



Response to “Call for input on the right to access and take part in scientific progress” issued by the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights.

13 November 2023

This submission is made by **Humanists International** (NGO with Consultative Status at UN ECOSOC). Humanists International is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) and the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diverse community of non-religious organisations and individuals. Inspired by humanist values, we are optimistic for a world where everyone can have a dignified and fulfilling life. We build, support and represent the global humanist movement and work to champion human rights, equality, and secularism. We campaign on humanist issues and defend humanists at risk of persecution and violence. We work to promote human rights priorities based on humanist values at international institutions including the United Nations. Our Members and Associates include humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist, and freethought organisations from all over the world. Our community also includes many individual supporters who share our vision and values.

1. This submission will address questions (4) and (5) posed by the Special Rapporteur's questionnaire. These questions will be answered with information on the following issues: disinformation campaigns around comprehensive sexuality education; and the role of blasphemy laws in interfering with scientific freedom.

(4) What are the main obstacles to ensuring the right of all persons to access scientific knowledge and its applications, within and between countries? Please provide an example.

2. In this section, we will highlight the role of disinformation campaigns as a significant obstacle to the realisation of the right of all persons to access scientific knowledge and its applications, in the context of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) provision.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) defined

3. CSE, according to the UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UN Women, and WHO's International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, is "scientifically accurate," with content "based on facts and evidence related to sexual and reproductive health, sexuality and behaviours."¹ It is understood as "an essential part of a good quality education that helps prepare young people for a fulfilling life in a changing world. It improves sexual and reproductive health outcomes, promotes safe and gender equitable learning environments, and improves education access and achievement."²
4. CSE has been shown to: improve attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health and behaviours; disrupt harmful gender norms and promote gender equality; lead to learners delaying the age of sexual initiations; increase the use of contraceptives; increase knowledge about bodies and relationships; and decrease risk-taking and the frequency of unprotected sex.³ It has also been shown to help reduce unintended and teen pregnancies and prevent unsafe abortions.⁴

¹ UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO, "International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. An Evidence-Informed Approach," [www.who.int](http://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789231002595#:~:text=Comprehensive%20sexuality%20education%20(CSE)%20plays), March 2018, p16, available at: [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789231002595#:~:text=Comprehensive%20sexuality%20education%20\(CSE\)%20plays](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789231002595#:~:text=Comprehensive%20sexuality%20education%20(CSE)%20plays).

² UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 39, 2019, p.1 available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368231/PDF/368231eng.pdf.multi>.

³ UNESCO, "Comprehensive Sexuality Education: For Healthy, Informed and Empowered Learners | UNESCO," www.unesco.org, 2023, available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/health-education/cse>. World Health Organisation, "Comprehensive Sexuality Education," www.who.int, May 2023, available at: <http://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/comprehensive-sexuality-education>, UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 39, 2019, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368231/PDF/368231eng.pdf.multi> <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/comprehensive-sexuality-education>.

⁴IPAS, *False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights*, Ipas, 2023, p.3, available at: <https://www.ipas.org/resource/false-pretenses-the-anti-comprehensive-sexuality-education-agenda-weaponizing-human-rights/>. By contrast, programs that teach only abstinence have not proven to be effective (UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Focus on Human Rights and Gender, available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20Operational%20Guidance%20for%20CSE%20-Final%20WEB%20Version.pdf>).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education situated within the right to science, and access to scientific knowledge and its applications

5. In her 2012 report on the right to Science (A/HRC/20/26), the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights explicitly recognizes the link between the right to science and the right to seek, receive and impart information (as part of the right to freedom of expression). Paragraph 21 outlines: “Given the enormous impact that scientific advances and technologies have on the daily lives of individuals and peoples, the right to science must be read in conjunction with freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, the right of everyone to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives, and the right of all peoples to self-determination.”⁵
6. The nexus between the right to science and the right to freely seek, receive and impart scientific information specifically has been reaffirmed more recently by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.⁶ Within this context, the Committee calls for “guarantees of equal access,” and requires “capacity-building and Education.”⁷
7. CSE involves education and access to information about science and is grounded in developments of science. It is also part of ensuring that everyone has equal access to the results of scientific progress. In other words, it is essential to help ensure the realisation of the right to access, take part in, and enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.
8. CSE also contributes to developing the type of critical thinking the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights highlighted as a prerequisite for implementing the right to science (and culture) in A/HRC/20/26.⁸ Critical thinking, along with critical reflection, responsibility, empathy, and other traits have consistently been highlighted as life skills developed through CSE.⁹

⁵ Human Rights Council A/HRC/20/26, “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Farida Shaheed: The Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and Its Applications,” 2012, Para 21.

⁶ General Comment No. 25 on Science and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 15 (1) (B); 2; 3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 2020, para 46.

⁷ General Comment No. 25 on Science and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 15 (1) (B); 2; 3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 2020, para 46.

⁸ She said: “A prerequisite for implementing both rights is ensuring the necessary conditions for everyone to continuously engage in critical thinking about themselves and the world they inhabit,” Human Rights Council A/HRC/20/26, “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Farida Shaheed: The Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and Its Applications,” 2012, Para 18.

⁹ UNFPA EECARO, World Health Organization, BZgA Federal Centre for Health Education, “Comprehensive Sexuality Education - Factsheet Series,” 2020, p10, available at: https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa_turkey_factsheet_all_-_who_web_r4.pdf; European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, “Comprehensive sexuality education: why is it important?” Feb. 2022, p20, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/719998/IPOL_STU\(2022\)719998_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/719998/IPOL_STU(2022)719998_EN.pdf); UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO, “International technical guidance on sexuality education,” March 2018.

9. As the Venice Statement on the Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and its Applications highlights, enjoyment of the applications of the benefits of scientific progress, “implies *inter alia non-discriminatory* access.”¹⁰ Crucially, when considering the gender dimension of the right to science, including the right to right to access and take part in scientific progress and enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications,¹¹ CSE is extremely pertinent since a large body of evidence demonstrates its role in promoting gender equality and positive outcomes, especially for women and girls.¹²
10. The intrinsic link between the right to science and CSE was also made apparent in communications sent by the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights and other special procedures to Canada in 2018 expressing concerns over regressive changes to the CSE curriculum in the province of Ontario.¹³ The letter reaffirmed what the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural rights had stated in A/HRC/20/26. It said, “access to scientific knowledge increases the range of available options to choose a life with dignity, thereby strengthening people’s capacity for self-determination and empowerment.” It also pointed out that “the right to have access to scientific knowledge implies a right to science education, understood as a right to be introduced to and informed about main scientific discoveries and their applications, regardless of frontiers. It also entails education instilling a spirit of scientific inquiry.”¹⁴
11. CESCR General Comment 25 notes that the right to science is essential for the realisation of the right to sexual and reproductive health. The provision of CSE has been explicitly recognised as part of the right to sexual and reproductive health.¹⁵ General Comment 25 also affirms that the right to access contraception and abortion is part of the right to science, in the context of a gender sensitive approach.¹⁶ All people who can become pregnant have a right to the benefits of scientific progress that can provide safe abortions. The WHO Model List of Essential Medicines, one of the leading databases on science-backed medicine, recognizes medicine, including mifepristone and

¹⁰ Venice Statement on the Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and its Applications, 2009, para 13 (emphasis added).

¹¹ See for example, General Comment No. 25 on Science and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 15 (1) (B); 2; 3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 2020, paras 29-33.

¹² UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO, “International technical guidance on sexuality education,” March 2018.

¹³ Letter sent to Canada by mandates of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and others, “Information received concerning changes to the sexuality education curriculum of the Province of Ontario,” 19 December 2018, Reference: OL CAN 4/2018, available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=24216>. The same language was used in a separate letter sent by Special Procedures to Romania on CSE and gender equality on 11 September 2020, ref: OL ROU 3/2020, available at:

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25554>

¹⁴ OL CAN 4/2018, pp.3-4.

¹⁵ See Special Rapporteur on the right to health et al., “A Compendium on Comprehensive Sexuality Education, March 2023, p10; Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 22, 2016, para. 9.

¹⁶ General Comment No. 25 on Science and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 15 (1) (B); 2; 3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 2020, para. 33.

misoprostol, to induce abortion as part of its core list. The provision of CSE has been linked to positive outcomes in terms of preventing safe abortion and increased contraceptive use.

12. In noting that the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights has reinforced the position of cultural rights as universal,¹⁷ in spite of the scepticism of some states,¹⁸ we encourage the Special Rapporteur to continue to defend the principle of universality with respect to cultural rights, and to consider the right within the broader context and within linkages to other rights, as outlined above through various instruments of international law.

Misinformation and misconceptions around CSE

13. Unfortunately, misinformation and misconceptions about CSE prevail. UNESCO has identified one barrier as the fact that, “many people still hold erroneous beliefs about the effects of teaching young people about sex and relationships.”¹⁹ These erroneous beliefs are one of the challenges that governments are faced with when they look to implement CSE programmes. Additionally, sex and sexuality, broadly speaking, are taboo topics in many parts of the world, and so there is an unwillingness to use CSE to destigmatize these topics.²⁰

Disinformation campaigns against CSE, undermining individuals to full and equal access and participation in the right to science

14. As well as misinformation and misconceptions around CSE, there is the additional driver of disinformation. Crucially, the aforementioned misinformation and misconceptions provide fertile ground for bad-faith actors to spread their disinformation. Stigma and general unwillingness to openly discuss sex and sexuality means that when disinformation is spread, it does so without competing ideas and so can fill a vacuum.²¹ Where there is not an information vacuum, many

¹⁷ General Assembly A/73/227, “Universality, Cultural Diversity and Cultural Rights** Note by the Secretary-General,” 2018.

¹⁸ Farida Shaheed and Andrew Mazibrada, “On the Right to Science as a Cultural Human Right,” in *The Right to Science*, ed. Helle Porsdam and Sebastian Porsdam Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 107–23.

¹⁹ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 39, 2019. available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368231/PDF/368231eng.pdf.multi>.

²⁰ Ghanim Almahbobi, “Multiculturalism and Inconsistency in the Perception of Sex Education in Australian Society,” *Australasian Medical Journal* 5, no. 12 (December 30, 2012): pp. 623–26, available at: <https://doi.org/10.4066/amj.2012.1510>; Eva S. Goldfarb and Lisa D. Lieberman, “Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 68, no. 1 (October 12, 2021): pp. 13–27, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>; Hildie Leung et al., “Development of Contextually-Relevant Sexuality Education: Lessons from a Comprehensive Review of Adolescent Sexuality Education across Cultures,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 4 (February 20, 2019): 621, available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16040621>.

²¹ Georgetown University Law Center Global Law Scholars, “Law and Disinformation in the Digital Age: Addressing the Role of Private Messaging Apps in Disinformation,” 2022, available at: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Law-and-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>.

individuals hold erroneous beliefs about sex, sexuality, and sex education.²² As such, disinformation campaigns can propagate these mistaken beliefs and, and allow for the spreading of mis- and disinformation.²³

15. UNESCO notes that, “these misconceptions, unsupported by evidence, are often fuelled and propagated by organised opposition and lobbying”.²⁴ One UNESCO representative was quoted as saying that there is an “aggressive opposition” to sexuality education around the world with claims that “are often identical, appearing to originate from a single [unknown] source.”²⁵
16. In a report published this year, the INGO IPAS documented several of the narratives propagated by groups opposing CSE. These include claims that CSE desensitises children to sexual material, it sexualizes children, promotes promiscuity, denies so-called “parental rights” while prioritising “sexual rights of children,” and that it “advances a Western agenda that goes against local culture and traditions.”²⁶
17. The opposition movement’s narratives are also frequently grounded in explicitly anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric; with claims including CSE programmes “indoctrinate youth to embrace radical sexual and gender ideologies,”²⁷ promote homosexuality, and endanger learners.²⁸ One anti-CSE bill in Poland was known as the “Stop Pedophilia” bill, tying promotion of tolerance and understanding around people of differing sexual orientations and gender identities to paedophilia. These claims are not only false, but completely ignore the research evidencing the bullying and exclusion that gender-diverse young people experience in schools and higher education,²⁹ which CSE programmes are

²² e.g. Gregory M. Herek, Keith F. Widaman, and John P. Capitanio, “When Sex Equals AIDS: Symbolic Stigma and Heterosexual Adults’ Inaccurate Beliefs about Sexual Transmission of AIDS,” *Social Problems* 52, no. 1 (February 2005): pp. 15–37, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2005.52.1.15>; S. C. Chia and W. Lee, “Pluralistic Ignorance about Sex: The Direct and the Indirect Effects of Media Consumption on College Students’ Misperception of Sex-Related Peer Norms,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20, no. 1 (February 4, 2008): 52–73, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edn005>.

²³ Tom Buchanan, “Why Do People Share Disinformation on Social Media?,” crestresearch.ac.uk, 4 September 2020, available at: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/disinformation-on-social-media/>.

²⁴ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 39, 2019, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368231>

²⁵ Joanna Herat, senior health and education specialist at UNESCO, quoted in openDemocracy, “UK Christian conservatives join ‘disastrous’ global backlash against sex education,” 12 September 2019.

²⁶ IPAS, *False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights*, Ipas, 2023, available at: <https://www.ipas.org/resource/false-pretenses-the-anti-comprehensive-sexuality-education-agenda-weaponizing-human-rights/>.

²⁷ “Stop CSE,” StopCSE.org, <https://www.comprehensivesexualityeducation.org/stop-cse-petition/>.

²⁸ Dennis Francis and Haley McEwen, “Normalising Intolerance: The Efforts of Christian Right Groups to Block LGBTIQ+ Inclusion in South African Schools,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, April 5, 2023, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2195913>.

²⁹ Dennis Francis and Haley McEwen, “Normalising Intolerance: The Efforts of Christian Right Groups to Block LGBTIQ+ Inclusion in South African Schools,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, April 5, 2023, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2195913>.

designed to help tackle. Many of the groups promoting these arguments and rhetoric have been identified as extremist anti-LGBTI or hate groups.³⁰

18. These anti-LGBTI+ narratives are deeply problematic both because they seek to undermine the rights of LGBTI+ persons to scientific freedom and their right to equal access, and also in so far as they are arguments based in hate and discrimination which seek to undermine the right to access scientific information for everyone overall.
19. Indeed, the role of these sorts of narratives has been recognised by the current Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights in the recent Policy Position on Cultural life and SOGI made with the Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. It says, “fundamentalist and extremist ideologies and the actions they incite when they are not challenged, threaten the expressions of diversity and may give rise to violations of - among others - LGBT persons’ internationally guaranteed human rights” which includes, “the right to take part in cultural life, scientific and artistic freedoms.”³¹
20. The opposition to CSE must be viewed within the wider anti-rights movement, which includes pushback on human rights and equality more broadly, and multilateralism.³² Proponents use instrumentalized conceptualisations of “traditional family values” and “authentic” national cultures, to the exclusion of gender and sexual minorities, religious and belief minorities, asylum seekers, migrants and others. “Parental rights” and national sovereignty are prioritised in the place of an international human rights framework grounded in concepts of equality, dignity, autonomy, and diversity. As part of this, the multilateral institutions which exist to uphold that framework, are

³⁰ For example, on *Family Watch International*: “Family Watch International,” Equity Forward, accessed November 13, 2023, available at <https://equityfwd.org/family-watch-international/>; “Family Watch International,” Pro-Lies, Equity Forward, accessed November 13, 2023, available at: <https://pro-lies.org/family-watch-international/>; “Family Watch International,” Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d., <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/family-watch-international>. On *National Organization for Marriage*: “National Organization for Marriage Continues to Spread Lies about Gays,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed November 13, 2023, available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/national-organization-marriage-continues-spread-lies-about-gays>; “National Organization for Marriage Abandons Core Mission, Promotes Anti-LGBT Hate,” Human Rights Campaign, January 29, 2014, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/national-organization-for-marriage-abandons-core-mission-promotes-anti-lgbt>; “Anti-Equality Organizations,” PFLAG, n.d., available at: <https://pflag.org/antilgbtq/>; On *International Organization for the Family*: “Exposed: The World Congress of Families,” Human Rights Campaign Foundation, June 2015, available at: <https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/WorldCongressOfFamilies.pdf>. On CitizenGo: “CitizenGo,” Equity Forward, accessed November 13, 2023, available at: <https://equityfwd.org/citizenngo/>; BBC, “Madrid Bans Catholic Group’s Anti-Transgender Bus,” *BBC News*, March 1, 2017, sec. Europe, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39125187>; On *Ordo Iuris*: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, June 2021, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018*, p37.

³¹ The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, “Cultural life and SOGI, Policy position,” 27 October 2023, p1.

³² Observatory on the Universality of Rights, 2021, *Rights at Risk: The Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2021*.

targeted; their legitimacy questioned and capacity to function undermined and disrupted through misrepresentation and disinformation campaigns.³³ Indeed, work on CSE by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UN WOMEN has been targeted within this context.³⁴

21. More specifically, the role of US-based Christian-Right groups in global action is notable, with “ample evidence suggesting that anti-CSE campaigning has been mobilised by well-resourced conservative ‘pro-family’ organisations in the United States.”³⁵ Research has shown that across Africa for example, many of the narratives against CSE bear resemblance to one another, and to narratives forwarded by these groups, showing “a coordinated countermovement against CSE is working to convince governments and communities that CSE is inappropriate for children and should therefore be rejected by government officials, teachers, and parents.”³⁶ Family Watch International has launched petitions against CSE in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, in partnership with local groups.³⁷ They have stated their purpose there is to stop the “exploitation” of children, which they allege occurs through CSE programmes.³⁸ Between 2008 and 2020, over \$280 million has reportedly been spent across the world by the US Christian Right.³⁹

³³ E.g. “The Financing of the UN Experts: ECLJ’s New Report,” European Centre for Law and Justice, 13 August 2021, available at: <https://eclj.org/geopolitics/un/-corruption-silencieuse--a-lonu--le-nouveau-rapport-de-leclj>; Bastien Lejeune, “Comment George Soros Étend Son Influence Sur Les Nations Unies,” Valeurs Actuelles, 1 August 2021, available at: <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/comment-george-soros-etend-son-influence-sur-les-nations-unies/> “The Impartiality of the ECHR: Presentation of the Report,” European Centre for Law and Justice, 10 November 2023, available at: <https://eclj.org/geopolitics/echr/l'impartialite-de-la-cedh--presentation-du-rapport/>; Philip Alston, “The ‘Scandal’ of Foundation Support for UN Human Rights Special Procedures,” EJIL: Talk!, 30 August 2021, available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-scandal-of-foundation-support-for-un-human-rights-special-procedures/>.

³⁴ Family Watch International, “FWI at the African Bar Association Conference 2022,” (video) available at: https://vimeo.com/738021132/0e3816b69a?inf_contact_key=1d26ee20d36271debb619f20bd2492567e470d92b8b75168d98a0b8cac0e9c09, accessed 13 November 2023; Family Watch International, “Family Policy Brief on The International Guidelines on Sexuality Education,” 2009, <https://familywatch.org/fwi/documents/fwipolicybriefunesco2ndREVISION.pdf>; Center for Family and Human Rights “Evidence of Systemic and Unlawful Promotion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education by UN Secretariat, Agencies, and other Entities,” September 2022, available at: https://c-fam.org/briefing_paper/evidence-of-systemic-and-unlawful-promotion-of-comprehensive-sexuality-education-by-un-secretariat-agencies-and-other-entities/

³⁵ Finn Reygan and Haley McEwen, “Beyond ‘Abstinence Only’: The U.S. Christian Right’s ‘Pro-Family’ Countermovement against Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Eastern and Southern Africa,” in *Queer Studies and Education: An International Reader*, ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez et al. (Oxford University Press, 2023).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Haley McEwen, “America’s Right Is Lobbying against South Africa’s Sex Education Syllabus,” MambaOnline, November 8, 2019, available at: <https://www.mambaonline.com/2019/11/08/americas-right-is-lobbying-against-south-africas-sex-education-syllabus/>

³⁸ “Stop CSE,” available at: <https://www.comprehensivesexualityeducation.org/stop-cse-petition/>; Family Watch International, “Child Protection,” available at: <https://familywatch.org/protect-child-health/#.Xb1ovy-B1R0>

³⁹ Nandini Archer and Claire Provost, “Revealed: \$280m ‘Dark Money’ Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally,” *OpenDemocracy*, 27 October 2020, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>.

22. The link between the campaigning activities and influence of these US groups and the global movement is made evident by one recent example, given by IPAS in its report on CSE: During a Family Watch International annual global policy forum, it was reported that an Ambassador for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation(OIC) made a statement which “outlined how the OIC was working to counter ‘outlandish ideologies’ like comprehensive sexuality education.”⁴⁰
23. Overall, the spread of disinformation has catalysed government action opposing CSE. Some examples:
- 23.1. In July this year, the president of Honduras vetoed a law that would have guaranteed the teaching of comprehensive education for the prevention of adolescent pregnancy, based on a human rights approach.⁴¹
- 23.2. In November 2022, the federal Government of Nigeria ordered the deletion of sexuality education from the Basic Education Curriculum, with the Education Minister emphasising that Nigeria is a religious country and as such morals and values are taught in Churches and Mosques.⁴²
- 23.3. On International Women’s Day in 2022, the Guatemalan Congress approved a law that prohibited public and private educational entities “from promoting, in childhood and adolescence, policies or programmes related to sexual diversity and gender ideology or from teaching sexual behaviours other than heterosexuality as normal.”⁴³
- 23.4. In January 2021, Senegal’s President rejected sex education as a western imposition which goes against national values.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ IPAS, *False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights*, Ipas, 2023, p.1, available at: <https://www.ipas.org/resource/false-pretenses-the-anti-comprehensive-sexuality-education-agenda-weaponizing-human-rights/>

⁴¹ Julio Cruz, “¿Por Qué Xiomara Castro Vetó La Ley de Educación Integral?,” *El Heraldo*, 31 July 2023, available at: <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/ley-educacion-sexual-veto-xiomara-castro-embarazos-honduras-PF14664319#:~:text=El%20s%C3%A1bado%2029%20de%20julio.>

⁴² Clement Idoko, “FG Orders NERDC to Remove Sex Education from Basic Education Curriculum,” *Tribune Online*, 3 November 2022, available at: <https://tribuneonlineng.com/fg-orders-nerdc-to-remove-sex-education-from-basic-education-curriculum/>; “MURIC Backs Minister on Removing Sex Education from BEC,” *Editorial*, 9 May 2023, available at: <https://edutorial.ng/muric-backs-minister-on-removing-sex-education-from-bec/>.

⁴³ Congress of the Republic of Guatemala, Initiative that provides for the approval of the Law for the Protection of Life and Family, Chapter III, Article 15, available at: https://www.congreso.gob.gt/detalle_pdf/iniciativas/66#gsc.tab=0

⁴⁴ Charly Hessoun, “Éducation Sexuelle : Macky Sall Refuse de Se Faire Forcer La Main Par L’ONU,” *La Nouvelle Tribune*, January 1, 2021, available at: <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2021/01/education-sexuelle-macky-sall-refuse-de-se-faire-forcer-la-main-par-lonu/>.

- 23.5. In 2018, Mali’s government cancelled workshops that included modules with questions on sexual orientation, tolerance, inclusion and respect after the High Islamic Council voiced opposition.⁴⁵
- 23.6. In 2016, Uganda’s government banned sex education in school and non-school settings after public outcry over claims that children were being taught “homosexuality.” Uganda’s Ministry of Education and Sports launched its own sex education policy, the National Sexuality Education Framework in 2018, which included strictures against same-sex relationships and emphasised abstinence until marriage. It was widely rejected nonetheless, with claims by some political leaders that it would “ruin the lives of children.”⁴⁶ According to UNESCO, the revised curriculum “does not align with the quality benchmarks promoted by the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, as it does not address some key topics and includes moralizing language.”⁴⁷
- 23.7. For many years in Poland, representatives from the Law and Justice (PiS) Government (in power until last month) made repeated moves to eliminate comprehensive sexuality education from schools.⁴⁸ They used “fearmongering around sexuality education to foster anti-LGBT and anti-choice sentiment and smear human rights defenders, accusing organizations and schools providing comprehensive sexuality education of threatening so-called traditional families and “morally corrupting” children.”⁴⁹
- 23.8. Likewise in Brazil, the past years have seen campaigns against ‘indoctrination’ and ‘gender ideology’ in schools. Between 2014 and 2022 lawmakers at the federal, state, and municipal levels have introduced over 200 legislative proposals to ban gender and sexuality education and ‘indoctrination’ in schools.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ RFI, “Mali: Suspension Du Débat Sur l’Enseignement de l’Éducation Sexuelle,” 18 December 2018, available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20181218-mali-debat-enseignement-education-sexuelle-suspendu>.

⁴⁶ Erin V. Moore et al., “Debating Sex and Sovereignty: Uganda’s New National Sexuality Education Policy,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 19 June 2021, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00584-9>.

⁴⁷ UNESCO, 2019, *Global Education Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 39, p.5 available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368231/PDF/368231eng.pdf.multi>.

⁴⁸ Justin Goldberg, “Polish Parliament Must Reject Regressive Proposals on Sexual and Reproductive Rights,” Center for Reproductive Rights, 14 April 2020, available at: <https://reproductiverights.org/polish-parliament-must-reject-regressive-proposals-on-sexual-and-reproductive-rights/>; Reuters in Warsaw, “Polish Lawmakers Pass Bill to Step up Government Control of Schools,” *The Guardian*, 13 January 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/polish-lawmakers-pass-bill-to-step-up-government-control-of-schools>.

⁴⁹ “Poland: Proposed Law Threatens Children’s Rights,” Human Rights Watch, 23 May 2023, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/23/poland-proposed-law-threatens-childrens-rights>

⁵⁰ IPAS, *False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights*, Ipas, 2023, p.11 available at: <https://www.ipas.org/resource/false-pretenses-the-anti-comprehensive-sexuality-education-agenda-weaponizing-human-rights/>; Human Rights Watch, “I Became scared, This Was Their Goal”: Efforts to Ban Gender and Sexuality Education in Brazil, 2022 available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/05/brazil_lgbt0522_web.pdf

24. As they work to roll back government policy, these campaigns of disinformation undermine the right of all individuals to a full and equal participation in the right to science, including the right to access and take part in scientific progress. As a result, interventions must focus on spreading accurate information about CSE. While CSE itself is aimed at young people, the pushback to CSE often comes from older generations. Culturally-sensitive and stratified social marketing campaigns which seek to educate entire populations on the virtues of CSE are crucial. The UNFPA recommendations for key stakeholders highlight multiple individuals who have a role and a duty with regards to combatting disinformation and promoting CSE.⁵¹

(5) Please describe how scientific freedom is respected, protected and promoted in your country. In particular, what kind of protection from interferences and threats from political, religious or commercial entities is offered? What are the main challenges? Please provide examples.

25. Across the world, we see significant interference and threats from political and religious entities into the realm of scientific and academic freedom,⁵² with scientists themselves reporting that they feel their free expression is under threat.⁵³ It is important to recognize both the right of those engaging in science to free expression as both citizens and *qua* scientists, researchers, and academics.⁵⁴ Scientific debate is often stifled and quashed where there is an ideological clash with religion or where academics, scholars, and researchers are deemed as a threat to a government's line. Blasphemy and apostasy laws are one common tool used in this.

26. There is a consensus at the international level that blasphemy laws are incompatible with the right to freedom of opinion and expression. There is also consensus that they are inherently discriminatory, counterproductive and undermine security, and are prone to abuse, including against the religious minorities they purport to protect.⁵⁵ We note that the Special Rapporteur in the

⁵¹ UNFPA and Muskoka, "Comprehensive Sexuality Education Evidence and Promising Practices in West and Central Africa," 2019, available at: [https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/VF_Brochure%20CSE_EN_WCARO%20\(1\).pdf](https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/VF_Brochure%20CSE_EN_WCARO%20(1).pdf).

⁵² Scholars at Risk, "Free to Think Report 2023," Scholars at Risk, 29 September 2023, available at: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023/>.

⁵³ Esa Valiveronen and Sampsa Saikkonen, "Science Communicators Intimidated: Researchers' Freedom of Expression and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism," *Journal of Science Communication* 20, no. 4 (21 July 2021): A08, available at: <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.20040208>.

⁵⁴ Cesare P. R. Romano, "The Origins of the Right to Science: America Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man," in *The Right to Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 33–53.

⁵⁵ See for example: General Comment No. 34 on Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011, para. 48; 'Rabat Plan of action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility of violence', A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, 5 October 2012, para.19; Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, A/HRC/46/30, 13 April 2021, para. 73; Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, A/HRC/40/58, 5 March 2019, at para. 21, 23, 56; United Nations Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, 2017, at page 17; "Blasphemy Laws Are Bad for Security," OSCE, March 24, 2022, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/514612>.

Field of Cultural Rights recognised the negative role of blasphemy laws in her recent joint Policy Position on Cultural life and SOGI.⁵⁶

27. Where blasphemy laws interact with science they are used to pushback against progress. This has a two-fold effect. On one hand, these laws are used to actively silence - through arrest and detainment - those advocating scientific and rational thinking. On the other hand, they have a chilling effect on the broad academic community, and “curtail the general public’s fundamental right to have access to information and a variety of viewpoints.”⁵⁷
28. Some examples:
 - 28.1. In March 2019, Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed was arrested on blasphemy charges for a post he made on Facebook which had questioned whether praying to God was a useful strategy to overcome drought, and suggested that the Somali authorities should instead address the problems with a scientific approach.⁵⁸ Professor Ahmed was sentenced to two and a half years in prison in April 2019.⁵⁹ Whilst he was subsequently pardoned by the Somalian President, he was forced into hiding as a result of a series of violent threats, stifling his academic freedom and freedom of expression.⁶⁰
 - 28.2. In April 2016, Dr Ahamdezra Djalali, a dual Iranian-Swedish citizen, was arrested while visiting Iran to take part in a series of workshops on disaster medicine, having been invited by the University of Tehran and Shiraz University.⁶¹ He was falsely charged with “spreading corruption on earth” (*mofsed-e-filarz* – a broadly defined crime capable of encompassing anything deemed undesirable by the state and usually used against alleged ‘blasphemers’) and espionage.⁶² The International Science notes that his “incarceration prevents him from

⁵⁶ The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, 27 October 2023, “Cultural life and SOGI, Policy position,” pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷ Freedom House, “Policing Belief: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights,” 2010, available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Archived_Special_Report_FH_Policing_Belief_Full.pdf.

⁵⁸ “Protect Mahmoud, the Somali Professor Accused of Blasphemy for a Facebook Post,” Humanists International, 6 March 2020, available at: <https://humanists.international/2020/03/protect-mahmoud-the-somali-professor-accused-of-blasphemy-for-a-facebook-post/>; “2019-03-21 University of Hargeisa,” Scholars at Risk, 21 March 2019, available at: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-03-21-university-of-hargeisa/>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ “Mahmoud Jama Ahmed – Case of Concern,” Humanists International, 15 March 2022, available at: <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mahmoud-jama-ahmed/>.

⁶¹ Vivi Stavrou, “Support Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali to Protect Scientific Freedom and Responsibility,” International Science Council, 2 December 2021, available at: <https://council.science/current/news/support-dr-ahmadreza-djalali/>.

⁶² “At UN, Humanists International Highlights Cases of Mubarak Bala and Ahmadezra Djalali,” Humanists International, 22 September 2023, available at: <https://humanists.international/2023/09/at-un-humanists-international-highlights-cases-of-mubarak-bala-and-ahmadezra-djalali/>.

making any contribution to the area of disaster medicine, in which he has much to contribute.”⁶³

28.3. During the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple individuals across many countries were charged with blasphemy laws and other public order offences for their criticism of their respective governments for failings to ensure access to scientific knowledge. These cases were engaged with by the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural rights in her report A/HRC/46/34.⁶⁴ Such cases include that of Kabir Kishore - who was arrested for creating a cartoon which satirised Bangladesh’s response to the pandemic⁶⁵ - and journalists Masoud Heydari and Hamid Haghjoo⁶⁶ who were charged in Iran with “insulting the sanctity of Islam” and “Insulting the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader” in connection with a cartoon which mocked the country’s Islamic leaders for claiming to have found a cure for COVID-19.⁶⁷ Given the divergence in countries’ responses to COVID-19 and the many competing claims around science and evidence-based approaches laid bare by the pandemic, these examples illustrate the importance of the right to freedom of expression and the role of dissent and advocacy for different approaches in the face of fast-moving scientific research.

29. The case of Afghanistan is instructive in terms of showing the negative impact on scientific freedoms in the context of interferences and threats from extremist religious entities. Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the situation for scientific freedom has worsened considerably.⁶⁸ The gender dimension is notable within this context. Earlier this year, the Taliban’s Ministry of Public Health announced that only males would be allowed to take exams to pursue specialised medical studies. That followed a ban on female medical students taking graduation exams and a prohibition

⁶³ Stavrou, “Support Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali to Protect Scientific Freedom and Responsibility,” International Science Council.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Council A/HRC/46/34, “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna: COVID-19 culture and cultural rights,” 2021, para 21.

⁶⁵ “Bangladesh: Cartoonist Tortured, Writer Dies in Jail: Ahmed Kabir Kishore,” Amnesty International, 8 March 2021, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/3800/2021/en/>; OHCHR, “UN Experts: Bangladesh Should Release Artist Jailed over Cartoons,” 16 December 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/12/un-experts-bangladesh-should-release-artist-jailed-over-cartoons>.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Council A/HRC/46/34, “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna: COVID-19 culture and cultural rights,” 2021, para 22.

⁶⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists. “Iran Arrests 2 Journalists for Allegedly Sharing Cartoon Mocking Government’s COVID-19 Response,” 27 April 2020, available at: <https://cpj.org/2020/04/iran-arrests-2-journalists-for-allegedly-sharing-c/>.

⁶⁸ “Afghan Chemists Are Afraid and Uncertain.” Chemical & Engineering News, available at: <https://cen.acs.org/policy/Afghan-chemists-afraid-uncertain/100/i26>; Rebecca Trager, “Science and Research ‘Are Dead’ in Afghanistan,” Chemistry World, 8 September 2021, available at: <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/science-and-research-are-dead-in-afghanistan/4014357.article>; Amena Karimyan, “Women Astronomers in Afghanistan Need the World’s Support,” *Nature Astronomy*, 29 March 2022, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-022-01653-8>; Geoff McMaster, “Engineering Researcher Helps Afghan Women Keep Learning and Working in STEM,” University of Alberta, 19 July 2023, available at: <https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2023/07/engineering-researcher-helps-afghan-women-keep-learning-working-in-stem.html>.

on women attending universities.⁶⁹ In April 2022, the Ministry of Higher Education instructed universities “to further enforce gender segregation at scientific conferences and programs.”⁷⁰ In a communication sent, the Ministry stated that female professors are banned from attending men’s scientific conferences and academic programs must be separated by gender.

⁶⁹ Rahim Faeiz, “UN Says the Taliban Have Further Increased Restrictions on Women and Girls in Afghanistan,” PBS NewsHour, 17 July 2023, available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/un-says-the-taliban-have-further-increased-restrictions-on-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan>.

⁷⁰ “2022-04-04 Various Institutions,” Scholars at Risk, 2022, available at: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2022-04-04-various-institutions/>.