

Gender Justice Means Freedom to Learn: How School Censorship Promotes Sex Discrimination

Students need safe and inclusive learning environments. This includes allowing young people to see their own lives reflected in what they read and learn, so they can feel understood and safe to be who they are. It also requires giving young people access to stories and lessons [about people different from them](#), so they can develop empathy for their peers and across communities.

But pro-censorship extremists—including some school board members and politicians, as well as hate groups like [Moms for Liberty](#)—strive to ban all topics in school that threaten their discriminatory agenda. These bans seek to maintain existing power structures and hierarchies related to race and gender by shutting down conversations that question those power structures and hierarchies. In this way, these bans reinforce racism and rigid gender roles. For example, to advance this agenda, Moms for Liberty chapters have been disseminating [a long list of books to target](#) in schools, most of which feature people of color and LGBTQIA+ people as authors and characters. Though pro-censorship extremists claim their goal is to “protect students,” they actually want schools to refuse to acknowledge racism, sexism, and other forms of bias and shut down efforts to make classrooms and curricula more inclusive. This promotes bias against vulnerable students and threatens to normalize and entrench discrimination against people of color, women and girls, and LGBTQIA+ people for a generation of young people.

Topics commonly censored through book and curriculum bans include: LGBTQIA+ identities, gender, and sexuality; race, racism, and the history of racism, segregation, and colonization; reproductive rights and sexual health; and consent, sexual harassment, violence, and abuse. Censoring these topics infects schools with dangerous, regressive ideas about race and gender, and compromises all young people’s safety and education. This especially harms LGBTQIA+ students, young women and girls of color, pregnant and parenting students, students who can become pregnant, student survivors of sexual violence, and any student who doesn’t meet pro-censorship extremists’ stereotyped ideals of gender. This is why fighting school censorship is a fight for gender justice.

Gender justice means fighting against censorship of LGBTQIA+ identity and topics related to gender and sexuality.

Young people have a right to engage in self-discovery and understand who they are. Yet, pro-censorship extremists want to erase LGBTQIA+ history and stories from schools. They hope that by cutting students off from access to any LGBTQIA+ representation, they will be able to prevent students from being themselves.

Banning discussion of LGBTQIA+ people in books and classroom lessons and shutting down supportive clubs (such as Gay Straight Alliances or Pride clubs) reinforces stigma about LGBTQIA+ people by sending a message that it is not okay to be LGBTQIA+, and that the only way for students to be accepted is to conform to rigid sex stereotypes when expressing their gender or sexuality. This lack of representation and enforcement of stereotypes heightens the likelihood that [LGBTQIA+ students will face mistreatment](#) in school: [the research shows](#) that when students do not see LGBTQIA+ representation in what they learn, they are more likely to report harassment and feeling unsafe to be who they are at school, as compared to LGBTQIA+ students who have access to LGBTQIA-inclusive curricula.

How is this showing up?

In the last two years, several states have banned “classroom discussion on sexual orientation or gender identity,” including [Alabama in 2022](#) and [Florida in 2023](#). Books by and about LGBTQIA+ people have also been overwhelmingly targeted: according to [Pen America’s report](#) on books banned in the first half of the 2022–2023 school year, books featuring LGBTQIA+ authors or stories made up 229 of 874 banned books. This includes *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (which is about the author’s nonbinary and asexual identities) and *Flamer* by Mike Curato (which is about a boy who is bullied for being gay and his ensuing mental health struggles); both books were banned in more school districts (15) than any other book as of December 2022. Popular children’s books that feature LGBTQIA+ characters to teach young people about the importance of loving their authentic selves have also been targeted. Some of the [most banned picture books of 2022](#) include Jazz Jennings’ *I Am Jazz*, which is based on the childhood experiences of trans activist Jazz Jennings, and Kyle Lukoff’s *When Aidan Became a Brother*, which tells the story of a trans boy who, upon finding out he is going to be a brother, helps his parents ensure that his future younger sibling is not subjected to the same gendered expectations he was.

Gender justice means fighting against censorship of Black, brown, and Indigenous people's stories and histories.

Young people of color already experience racism every day. Schools have a duty to teach all students how to recognize, understand, and reject the history of racism that continues to impact the daily lives of Black, brown, and Indigenous people and other people of color. But pro-censorship extremists are trying to prevent young people from getting a true and accurate education of racial history and identity (especially Black history and identity) and having basic discussions about racism. This includes banning honest education about topics such as: the enslavement of Black people and the segregation of and violence against Black people during the Jim Crow-era; the genocide of Indigenous people; and xenophobia against migrants. Teaching this accurate history is essential. It helps young people understand modern-day racial justice movements like the Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, and Land Back, work together to challenge white supremacy, and identify and prevent racism within their school communities. Teaching this history will also ensure students of color are represented in their education, minimizing the risk that their experiences of racism will be ignored or dismissed.

Censoring stories and lessons about race and racism is a gender justice issue too. Black and brown girls are already at risk of being pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline, which forces students out of schools and into the criminal legal system through racist school policies and excessive discipline. Black girls are also more likely to be punished for normal, child-like behavior and less likely to be taken seriously when they report harassment or discrimination. This is because of the “adultification” of Black girls, which occurs because of racist and sexist stereotypes that label them as less “innocent” than their white peers—and thus less deserving of protection. So, it is critical that Black and brown girls get the message that they can and deserve to thrive, be safe, and succeed in school. This means ensuring their access to books and curricula that discuss the lives, leadership, and successes of Black and brown women and girls. And teaching about race and racism is critical to helping educators become aware of their own biases and disrupt racist systems in their schools, including racist policies and excessive discipline of Black and brown girls. Censorship of these topics thus risks normalizing mistreatment of students of color and increasing the discrimination Black and brown girls already face.

How is this showing up?

Several states in the last three years have banned teaching topics like the history of racism (like [Texas in 2021](#)), the existence of racism today (like [Georgia in 2022](#)), and implicit racial bias (like [Florida in 2022](#)). School districts have also banned teaching [critical race theory](#), like [Ramona Unified School District in California](#) and [District 49 in Colorado](#) in 2021. In some cases, this has led to absurd results: for example, [the Florida Department of Education](#) rejected 54 *math* textbooks in 2022 because they showed bar graphs measuring racial prejudice among different political and age groups. Books by Black women are also frequently targeted for censorship: for example, Toni Morrison's books have been banned by 11 school districts as of as of December 2022. Similarly, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, about a Black student whose friend is killed by police, was [the most challenged book in Georgia](#) in 2022. Stories about Black women and girls and their leadership in fighting racism are also being censored, like Ruby Bridge's book *This Is Your Time* (about her experience as the first Black student integrating an all-white New Orleans public school), [which has been banned in several school districts in Texas](#); attempts have also been made to ban a Disney movie about her life and a picture book about her. Some of the most banned picture books in 2022 include Duncan Tonatiuh's *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation*, which is based on a true story of a Mexican and Puerto Rican family's fight to end segregation in California public schools.

Gender justice means fighting against censorship of information about reproductive and sexual health.

Young people deserve comprehensive sex education so they have access to age-appropriate information about their sexual and reproductive health. This is especially true as reproductive rights are under attack across the country. Sex education helps young people—including [LGBTQIA+ students](#), who are often left out when discussing reproductive health—keep themselves safe and healthy and to learn about consent in sexual relationships. Censoring discussion of sexual health and reproductive rights deprives students of the knowledge necessary to practice safe sex, prevent unplanned pregnancies, and make informed choices about their reproductive health. Censorship of information about sexual and reproductive health also stigmatizes topics like pregnancy, abortion, birth control, menstruation, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This culture of shame and secrecy about topics related to sex and pregnancy also stigmatizes pregnant and parenting students, imposing [additional barriers to finishing their education](#). Censorship of these topics also prevents pregnant and parenting students from making informed choices about their pre-and post-natal health, about which accommodations they will need to continue their educations, and about whether to become a parent.

Comprehensive sex education [does not lead](#) to increased sexual activity, risky sexual behavior, or STIs. The [research shows](#) that students receiving sex education have a lower risk of HIV and STIs and are more likely to delay sex, use protection during sex, and succeed in school. And [research](#) has shown that providing sexual health education for K-12 students decreases the likelihood that a student will be a victim and/or perpetrator of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or dating violence. Unfortunately, [research also shows](#) that there are disparities in race, gender, and sexual orientation when it comes to getting access to sex education. For example, [LGBTQIA+ students](#) are often excluded in discussions of consent and relationships healthy relationships, which promotes harmful gender stereotypes about who can be a victim and perpetrator of sex-based harassment.

How is this showing up?

School districts have censored lessons on reproductive and sexual health and excluded LGBTQIA+ relationships from sex education curricula. For example, in 2023, [the Charleston County School Board in South Carolina](#) voted to remove a section from the middle school's sex education curriculum that discussed contraceptives, consent, and preventing STIs in all types of sexual relationships. So have states like Florida, which passed a [curriculum ban](#) in 2023 that requires teachers to exclude transgender people from lessons on reproductive health, thereby banning the recognition of the existence of transgender people in sexual relationships and their ability to get pregnant. States and schools have also taken steps to attack access to comprehensive sex education. For example, [Texas's State Board of Education](#) in 2020 removed a requirement for middle school sex education to cover consent or LGBTQIA+ relationships. And [Miami-Dade School District in Florida](#) in 2022 removed a chapter from a sex ed textbook for middle and high school students because it discussed LGBTQIA+ identity, consent, and healthy relationships.

Gender justice means fighting censorship of discussions of consent, healthy relationships, and sex-based harassment, including sexual violence.

Young people have a right to access to books and lessons that discuss sexual and intimate consent, healthy relationships, and sex-based harassment (including sexual assault and dating violence). This is crucial to enabling all young people to prevent sex-based harassment, as well as to supporting the ability of survivors to recognize mistreatment and ask for help. It is also especially important for girls and young women, who are more likely to experience this harassment. Many of these banned books are written by sexual assault survivors who seek to connect with, give voice to, and support other survivors through their work. But pro-censorship extremists have tried to restrict students' access to stories that discuss

both consensual sexual encounters and sexual abuse on the basis that they are "sexually explicit" or too "controversial." Censoring books that contain descriptions of consensual sexual encounters prevents students from understanding what healthy, consensual relationships can look like. Censoring descriptions of sexual harassment and assault can make it harder for students to understand what abuse looks like and it may wrongly suggest to survivors (who are already stigmatized and very often reluctant to tell anyone about what happened) that there is something obscene about discussing their own victimization, which makes it even harder for them to ask for help. These censorship efforts also seek to prevent students from learning about the prevalence of sexual violence: pro-censorship advocates have even censored books that acknowledge the high rates of sexual violence in society or on college campuses. This especially [hurts girls and women of color, pregnant and parenting students, disabled students, and LGBTQIA+ students](#), who are more likely to experience sexual violence.

How is this showing up?

Books that discuss consensual sexual experiences and sexual assault are often banned in schools. For example, Sapphire's *Push*, the story of a young mother living in poverty who is sexually assaulted by her father and becomes pregnant with her second child, has been banned in 11 school districts as of December 2022. Similarly, Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*, a collection of poems about love, sex, trauma, and sexual abuse, has been banned in 14 school districts as of December 2022. Kaur, who is a survivor of sexual abuse, [spoke about wanting to support survivors through her work](#): "My experiences have led me to write about these heavy themes, and it used to be difficult to share, but I realize it is essential for me to share, because when we share, we connect. And when we connect, we feel less alone, and can help one another recover." Chapters of Moms for Liberty [have also targeted books](#) like *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* by survivor of sexual assault, Roxane Gay (which is about the epidemic of sexual violence in our society), as "sexually explicit" or "obscene" because of excerpts like: "[w]hen I first came up with the idea for this anthology, I wanted to assemble a collection of essays about rape culture...that engaged with the idea of rape culture, what it means to live in a world where the phrase 'rape culture' exists;" and an excerpt referencing a nationwide study revealing that "[t]wenty-five percent of women in college have been the victims of rape or attempted rape." And Laurie Halse Anderson's book *Speak*, which is about a high school student who is sexually assaulted and then stops speaking, was [banned 14 times in the 2022-2023 school year](#). Anderson, a survivor of rape when she was 13 years old, has said about her book: "[I]t goes into a lot of the same feelings that I had, which makes the book little bit larger than a book about sexual assault. I think a lot of teenagers find in the book a little bit of a road map for how they can find the courage to speak up when a bad thing happens."

When stories by and about LGBTQIA+ people, people of color (especially women and girls of color), survivors of sexual violence, and pregnant and parenting people are silenced, and the ability of students to learn about the history of racism, gender and sexual orientation, consent, sexual health, and reproductive rights is obfuscated, it sends a harmful and regressive message to students about gender. It tells students—especially young women and girls of color, LGBTQIA+ students, students who can become pregnant, and pregnant and parenting students—that they are not deserving of visibility and opportunities. It leaves students unprepared to identify discrimination and abuse, less able to understand and challenge oppressive systems, and without the knowledge to make informed choices about their bodies and rights. And it compromises students’ ability to see themselves reflected in what they learn, relate to what they learn, and feel supported in being who they are—which they need to thrive in their educations. This is why the fight for gender justice must include fighting against pro-censorship extremists’ efforts to force classrooms to uphold their regressive agenda: so that every student has access to the safe, inclusive learning environment they need to succeed.

