome_n_2059799).

<sup>380</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>381</sup>Angela Giuffrida, ‘‘We’re living in fear: LGBT people in Italy pin hopes on new law,’’ *The Guardian*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/26/italy-lgbt-new-law-debate>.

<sup>382</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>383</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>384</sup>*Ibidem*.

sexuality education that would help prevent, or at least mitigate, episodes of violence towards queer individuals. Proposals at the national level remain insufficient and for the most part hampered, notwithstanding evidence showing that a mandatory, inclusive, and curriculum-based sexuality education would significantly decrease the level of gender-based discrimination in the country.

### *Inclusive of disabled people*

Although disabled people are rarely, if ever, included among the individuals that need and deserve to receive an effective sexuality education, they are sexual beings equally to any other individuals. They deserve equal rights and opportunities to have control over, and to make choices about, their bodies, sexualities, and sexual expressions. They also have a right to experience and engage in fulfilling romantic and/or sexual relationships throughout their lives. Indeed, Rule 9.2. of the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Persons with Disabilities argues that disabled people have a right to experience sexuality, have sexual relationships, and receive accessible information on the sexual functioning of their bodies.<sup>385</sup> Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) adds that the just-mentioned rights can be fully enjoyed if disabled individuals, including children, are able to: express their views and have an opinion (Article 7 and Article 21), have access to justice (Article 13), have access to information (Article 21), and have access to education (Article 24) on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers.<sup>386</sup> While international law recognizes that disabled and non-disabled individuals deserve equal rights and recognition, including the right to receive a sexuality education tailored to their needs and experiences and most importantly free of prejudices and stereotypes, at societal level the needs and rights of disabled persons are viewed as secondary compared to their non-disabled peers. This is primarily due to a widespread misperception that disabled people are eternal children, and therefore innocent, naive, and asexual beings who are incapable of sexual

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<sup>385</sup>Sonali Shah, “Disabled People Are Sexual Citizens Too: Supporting Sexual Identity, Well-being, and Safety for Disabled Young People,” *Frontiers in Education* (September 2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00046>.

<sup>386</sup>*Ibidem*.

expression and exchange.<sup>387</sup> Indeed, disabled individuals are stereotypically considered incapable of showing sentiments of affection, empathy, and in general of displaying emotions typical of romantic and/or sexual relationships. That is why even when the sexuality of disabled individuals is addressed, it is almost always through pietistic and humiliating lenses.<sup>388</sup> Besides this, another aspect that undermines the possibility for disabled individuals to fully enjoy their internationally recognized sexual rights is the fact that sexual representation of disabled people, just like the representation of other minority groups, is scarce or even completely absent in almost all existing sexuality education programmes, including the most ambitious ones. This is particularly problematic as the exclusion of disabled youth from the common discourse on sexuality negatively impacts their exposure to sexual knowledge and sexual opportunities, including the possibility of exploring their sexual identities and bodies. These aspects are fundamental for young people's growth, in that they constitute a healthy and normal part of their development: when education on sexual matters is watered down or at worst absent from the lives of physically and/or mentally disabled young students, this gap undermines their already fragile health and exposes them to higher sexual risks, including the probability of falling victims of perpetrators. As a matter of fact, the reason why it is crucial to advocate for a comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education in the Italian school system draws from the fact that only when the rights of all individuals are adequately addressed, including and especially those of minorities, then a positive and enriching societal transformation can be achieved. It follows that in Italy a potential sexuality education curriculum must necessarily include conversations on the needs and experiences of disabled people. This originates also from the fact that, as anticipated, this group of people is particularly at risk of experiencing sexual manipulation, abuse, and violence because their invisibility in the sexual discourse and their low levels of sexual knowledge make them significantly more vulnerable compared to their non-disabled peers. Indeed, research has shown that disabled individuals are more prone to bad sex experiences, including cases in

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<sup>387</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>388</sup>Alessandra Fraissinet (@inclusivesextalk), "Autismo, sessualità, e relazioni," Instagram post, April 2, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb1-ijAgV8a/>.



which their lack of knowledge and awareness is exploited to manipulate and disempower them through prostitution and pornography, sexual violence, unplanned pregnancy, and STDs.<sup>389</sup> That being said, a sexuality education curriculum inclusive of disabled people is urgent and necessary not only for the targeted group itself, but also for teachers, educators, and even parents and health professionals who are often unprepared and lack the appropriate knowledge and resources to teach and interact with disabled youth on sexual matters.<sup>390</sup>

### *Pleasure-centered and sex positive*

The International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF) defines sex positivity with the following words:

An attitude that celebrates sexuality as a part of life that can enhance happiness, bringing energy and celebration. Sex-positive approaches strive to achieve ideal experiences, rather than solely working to prevent negative experiences. At the same time, sex-positive approaches acknowledge and tackle the various risks associated with sexuality, without reinforcing fear, shame or taboo surrounding the sexualities of young people.<sup>391</sup>

That being said, a pleasure-centered and sex positive approach to sexuality education is key to fight gender roles and stereotypes, and in turn to achieve a gender-equitable society in the Italian landscape. That is because a sex positive approach allows to critically engage with gender stereotypes that have traditionally been associated to the biological fact of being a female or a male, especially in the realm of sex and sexuality. In other words, adopting a sex positive approach allows to view sexual experiences and sexual matters beyond gender, and to abandon the misleading idea that there is a gendered way of behaving and expressing emotions in sex. More importantly, adopting a sex

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<sup>389</sup>Sonali Shah, "Disabled People Are Sexual Citizens Too: Supporting Sexual Identity, Well-being, and Safety for Disabled Young People," *Frontiers in Education* (September 2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00046>.

<sup>390</sup>*Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>391</sup> "Putting Sexuality back into Comprehensive Sexuality Education," IPPF, last modified October 11, 2016, <https://www.ippf.org/resource/putting-sexuality-back-cse-tips-sex-positive-workshops-young-people>.

positive approach in the teaching of sexuality education enables young students to unveil gender stereotypes that affect boys' and men's relationship with sex and sexuality, and not only women's. While sex positivity is usually associated to discourses and lessons on the empowerment and sexual emancipation of women, which are undoubtedly essential components of a comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education, the ambition is to discuss how gender stereotypes are dangerously embedded even in males' behaviours that would normally be praised. To clarify, the fact that men have historically always had more sexual freedom than women is not necessarily an indicator of sexual emancipation and sex positivity, as these behaviours were usually introjected as the result of sexual pressure and stigma.<sup>392</sup> Indeed, men tend to be more performative and competitive than females in sex because they are frequently raised with the belief that displaying these traits makes them more virile and respectable individuals. Moreover, men tend to experience a bigger pressure to be sexual and to have a lot of sexual partners, because since they are very young the common representation they are exposed to depicts male figures as bold individuals in control of their sexuality.<sup>393</sup> That is why a sex positive sexuality education is needed to contrast stereotypes and gender differences that are conveyed through sex and sexuality, and that prevent individuals from viewing sex as an enriching experience that allow females and males to express and feel emotions interchangeably. In addition to this, sex positivity is key also because it leads to the acceptance of fetishes, kinks, and different sexual identities<sup>394</sup>: a sexuality education in this sense is needed because it encourages conversations on these commonly considered taboo topics, and delivers the message that sexual fantasies are healthy and normal insofar as they are performed after a consensual agreement and do not become invalidating for the person experiencing them. In general terms, it can be said that sex positivity should be an essential component of sexuality education as it leads

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<sup>392</sup>UNGIRLS (@weareungirls), "Sex positivity is for men too" Instagram post, July 12, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRO0CM0sYhk/>.

<sup>393</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>394</sup>*Ibidem*.

to a happier, healthier, and more fulfilling sex life as well as to the freedom of expressing sexuality without stereotypes.<sup>395</sup>

Besides this, adopting a sex positive approach to sexuality education also equates delivering a pleasure-centered sexuality education. On the contrary, for decades, and to a certain extent also at the present time, medical, academic, and cultural discourses on sexuality were impregnated with concerns about disease, risk, danger, sin, and shame.<sup>396</sup> Indeed, in Italy even the little sexuality delivered either in school or through out-of-school activities is usually embedded with medical aspects of prevention and protection which place a significant emphasis on risks and dangers linked to sexual activity: diseases, infections, abuse, addiction, violence, dysfunction, pedophilia, and teen pregnancy are discussed more frequently than the enriching and positive aspects of sex such as sexual desire, passion, and pleasure.<sup>397</sup> This pattern contributes to fuel students' negative interpretations of sexuality, as well as to deliver the message that sexual activity is deplorable if experienced outside of marriage, procreation, or heterosexuality. Moreover, the fact that a conception of this kind is still deeply rooted in most people's minds, including teachers and educators, hinders the opportunity of discussing how a pleasure-centered approach to sexuality education is instead positively linked to better sexual health outcomes. As a matter of fact, reliable and scientific studies (including the White Paper published by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in cooperation with the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality) found that solo and/or partnered sexual activity is associated with improved health, longevity, immunity, pain management, self-esteem, and reduction in stress.<sup>398</sup> Moreover, a pleasure-centered approach to sexuality education has proven effective to: achieve risk-reduction (i.e. through increased condom use), cultivate healthy relationships, celebrate sexual diversity, exercise sexual rights including empowerment and consent, and prevent gender-based

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<sup>395</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>396</sup>Woet L. Gianotten, Jenna C. Alley, and Lisa M. Diamond "The Health Benefits of Sexual Expression," *International Journal of Sexual Health* 33, no. 4 (2021):<https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2021.1966564>.

<sup>397</sup>"Achieve Recognition of Sexual Pleasure as a Component of Well-being," World's Sexual Health, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/millennium-chapter8.pdf>.

<sup>398</sup>*Ibidem.*

sexual violence.<sup>399</sup> Sexual pleasure has also been associated to improved overall physical and mental health, including cardiovascular and perinatal health.<sup>400</sup> In this perspective, it appears evident how integrating a pleasure-centered and positive approach to a sexuality education curriculum is essential not only because pleasure allows all different forms of sexual expressions to flourish by giving value to the personal meaning that people attribute to their experiences and wellbeing, but also because it has undeniable positive effects on health. Even more importantly, a pleasure-focused and inclusive sexuality education is transformative because it leads to individuals' self-determination, self-respect, and self-love and educates young people to display sentiments of empathy rather than judgment towards people who have different sexual preferences. In addition, a pleasure-centered sexuality education allows students to learn about sexual health in its wider spectrum, not limited to conversations on STI prevention and treatment, but also to discussions on: pleasure and orgasms; physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being; freedom and choice; and LGBTQIA+ liberation.<sup>401</sup> These topics, while being an essential part of a person's health and wellbeing are often dismissed in the common discourse on sexual health. A justification for teaching sexuality education through the lenses of pleasure is offered also by the World Association for Sexual Health, which describes sexual pleasure as:

The physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings. Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence, and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and well-being. Sexual pleasure should be exercised within the context of sexual rights, particularly the rights to equality and non-discrimination, autonomy and bodily integrity, the right to the highest

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<sup>399</sup> Kristen Mark, Esther Corona-Vargas, and Mariana Cruz, "Integrating Sexual Pleasure for Quality & Inclusive Comprehensive Sexuality Education," *International Journal of Sexual Health* 3, no. 4 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2021.1921894>.

<sup>400</sup> Woet L. Gianotten, Jenna C. Alley, and Lisa M. Diamond "The Health Benefits of Sexual Expression," *International Journal of Sexual Health* 33, no. 4 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2021.1966564>.

<sup>401</sup> Alessandra Fraissinet (@inclusivesextalk), Instagram post, September 4, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiFRUy6sajm/>.

attainable standard of health and freedom of expression. The experiences of human sexual pleasure are diverse and sexual rights ensure that pleasure is a positive experience for all concerned and not obtained by violating other people's human rights and well-being.<sup>402</sup>

The Association also adds that: «sexual pleasure shall be integrated into education, health promotion and service delivery, research and advocacy in all parts of the world»<sup>403</sup> since «the programmatic inclusion of sexual pleasure to meet individuals' needs, aspirations, and realities ultimately contributes to global health and sustainable development and it should require comprehensive, immediate, and sustainable action».<sup>404</sup> It appears, therefore, evident how a pleasure-centered sexuality education is helpful both at the individual and at the societal level. Indeed, if a society, such as in this case the Italian one, is truly concerned with the wellbeing of individuals and stability of couples, families, and communities in general, it should be in the prime interest of policy makers to implement a curriculum-based sexuality education that stresses the importance of sexual pleasure as a fundamental part to individual and partnered health wellbeing. In March 2022, the Pleasure Project<sup>405</sup> launched the world's first guide to practicing pleasure-based sexual health, named 'The Pleasure Principles'.<sup>406</sup> Based on existing scientific data, the latter seeks to raise awareness on how a sex positive sexuality education that focuses on the joyful, pleasurable elements of sex can contribute to ensuring safer and more pleasurable sexual experiences, therefore shifting from the widespread sexual and reproductive health narrative that focuses primarily on death and disease.<sup>407</sup> As a matter of fact, it is almost paradoxical that notwithstanding pleasure-seeking being one of the main reasons

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<sup>402</sup> 'World Sexual Health Day 2022,' WAS, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://worldsexualhealth.net/>.

<sup>403</sup> 'Declaration on Sexual Pleasure,' WAS, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://worldsexualhealth.net/resources/declaration-on-sexual-pleasure/>.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>405</sup> The Pleasure Project is an international education and advocacy organization working to eroticize safer sex. The Project aims to develop the evidence base for a sex-positive and pleasure-based approach to sexual health and rights. "What we do," The Pleasure Project, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://thepleasureproject.org/about-us/>.

<sup>406</sup> "Sex education needs to include pleasure," PSI, last modified March 17, 2022, <https://www.psi.org/news/sex-education-needs-to-include-pleasure/>.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibidem*.

why people engage in sexual activities, sexual health interventions and educational programmes almost never include sexual pleasure among their teaching objectives.<sup>408</sup> In this regard, the Pleasure Project specifies that a pleasure-based approach to sexual health is one that: «celebrates sex, sexuality and the joy and well-being that can be derived from these and creates a vision of good sex built on sexual rights. It focuses on sensory, mental, physical, and sensual pleasure [...] and multifaceted desires».<sup>409</sup> The Principles want to be a guide for sex educators and teachers in general to adopt a sex positive approach when addressing sexual matters with young students: this is both because pleasure-based sexuality education prevents unsafe sex and risky sexual behaviors, and because it encourages young individuals to engage in honest conversations with themselves and with others about what they desire from their sex lives. Notwithstanding this, the Pleasure Project has yet to define a clear and well-established technical guidance on how to incorporate pleasure into the teaching of sexuality education.<sup>410</sup> Another inherent aspect of sex positivity in sexuality education concerns the requirement for it to be judgment-free and open-minded. Indeed, a judgment-free and open-minded sexuality education is one that is delivered taking into consideration that sexuality is a much more complex phenomenon than sexual intercourse. In this perspective, sexuality education should teach young students that sexuality is more than just sex, and it includes sensuality, body image, intimacy, health, pleasure, fantasy, and desire, all aspects that can be experienced with or without explicitly sexual acts.<sup>411</sup> Moreover, limiting sexuality to just the act of sex can be triggering for those people who experience sex and sexuality differently, such as queer individuals, ace individuals<sup>412</sup>, disabled individuals, individuals who experience painful

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<sup>408</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>409</sup> “IPPF endorses pleasure-inclusive sexual health via The Pleasure Principles,” IPPF, last modified September 2, 2022, <https://www.ippf.org/media-center/ippf-endorses-pleasure-inclusive-sexual-health-pleasure-principles>.

<sup>410</sup> “Sex education needs to include pleasure,” PSI, last modified March 17, 2022, <https://www.psi.org/news/sex-education-needs-to-include-pleasure/>.

<sup>411</sup> Casey Tanner (@queersextherapy), Instagram post, September 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiXz7ScOSbr/>.

<sup>412</sup> Ace is a synonym for asexual and it includes all those people who may have little to no interest in having sex even though desiring emotionally intimate relationships and friendships. Samantha Currie, “What Does It Mean to Be Asexual or ‘Ace’?,” *Monarch*, June 27, 2022,

intercourse, and others.<sup>413</sup> For this reason, adopting an open-minded approach to sexuality education implies using adequate and professional terminology and body language when conversing with audiences that may be composed of individuals with intersecting identities (i.e., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, and others).<sup>414</sup> In this regard, even the Pleasure Project pushes practitioners, such as teachers and educators, to use a positive and conscious language to communicate effectively and positively and to avoid expressing cultural or sexual norms that consider sexuality in sex negative terms and/or reinforce stereotypes. Indeed, a truly inclusive and holistic sexuality education should not assume that all individuals experience sexuality through the act of sex, specifically through penetrative sex, as this pattern invalidates identities that rightfully exist outside of behaviors.<sup>415</sup> Moreover, being sensitive and respectful when interacting with an unknown audience also implies using scientific language to refer to sexual matters, instead of resorting to euphemisms which are more likely to foster shame about sexuality and desires. For instance, on some occasions educators might convene that using gender-neutral language is more appropriate than making gender distinctions when these are not justified by biology. Other than this, an inclusive and holistic sexuality education should teach about the existence of different forms of loving and showing affection, therefore expanding the universe of monogamy to explore other forms of consensual and ethical non-monogamy, such as polyamory. Concerning the need for a sexuality education curriculum to devote part of the lessons to discuss the existence and different of ways of being in a relationship, experts clarify that:

Giving students a foundation in relationship-building and centering the notion of care for others can enhance wellbeing and pave the way for healthy intimacy in the future. It can prevent or counter gender stereotyping and bias, and it could minimize instances of sexual harassment and assault in middle and high school, instances that may

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<https://meetmonarch.com/health-resources/articles/asexuality/what-does-it-mean-to-be-asexual-ace-aces>.

<sup>413</sup> Casey Tanner (@queersextherapy), Instagram post, September 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiXz7ScOSbr/>.

<sup>414</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>415</sup>*Ibidem*.

range from cyberbullying and stalking to unwanted touching and nonconsensual sex.<sup>416</sup>

Indeed, a sex positive and open-minded approach to sexuality education is one that strives to achieve students' wellbeing regardless of the status and kind of relationship each individual decides that its best for him or her. As mentioned, considering that most crimes of sexual assault and violence are perpetrated by people close to the victim, a sexuality education curriculum must make the effort of teaching students how to have enriching, meaningful, and healthy interactions with people, because this has proven effective in reducing violence and preparing students for more meaningful lives.<sup>417</sup>

The aspects outlined so far must represent an essential and non-negotiable part of a comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education curriculum. Topics to be discussed in each cluster of a sexuality education curriculum should be decided at the national level, meaning that equally to any other curricular subject there must be an educational plan for teachers to follow. What should distinguish, however, a sexuality education curriculum from other subjects is the approach used: it is fundamental that teachers and educators encourage dialogue and active learning through participation in peer-to-peer and peer-to-educator discussions. Indeed, the peculiarity and delicacy that characterize sexual matters require a dialogic experience rather than a unidirectional transmission of concepts: a sexuality education class should be seen as a laboratory for human emotions, where students learn through group discussions, brainstorming, and role play activities that can function as icebreakers. In this context, experts such as teachers and educators must play the role of facilitators and mediators to allow students to express their views, opinions, and thoughts in a confidential, non-judgmental, and constructive way. A similar approach was molded at the national level by the Institute of Clinic Sexology in Rome, which advanced scientifically motivated proposals of how an ideal sexuality education class should be structured. This contribution is meaningful considering that in Italy the common discourse on

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<sup>416</sup>Grace Tatter, "Sex Education that Goes Beyond Sex," *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/11/sex-education-goes-beyond-sex>.

<sup>417</sup>*Ibidem*.



sexuality education places a considerable emphasis on the need and urgency of its introduction, while there is little to no mention of the practical implications of implementing a sexuality curriculum, meaning what are the topics that would be tackled and the methodology that would be adopted.<sup>418</sup> Evidence suggests that two are the main approaches used for teaching sexuality education, respectively called ‘didactic model’ and ‘qualification model’.<sup>419</sup> The former is the prevalent and almost only approach used in the country to deliver interventions on sexuality education: this model views students as recipients to be filled with notions that are useful to achieve a predetermined objective, as in this case the learning of topics related to sexuality. The other model, on the contrary, aims at helping students obtain the knowledge tools needed to take informed and autonomous decisions according to their personal preferences and experiences. The just-mentioned model stresses the importance of agency and autonomy in taking decisions, and for this reason it should be preferable. Another reason why it should be preferred to the other model has to do with how the role of educators is conceived. As anticipated above, for a sexuality education class to be truly effective, educators should be able to listen to, and reflect on, students’ considerations because this allows grasping the variety and diversity of experiences rather than imposing fixed categorizations and models.<sup>420</sup> However, this does not imply that educators must not be experts, rather than it is precisely because of their position that they should recognize the fundamental importance of creating spaces for dialogue and reflection after notions are delivered. Moreover, experts of the Institute agree that this kind of approach is even more effective when discussions are undertaken in small groups, as this allows tailoring contents and objectives to the real necessities of the group as well as valuing the diversity of each individual experience.<sup>421</sup> A similar approach to the one described so far is found in a document called ‘Piccola guida di educazione trasformativa per promuovere resilienza a scuola

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<sup>418</sup> ‘L’educazione sessuale secondo il modello dell’Istituto di Sessuologia Clinica di Roma,’ Fogliolapis, accessed September 17, 2022, <http://www.fogliolapis.it/int-rossi.htm>.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibidem*.

nell'ambito della violenza di genere'<sup>422</sup>, which highlights the features that need to be present for an education to be truly transformative and resilient. The guide mentions many of the elements already described, expanding the explanation of the reasons why they should represent the typical *modus operandi* when delivering classes on sensitive topics, such as sexuality education classes. As a matter of fact, the guide mentions brainstorming among the methods that can stimulate participation and confrontation through the exploration of ideas.<sup>423</sup> It is remarked that the participation in brainstorming activities should be free of any judgments and prejudices, because only in this way students can feel free to express their views knowing they will not be evaluated.<sup>424</sup> Moreover, brainstorming should form an essential part of sexuality education classes because it encourages students to expand their thoughts on a specific idea, as well as to examine a situation or topic from different perspectives.<sup>425</sup> The guide also highlights the importance of group discussions in generating reflections, opinions, and answers on a given topic as well as in improving knowledge and preventing disinformation on sexual matters, which is often perpetrated through false myths.<sup>426</sup> Lastly, the guide mentions the possibility for sexuality education classes to consider making use of open questions that facilitate the emergence of students' emotions and thoughts on a certain activity and/or argument of discussion.<sup>427</sup>

In conclusion, the present chapter has tried to outline examples and proposals to support the practical implementation of a sexuality education curriculum in the Italian schools. Even though both at the international and at the national level there are guidelines and examples that could be inspirational in the drafting process of a sexuality education curriculum, what has made and continues to make the difference is the willingness and importance that policymakers attribute to its introduction.

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<sup>422</sup> "Piccola guida di educazione trasformativa per promuovere resilienza a scuola nell'ambito della violenza di genere," INDIRE, accessed September 17, 2022, [https://www.genderschool.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/garista\\_scheda\\_sito2-1.pdf](https://www.genderschool.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/garista_scheda_sito2-1.pdf). (Translation: a short guide on transformative education to promote resilience at school in the context of gender-based violence).

<sup>423</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibidem*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The motivation to write this thesis was born from the awareness that the serious and dramatic situation concerning gender equality in Italy needed to be contrasted with practical, wide-ranging, and transformative actions. In this regard, the school was identified as the most appropriate setting where to begin a path of substantial and enduring societal change through the teaching of a mandatory and curriculum-based comprehensive sexuality education. Framing the issue in a human rights perspective, the first chapter of this thesis availed itself of background evidence from existing international treaties, declarations, and guidelines, to justify the long-term positive impact that educating children and adolescents on sexual and relationship matters has on stereotyped, discriminatory, and violent patterns of behavior. This was the backbone *rationale* used to write also the second and the third chapter: although dealing respectively with challenges and proposals, both chapters were structured in a way that constantly disclosed a critical consciousness on the urgency for the Italian educational system to rethink gender norms and binaries, dismantle root causes of inequalities, and to more generally transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices that prevent the achievement of full social justice. The latter was understood in this thesis as the opportunity of each citizen to enjoy and exercise equal rights, reason why the past pages have sought to highlight how the implementation of a gender-responsive comprehensive sexuality education curriculum would represent a decisive step towards this achievement. Another reason that pushed me to write this thesis was the fact that although the negative effects of the lack of a mandatory sexuality education curriculum are many and visible, as I tried to argue throughout these pages, there is still little to no public attention on the issue. That is why, however conscious of the challenge that is convincing and persuading Italian stakeholders, and especially policy makers, on the importance of including conversations on gender and sexuality in schools, this thesis was written in the hope of representing an additional inspiring academic resource for teachers, political leaders, and education policy makers more ambitiously. In conclusion, it can be rightfully argued that this thesis acquires an even greater importance

considering the results of the recent elections: in Italy, the presence of a far-right government risks undermining even further the opportunity to create a welcoming, non-discriminatory, and compassionate society based on gender equality. Indeed, the ideology of Giorgia Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* espouses completely opposite values and principles compared to those that this thesis sought to promote and advocate for. In this context, embracing the transformative power of sexuality education should be taken as a priority mission to oppose the dangerous overflowing of false and misleading information that risks undermining the present and future wellbeing of the Italian youth, and that prevents establishing healthy, peaceful, and respectful relationships with oneself and with others.

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