



**Positive**  
**OUTLOOK**  
**Developing**

# Executive Summary

**on sexuality and  
sexuality  
education  
among young  
people**



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# 1. Introduction

Sex education is a fundamental part of contemporary health and social welfare programmes, providing young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexuality. From an international perspective, it has been recognised as an essential human right in global documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, reinforcing its relevance as a tool for human development and social equity (UNESCO, 2018; WHO, 2020). Its scope goes far beyond the prevention of unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections, as it also aims to promote interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect, equality and consent, thus contributing to the emotional well-being and comprehensive development of young people.

In the European context, sex education is complex and heterogeneous, conditioned by the cultural, political and religious diversity of the Member States. While comprehensive sex education programmes have been consolidated and made compulsory in certain countries in northern and western Europe, in other regions attempts at implementation have been fragmented or subject to socio-cultural resistance that limits their scope. These inequalities are reflected in public and social health indicators, where the prevalence of teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and discriminatory attitudes based on gender or sexual orientation show significant differences between countries (WHO Europe, 2020).

In response to this situation, this research project aims to analyse and evaluate the current state of sex education programmes in different European contexts, focusing on four countries that represent contrasting socio-political realities: Italy, Lithuania, Ireland and Spain. The purpose is to identify successful practices, highlight persistent obstacles and promote innovative proposals to overcome the limitations detected in each case. Based on this comparative approach, the project seeks to lay the foundations for the construction of a common framework that promotes inclusive, rights-based sex education adapted to Europe's cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2018).

The introduction to this extensive executive summary should be understood as a frame of reference that places the research in the context of international debates on health, human rights and education, while highlighting the importance of moving towards education systems that integrate a broad view of sexuality. The analysis presented here is not limited to describing programmes or regulations, but also incorporates critical perspectives on the socio-cultural factors that influence their development and on the consequences that the absence of comprehensive policies

has on young people. This reinforces the idea that sex education is not an end in itself, but a strategic means to build more equitable, inclusive and healthy societies (IPPF, 2021).

## 2. Background and rationale

Research on sex education in Europe is based on a set of structural, social and cultural factors that highlight the need for further study. First, public health indicators show a significant polarisation between countries that have incorporated comprehensive sex education programmes and those that maintain a limited or non-existent approach. The experiences of countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, where sex education is compulsory and designed in a scientific and progressive manner, have shown reduced rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, confirming the effectiveness of these programmes. In contrast, in countries such as Italy and Lithuania, the absence of coherent legislative frameworks and the prevalence of cultural resistance have led to greater difficulties, both in preventing unplanned pregnancies and in managing issues related to discrimination against vulnerable groups, including LGBTQ+ youth (WHO Europe, 2020; IPPF, 2021).

In addition to these differences in health, there are socio-cultural factors that directly influence the implementation of sex education. In several European countries, the positions of certain religious and traditional sectors have limited the ability of education systems to offer comprehensive and inclusive content. By perpetuating taboos and stigmas, this resistance not only restricts young people's access to accurate and verified information, but also encourages the transmission of prejudices and stereotypes that affect social coexistence and gender equality (UNESCO, 2018). Consequently, the absence of a comprehensive and scientific approach creates an educational deficit that affects young people's autonomy and their ability to exercise their rights fully and consciously.

Sex education must also be understood as an indispensable mechanism for promoting gender equality. The lack of information on consent, healthy relationships and gender roles reproduces dynamics of inequality and violence that particularly affect women and historically discriminated groups. In this regard, research shows that comprehensive sexuality education is not limited to risk prevention, but acts as a tool for social transformation by challenging power



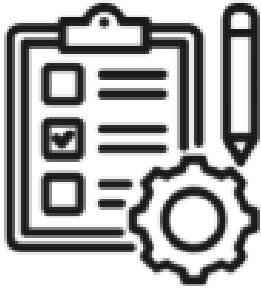
structures and promoting relationships based on equality, respect and shared responsibility (UNESCO, 2018; WHO Europe, 2020).

The need for inclusion is another pillar that justifies the relevance of the project. When designed from a heteronormative perspective and focused solely on reproduction, sex education programmes exclude young people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, as well as people with disabilities or those belonging to marginalised contexts. Educational exclusion in these cases increases the vulnerability of these groups, who are exposed to greater risks of violence, harassment and health problems without adequate resources to deal with them (Taylor et al., 2011; Servais, 2006). Therefore, research emphasises the need for an intersectional approach that recognises the multiplicity of youth experiences and ensures that no one is left out of access to quality education.

The convergence of these factors supports the urgency of structured interventions that overcome current limitations and align with the international commitments made by European countries. The regulatory framework promoted by organisations such as UNESCO and the WHO establishes that sex education should begin in childhood and accompany individuals throughout their stages of development, adapting its content in a progressive and culturally relevant manner (UNESCO, 2018). However, the lack of uniform policies in several states has prevented this right from being guaranteed equitably.

In this scenario, the project is justified as an essential contribution to comparative analysis and the identification of strategies that will enable progress towards greater coherence at the European level. It is not only a question of evaluating what each country has done so far, but also of understanding the obstacles that have limited progress, recognising good practices that can be replicated, and generating solid proposals for the formulation of inclusive and effective policies. The research thus responds to the need to provide rigorous evidence for a debate that brings together public health, human rights and social equity, consolidating an approach that understands comprehensive sexuality education as an indispensable element for the fair and sustainable development of European societies (IPPF, 2021; WHO Europe, 2020).

### 3. Project objectives



The research project is structured around a set of interrelated objectives that seek to respond to the challenges facing sex education in different European contexts. These objectives have been defined in response to the shortcomings identified in national frameworks and the need to move towards convergence with international standards established by organisations such as UNESCO and the World Health Organisation. Their scope includes analytical, comparative and propositional dimensions, with the aim of providing solid evidence and generating useful proposals for the formulation of public policies.

Firstly, the project aims to carry out a comparative analysis of existing sex education programmes in Italy, Lithuania, Ireland and Spain. This objective seeks to identify the methodologies, content and pedagogical approaches that characterise each country, as well as the differences and similarities between them. The focus is not only on describing national experiences, but also on highlighting the structural elements that condition their effectiveness and their degree of alignment with international frameworks. This comparative approach makes it possible to identify both advanced models that can serve as references and significant gaps that require priority attention (UNESCO, 2018; WHO Europe, 2020).

A second objective focuses on examining the socio-cultural, political and educational factors that act as barriers or facilitators in the implementation of sexuality education programmes. The research seeks to highlight how local dynamics, from the influence of religious institutions to the existence of more or less consolidated legislative frameworks, condition the design and social acceptance of these policies. At the same time, opportunities that could favour the development of more inclusive initiatives are analysed, such as the commitment of certain local governments, the action of civil society organisations or the support of international institutions (Paternostro, 2020; ILGA-Europe, 2021).

The identification of good practices is a third central objective of the project. The aim is to collect and document examples of programmes that have proven effective in improving sexual and reproductive health indicators, reducing gender-based violence, and promoting diversity and inclusion. Although developed in specific contexts, these experiences provide methodological and pedagogical insights that can be adapted to other realities. In this regard, the project highlights the importance

of having a repository of successful practices that can serve as a basis for future educational and policy interventions (IPPF, 2021).

The fourth objective is aimed at formulating public policy proposals to consolidate comprehensive sexuality education programmes in Europe. These recommendations focus on aspects such as teacher training, curriculum design, accessibility of resources, and intersectoral collaboration between the educational, health, and community spheres. The aim is not to develop a single model applicable to all countries, but to offer flexible and adaptable guidelines that can respond to Europe's cultural and political diversity without compromising the principles of inclusion, equity and respect for human rights (WHO Europe, 2020).

Taken together, these objectives reflect the intention that the project should transcend the mere description of national contexts and become an instrument of educational and social transformation. The research is not limited to diagnosing the current situation, but aims to lay the foundations for a more coherent and effective European agenda on sexuality education, contributing to the construction of societies that guarantee their young people access to accurate information, inclusive resources and a regulatory framework that respects diversity and gender equality.

## 4. Methodology

The methodological design of the project integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to provide a rigorous analysis of the situation of sex education in the countries under study. Data triangulation was conceived as a central strategy to ensure the validity of the results, combining documentary review with the collection of direct information from young people, teachers and experts.

The first phase consisted of an exhaustive review of academic literature, regulatory frameworks and public policies, with special attention to studies published in the last decade and documents produced by international organisations such as UNESCO, WHO and UNFPA. This exercise made it possible to construct a solid frame of reference and subsequently contrast the data obtained through fieldwork.

In the second phase, primary data was collected using three instruments: structured surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The surveys collected information on youth and professional perceptions through closed-ended questions and Likert scales, while the interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of socio-cultural barriers, the specific needs of vulnerable groups, and institutional

limitations. The focus groups, for their part, were essential for identifying collective discourses and nuances in the experiences of young people and educators.

The validation of these instruments included pilot tests and translations adapted into Italian, Lithuanian, English, and Spanish, ensuring the cultural and linguistic relevance of the tools.

The analysis was carried out on three levels. First, descriptive procedures were used to identify general trends in the surveys. Second, inferential techniques, such as correlation analysis and variance tests, were applied to explore associations between sociodemographic variables and perceptions. Finally, qualitative analysis software such as NVivo was used to code and group thematic patterns in interviews and focus groups, allowing representative testimonies to be integrated and robust analytical categories to be generated.

Throughout the process, compliance with ethical principles was ensured, guaranteeing informed consent, participant anonymity, and secure storage of information. The research complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation.

## 5. Key findings by country



### 5.1 Italy

The situation in Italy with regard to sex education reflects the absence of a national legislative framework to ensure its uniform teaching throughout the education system. This has led to a fragmented scenario, in which young people's experiences depend on regional and local decisions or even on the individual initiative of some schools and teachers.

One of the most decisive factors in this shortcoming is the historical and persistent influence of the Catholic Church. Its role in the design of education policies has limited the possibility of developing comprehensive programmes, relegating sexuality to a sphere linked mainly to reproduction and morality. This situation translates into a lag behind other European countries, where regulatory frameworks ensure universal and compulsory access to sex education.

The available data reflect the consequences of this institutional vacuum. According to ISTAT (2021), only a quarter of young Italians have received any form of sex

education at school, a figure well below that of northern European countries. This lack of access is linked to inconsistent use of contraceptive methods, relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy and poor prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, Italy ranks low on indicators of inclusion towards LGBTQ+ people, confirming the need to incorporate content that promotes diversity and combats discrimination (ILGA-Europe, 2021).

Local initiatives have shown, however, that it is possible to introduce programmes with a positive impact. In regions such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, projects supported by associations such as AIDOS have incorporated participatory workshops and resources tailored to both young people and teachers. The results show an improvement in knowledge about sexual health and attitudes towards consent and equality, although these experiences remain limited by the lack of a state framework to ensure continuity and stable funding.

The main obstacles in Italy are related to the lack of specific training for teachers and the persistence of cultural resistance. The absence of standardised resources leads to inequality in the quality of teaching, even within the same region. In addition, poor coordination between schools and health services makes it difficult for young people to access practical prevention and counselling resources.

This analysis highlights the need to establish a legislative framework that guarantees compulsory comprehensive sexuality education throughout the country, accompanied by investment in teacher training and the development of inclusive teaching materials. It is also essential to promote collaboration between the education system, health services and social organisations in order to reduce resistance and ensure that Italian youth have access to rights-based, scientific and diversity-sensitive sex education.

## 5.2 Lithuania



The case of Lithuania is conditioned by a historical and cultural legacy that has hindered the consolidation of a comprehensive sex education programme. During the Soviet period, sexuality was treated as a taboo subject, relegated to the private sphere and excluded from school curricula. After independence, the country began to develop its own regulatory frameworks, but sex education never became a public policy priority.

Currently, Lithuania lacks a compulsory national programme in this area. Although attempts have been made to integrate it into some subjects, the content continues to focus on the biological aspects of puberty and reproduction, leaving aside key issues such as consent, emotional relationships, gender equality and sexual diversity (UNESCO, 2018). This limitation creates an educational gap that exposes young people to greater risks and perpetuates social stigmas.

Health indicators reflect the consequences of these shortcomings. The country has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the European Union, along with an increase in sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and HPV. In addition, a high percentage of young people are unaware of contraceptive methods or use them inconsistently (Eurostat, 2021).

The lack of inclusion of sexual diversity is another notable weakness. Lithuania ranks low on the LGBTQ+ rights index compiled by ILGA-Europe (2021). The lack of inclusive content in the school curriculum reinforces attitudes of rejection and contributes to the vulnerability of young people belonging to sexual and gender minorities, who face high levels of harassment and discrimination.

Despite these limitations, some non-governmental organisations have played an active role in promoting workshops and educational activities. The Lithuanian Youth Information Centre, among other entities, has developed programmes that address the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, diversity and the building of equal relationships. These projects, although limited in scope and dependent on external funding, demonstrate that there is a social foundation for moving towards a more inclusive model.

Inequalities between urban and rural contexts are an additional factor. While pilot projects have been developed with a certain degree of acceptance in cities such as Vilnius, content related to sexuality remains virtually non-existent in rural areas, widening the gaps in access and knowledge.

According to the findings, it is a priority to establish a national legislative framework that ensures comprehensive sexuality education is compulsory in all schools, in line with international standards. Teacher training should be strengthened with programmes that provide them with pedagogical tools and up-to-date knowledge to address sensitive issues with rigour and cultural sensitivity. In addition, it is recommended that inclusive materials be designed that reflect the diversity of young people and that coordination between the education and health sectors be ensured so that students can access practical resources and specialised advice.

The Lithuanian experience shows how the absence of coherent policies and persistent cultural resistance generate educational deficits with direct effects on the health and well-being of young people. At the same time, it demonstrates that local and community initiatives can serve as a starting point for building a more inclusive and sustainable sex education system.



### 5.3 Ireland

Sex education in Ireland is undergoing a transition. For much of the 20th century, programmes were heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which limited their scope to content related to reproduction and basic prevention, without addressing emotional, social or diversity issues. This legacy explains why many of the programmes implemented until recently were incomplete or ill-suited to the needs of young people.

Recent regulatory changes have opened up an opportunity to move towards a more inclusive model. The legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015 and the 2018 constitutional reform on voluntary termination of pregnancy reflect a profound social transformation around sexual and reproductive rights. These milestones have sparked a public debate on the need to renew sex education programmes in order to bring them into line with a more pluralistic and democratic society (UNESCO, 2018).

However, significant gaps remain. Current programmes are not uniform across the country and depend largely on the decisions of individual schools. In many cases, religious guidelines continue to influence content, limiting the inclusion of topics such as consent, sexual diversity, and pleasure. Young participants in focus groups pointed out that the content taught focuses excessively on risk prevention, leaving issues related to emotions, relationships, and gender equality unaddressed.

Health indicators reflect these limitations. Although teenage pregnancy rates are lower than in countries without established programmes, they remain higher than in countries with comprehensive sexuality education, such as the Netherlands. The lack of consistent information on contraceptive methods and limited access to sexual health services reinforce the vulnerability of part of the youth population.

With regard to diversity, steps towards inclusion have been taken, but unevenly. Some initiatives supported by civil society organisations have sought to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ realities, but there is no systematic integration into school

curricula. This leads many young people to perceive these issues as marginal rather than an integral part of sex education.

Educators also identify difficulties associated with the lack of specific training. Many teachers do not feel prepared to confidently address sensitive issues and recognise that they require methodological and pedagogical support to ensure an inclusive and respectful approach.

The findings suggest that Ireland is at a turning point. Consolidating a comprehensive sex education system requires a common curriculum framework that ensures its mandatory implementation in all schools, regardless of their ideology. Sustained investment in the training of teachers and youth workers is also necessary, as is coordination between the education system and health services. These measures would enable legal advances to be translated into coherent educational programmes, adapted to social diversity and the needs of young people.

Ireland therefore represents a context in transformation, where regulatory progress has opened up the possibility of developing comprehensive sexuality education programmes, but where resistance inherited from the past continues to limit their scope. The challenge lies in taking advantage of this moment of social openness to consolidate inclusive and effective education policies.



## 5.4 Spain

Spain has made significant progress in terms of rights and has a more favourable regulatory framework than the other countries analysed, although there are limitations due to the decentralised structure of the education system. Since the transition to democracy, sexuality has been treated as an issue linked to equality and rights, which has opened the door to more inclusive education programmes. This process was consolidated in the 2000s with laws that reinforced gender equality, protection against violence and the rights of LGBTQ+ people, creating an institutional context receptive to sex education (UNESCO, 2018).

Despite these advances, there is no uniform national programme that guarantees comprehensive sex education throughout the country. Educational decentralisation has led to significant regional inequalities: some autonomous communities have implemented innovative and widely recognised programmes, while in others, development has been limited or unstable. This disparity has a direct impact on

young people's access to up-to-date information and on the quality of available resources.

Health indicators show intermediate results in the European context. Spain has lower rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections than countries without structured programmes, such as Italy and Lithuania, but higher than those with established models, such as the Netherlands and Sweden. These data suggest that sex education in Spain has had positive effects, although insufficient to reach the levels of effectiveness of the most advanced models.

In terms of diversity, Spain has made notable progress in the legal recognition of rights. The approval of equal marriage in 2005 and subsequent gender identity laws place the country among the most progressive in Europe in this area. However, the inclusion of these realities in school curricula remains uneven and in many cases depends on local initiatives, specific projects or the commitment of individual teachers.

The interviews collected in the research show that part of the educational community perceives sex education as positive and necessary, while in certain contexts it is still considered a controversial issue. This polarisation has had consequences for the continuity of programmes, which have sometimes been modified or eliminated depending on changes in regional governments.

Teacher training is one of the main challenges. Despite the existence of training programmes, many professionals admit that they do not feel sufficiently prepared to address sensitive issues such as consent, sexual diversity, or violence prevention. This shortcoming leads to significant inequalities in the quality of teaching, even within the same community.

There are, however, examples that demonstrate the potential of comprehensive sexuality education. Programmes implemented in several autonomous communities have incorporated participatory methodologies and cross-cutting approaches, addressing not only the biological dimension, but also emotional, gender and diversity aspects. These projects have contributed to reducing sexist attitudes, improving young people's self-esteem and promoting more equal relationships.

The findings suggest that Spain has a solid foundation for moving towards a more coherent and homogeneous model, but it needs to strengthen coordination between autonomous communities and ensure universal access. It is a priority to invest in teacher training, develop inclusive teaching materials and ensure that diversity and gender equality are systematically integrated into all programmes. Overcoming these

barriers would bring the country into line with the most advanced European models, with benefits for public health, social equity and cultural cohesion.

## 6. European comparative analysis

The comparative study of the four countries analysed—Italy, Lithuania, Ireland and Spain—clearly shows the diversity of approaches, resistance and progress in the implementation of sex education in Europe. This analysis reveals not only the heterogeneity of existing models, but also the common challenges faced by national experiences, which hinder the consolidation of a cohesive European framework for comprehensive sex education.

Firstly, there is a structural difference between the countries of northern and western Europe, which have incorporated compulsory comprehensive sexuality education programmes, and the countries of southern and eastern Europe, where implementation has been more fragmented or limited. This contrast is reflected in public health indicators, with lower rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in countries with consolidated systems, compared to more worrying figures in those where sex education does not have a uniform regulatory framework or is not compulsory.

Italy and Lithuania are prime examples of the difficulties faced by states where religious influence and cultural resistance have limited the implementation of inclusive and scientific programmes. In both cases, the absence of a coherent national legislative framework creates significant regional inequality and excessive dependence on local initiatives or non-governmental organisations. Although there are positive experiences in specific regions, such as the pilot projects in Emilia-Romagna in Italy or the workshops at the Youth Information Centre in Lithuania, these practices lack the stability and coverage necessary to ensure a sustained impact at the national level.

Ireland finds itself in an intermediate situation. The country has made significant progress in sexual and reproductive rights in recent years, such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage and constitutional reform on abortion, which have driven a change in social perceptions of sexuality. However, sex education has not developed at the same pace as these regulatory advances, creating a dissonance between the legal framework and educational practice. Resistance inherited from the Catholic tradition continues to influence the content of programmes, which in many cases

remain focused on risk prevention and omit key dimensions such as consent and gender diversity.

Spain, in contrast, has a more favourable regulatory framework and significant experience in certain autonomous communities, placing it in a more advanced position than Italy or Lithuania. However, the decentralisation of the education system has led to uneven implementation, creating disparities between regions with consolidated programmes and others where content remains limited or fragmented. In this sense, Spain shares with Ireland the challenge of translating legal and regulatory advances into consistent and effective educational practices.

The comparative analysis also identifies common barriers across the four countries. These include insufficient teacher training, which limits the ability to address sensitive issues in an inclusive manner; lack of coordination between the education and health sectors, which prevents sex education from being systematically linked to youth health services; and the persistence of cultural and political resistance that continues to associate sex education with the loss of traditional values, hindering its social acceptance.



Alongside these barriers, there are also positive elements and good practices that can serve as a reference for moving towards a more coherent European framework. The experience of countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, although not part of this analysis, provides a horizon to which the countries of southern and eastern Europe can aspire through the adoption of evidence-based policies, compulsory programmes and the systematic inclusion of diversity. At the domestic level, local initiatives in Italy and Lithuania show that sex education can have a positive impact even in adverse contexts, while in Spain and Ireland recent social debates offer an opportunity to consolidate educational reforms that translate regulatory advances into concrete practices.

The European analysis shows a contrasting picture where significant progress coexists with persistent resistance. The lack of homogeneity reflects the need to strengthen political and social commitments to comprehensive sexuality education as a human right and as a strategic tool for public health and social equity. The challenge is to overcome national and regional fragmentation, ensure the training of professionals and design inclusive policies that respond to the diversity of European contexts, without renouncing the universal principles of equality, respect and dignity.

## 7. Expert opinion and identified needs

The analysis of interviews and focus groups conducted with experts in education, health and youth work adds an essential dimension to the study, highlighting qualitative perceptions that complement statistical data and regulatory frameworks. These voices provide a deeper understanding of the challenges facing sexuality education in Europe and the opportunities that could arise from a more comprehensive and coordinated approach.

Experts agree that the lack of consistency in sex education programmes is one of the most pressing problems. In all the countries analysed, fragmentation appears to be a common feature: whether due to the absence of national frameworks (Italy and Lithuania), the influence of religious traditions that limit uniform implementation (Ireland), or territorial decentralisation that creates disparities between regions (Spain). From the specialists' perspective, this lack of homogeneity translates into a violation of young people's right to receive adequate and equitable education, which increases social and health inequalities.

A second aspect highlighted by experts is the insufficient training of teachers. Although some countries have training programmes, these tend to be ad hoc, limited in scope, or focused on purely biological aspects. The absence of solid preparation on issues such as consent, sexual and gender diversity, or the prevention of sexual violence makes it difficult for teachers to feel capable of addressing these issues in the classroom. This lack of preparation generates professional insecurity and, on occasions, leads to the total omission of the subject or the transmission of biased information.

The disconnect between the education system and health services is also highlighted. In most of the contexts studied, young people do not find continuity between what they learn at school and the practical resources available in health services. This means that, even though they acquire certain theoretical knowledge, they lack effective access to contraceptive methods, testing for sexually transmitted infections, or confidential and accessible counselling services. According to experts, this gap limits the impact of programmes and perpetuates avoidable risks to youth health.

Another point of consensus is the need to include diversity in programme design. The exclusion of the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and young people with disabilities was identified as one of the most serious shortcomings of current systems. Experts agree that comprehensive sexuality education must adopt an

intersectional approach that recognises the multiple realities of European youth and ensures that no group is left invisible. The omission of these dimensions not only reinforces stigma and discrimination, but also increases the vulnerability of groups that already face greater risks of social exclusion and violence.

In relation to the needs identified, specialists highlight five fundamental priorities. First, the creation of mandatory national regulatory frameworks that ensure universal coverage of sexuality education, aligned with UNESCO and WHO international standards. Secondly, the implementation of continuing education programmes for teachers and youth professionals, enabling them to acquire pedagogical and cultural awareness skills. Thirdly, the development of educational materials adapted to different age groups and socio-cultural contexts, integrating inclusive perspectives and participatory approaches. Fourthly, the strengthening of intersectoral coordination between education, health and social services, with the aim of offering young people a comprehensive support network. Finally, the importance of promoting community awareness campaigns to reduce cultural resistance and improve social acceptance of the programmes is highlighted.

The experts also warn that any attempt at reform must take into account the specific contexts of each country. It is not possible to mechanically transfer successful models from one country to another without adapting them to cultural, political and social particularities. In this regard, they recommend promoting participatory processes that include young people, families, teachers and community organisations in the design of programmes, thus ensuring their relevance and sustainability.

Expert opinion and the needs identified in the study confirm that sex education in Europe requires a combination of legislative changes, investment in training, the production of inclusive materials and the creation of cross-sector networks. Only through this combination of measures can we ensure that young people in Europe have access to comprehensive, scientifically accurate sex education that respects diversity, in conditions of equity and dignity.



## 8. Strategic proposals and recommendations

The analysis of regulatory frameworks, health indicators and the perceptions of experts and young people has enabled us to formulate a set of strategic proposals aimed at overcoming the shortcomings identified in sex education in the countries analysed and, by extension, in the European context. These recommendations seek to respond to the needs identified and are framed within a human rights, gender equality and public health approach, in line with the international standards promoted by UNESCO (2018) and the WHO (2020).

A first recommendation is the creation of national regulatory frameworks that clearly and bindingly establish the compulsory nature of comprehensive sexuality education at all stages of education. The absence of legislation, as in Italy or Lithuania, or territorial fragmentation, as in Spain, generates inequalities that deprive large sectors of young people of a fundamental right. A common framework would guarantee universal access and serve as a reference for resource allocation, teacher training and the evaluation of results.

At the same time, it is proposed that curricula be developed based on scientific evidence, incorporating progressive content adapted to each age group. These curricula should go beyond the biological dimension of reproduction, integrating aspects related to consent, emotions, healthy relationships, sexual and gender diversity, violence prevention and shared responsibility in emotional life. The adoption of a comprehensive approach is key to ensuring that sex education is not reduced to risk prevention, but rather becomes a tool for building citizenship and more egalitarian societies.

Teacher training appears as a cross-cutting theme in the recommendations. It is essential to equip teachers and youth workers with pedagogical skills and tools that enable them to approach sex education with confidence, cultural sensitivity and scientific rigour. The creation of initial and continuing training programmes, endorsed by educational and health institutions, would help to overcome the current lack of preparation that so many experts have identified as one of the main limitations of the programmes.



It is also recommended that inclusive and accessible teaching materials be developed, adapted to different cultural and linguistic contexts. These resources

should reflect the diversity of young people's experiences, highlighting the realities of LGBTQ+ youth, people with disabilities and socially vulnerable groups.

The inclusion of these perspectives would help to reduce discrimination and promote a culture of respect and diversity in educational settings.

Another strategic element is the strengthening of intersectoral coordination between the educational, health and social spheres. Sex education should be understood as a process that transcends the classroom, linking up with youth health services, community programmes and gender equality policies. Establishing channels of cooperation would allow young people not only to receive information at school, but also to have access to practical resources such as confidential counselling, contraceptive methods and services for the detection and prevention of sexually transmitted infections.

The implementation of mechanisms for the systematic evaluation of sex education programmes is also proposed. These mechanisms should measure not only health indicators, such as the reduction of teenage pregnancies or infections, but also qualitative dimensions related to attitudes towards diversity, the perception of consent and the reduction of gender-based violence. Having solid data would facilitate the continuous adjustment of policies and contribute to the social legitimacy of interventions.

At the community level, it is recommended that public awareness campaigns be promoted to help reduce cultural resistance and create a climate of acceptance towards comprehensive sexuality education. These campaigns could be based on testimonials from young people, collaboration with community leaders, and the dissemination of scientific evidence showing the benefits of such programmes. The involvement of families in this process is essential, as their support is crucial to the sustainability of the initiatives.

Finally, the need to promote international cooperation and the exchange of good practices at the European level is highlighted. The diversity of existing models provides an opportunity to learn from successful experiences and adapt them to other contexts. Establishing networks of collaboration between countries would accelerate convergence toward common standards and strengthen Europe's commitment to sex education as a human right and as a strategic policy for youth welfare. These proposals set out a roadmap that combines policy change, investment in training and resources, cross-sectoral articulation, and social awareness strategies. Its implementation requires political will, institutional commitment, and community participation - elements without which it would not be possible to transform sex education programs effectively in Europe.

## 9. Impact

The implementation of comprehensive sex education programs in the European countries analyzed has the potential to have a significant impact on multiple social, health and cultural dimensions. Research findings show that the absence of consistent policies and sound regulatory frameworks creates inequalities that directly impact youth health and well-being, as well as social cohesion. The consolidation of proposals such as those made in this study would reverse these inequalities and generate measurable benefits both in the short and long term.

In public health, the most obvious impact relates to the reduction of unplanned teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. International evidence shows that countries that have implemented mandatory comprehensive sex education programs, such as Sweden or the Netherlands, have achieved significantly lower rates in these indicators compared to contexts where programs are fragmented or non-existent (WHO Europe, 2020). Applying similar models in countries like Italy or Lithuania could contribute to a substantial reduction of teenage pregnancies and transmission of infections, with benefits not only for the health of young people but also for health systems, by reducing the costs associated with the care and treatment of these situations.

Another key area of impact is the promotion of gender equity. The inclusion of content on gender roles, consent and violence prevention in sex education helps to challenge traditional stereotypes and promote more egalitarian relationships. In countries where high rates of gender-based violence persist, such as Italy and Spain, comprehensive sex education could play a decisive role in reducing male chauvinism and building a culture of respect. The impact would extend to preventing sexual abuse and strengthening young people's ability to identify and reject situations of violence.

The inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in programs would have a positive effect on reducing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Research shows that the invisibility of these realities in school curricula increases the vulnerability of young people belonging to sexual minorities, exposing them to higher levels of bullying, depression, and dropout. Integrating their experiences into sex education would not only increase social acceptance and respect for diversity, but also improve these groups' mental health and well-being by fostering their full participation in social and educational life (ILGA-Europe, 2021).

The impact can also be seen in the community and cultural dimension. Normalizing sex education in the educational system helps to reduce taboos and stigmas surrounding sexuality in many European contexts. This would have a multiplier effect, as young people, by sharing their knowledge with their families and communities, generate greater social openness to issues related to sexual health, consent, and equality. This cultural transformation would foster social cohesion and reduce resistance to inclusive education policies.

From an economic perspective, the positive impact is linked to reduced health and social costs associated with lack of sex education. Effective programs diminish the need for medical interventions for unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, while reducing social spending linked to exclusion and violence. In addition, by improving the health and well-being of young people, their educational and job employability is increased, thus contributing to the economic development of countries.

In terms of public policy, the impact of comprehensive sex education is reflected in strengthening democracy and human rights. By ensuring that all young people, regardless of their background, have access to an education based on equality and respect, states strengthen their commitment to international frameworks and the UN 2030 Agenda, especially with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals on health, education and gender equality.

The comparative analysis carried out in this project shows that, although the potential impact is broad and evident, its materialization depends on key factors such as political will, adequate allocation of resources, and the ability to generate social consensus around sex education. Where these elements are articulated, the benefits extend beyond youth to society as a whole.



## 10. Conclusions

The analysis of sex education in Italy, Lithuania, Ireland and Spain highlights the heterogeneity that characterizes Europe in this field, as well as the existing tensions between normative frameworks, cultural contexts and social demands. While some countries have made progress in consolidating inclusive programs aligned with international standards, others continue to show structural gaps that limit young people's access to adequate education about sexuality, rights, and equality.

Research has shown that deficits in the implementation of sex education have direct consequences for public health, gender equity and social inclusion. Adolescent pregnancy rates, the persistence of sexually transmitted infections and discriminatory attitudes towards sexual diversity are indicators that reflect the urgency of consolidating coherent and universal education policies. These data confirm that comprehensive sex education should not be seen as a complement, but as an essential element of European educational systems.

The study also shows that cultural and religious resistance continue to be a determining factor in program design. In contexts such as Italy and Lithuania, the influence of conservative traditions has held back inclusive policymaking, while in Ireland and Spain, although normative advances exist, implementation remains uneven and dependent on territorial or institutional factors. This fragmentation challenges equity in access to a fundamental right and raises the need for progress toward more homogeneous national and European frameworks.

At the same time, local experiences and civil-society initiatives have been found that, even in adverse contexts, demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of implementing inclusive and participatory programs. These practices, though limited in scope, represent a valuable foundation for building broader and sustainable policies. Its success lies in the ability to link young people, families, teachers and health professionals in a common effort that transcends the classroom and projects into the community.

The central conclusion of the research is that comprehensive sex education must be recognized and guaranteed as a basic human right, inseparable from young people's health, equality, and dignity. The evidence collected shows that the benefits of its implementation far outweigh initial resistance, and that its absence perpetuates inequalities affecting both individual and collective development.

The challenge for European countries is to transform political will and international commitments into concrete actions that ensure the universality and quality of

programs. This means moving forward with clear legislative frameworks, investing in teacher training, developing inclusive materials, reinforcing cross-sectoral coordination, and promoting a social culture that recognizes sex education as a tool of equity and social justice.

The research reinforces, ultimately, the need to conceive sex education as a central pillar of contemporary public policies, not only for its impact on youth health, but also for its ability to contribute to more egalitarian societies. inclusive and respectful of diversity.

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