

Behind Closed Doors:

Protecting Bodily Autonomy Through Comprehensive Sexuality Education



Gender-based violence (GBV) is often framed in the United States as exclusively a foreign problem. But gender-based harms—including sexual violence; intimate partner violence (IPV); femicide; female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); and child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU)—occur across the United States.¹ While these forms of violence differ, they share common roots in gender inequality, unequal power dynamics, harmful social norms, and violations of bodily autonomy.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), a holistic curriculum-teaching and learning of various dimensions of sexuality, can help address root causes of GBV.² By equipping young people with knowledge about consent, healthy relationships, gender norms, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), CSE gives young people tools to understand and exercise their bodily autonomy—and respect the autonomy of others.³

Gender-based violence remains a widespread violation of bodily autonomy in the United States

More than 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced a form of physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological aggression in their lifetime.⁴ Many violations begin during adolescence, with 16 million women and 11 million men reporting their first experience of IPV before age 18.⁵

Other forms of gender-based harm persist across the country:

- **Femicide:** The United States accounts for a disproportionate share of femicides across high-income countries, with approximately 2,000 women murdered by men in 2020.⁶
- **FGM/C:** More than 513,000 women and girls are estimated to have experienced or be at risk of FGM/C.⁷
- **Child marriage:** Nearly 315,000 minors were married in the United States between 2000 and 2021, most of them girls married to older men.⁸

Comprehensive sexuality education helps young people develop the knowledge and skills they need to exercise bodily autonomy

Bodily autonomy means having the information, resources, and ability to make informed decisions about one's body, health, relationships, and future. CSE supports bodily autonomy by teaching young people about:

- Consent, boundaries, personal safety, and bodily autonomy.
- Healthy relationships and communication.
- Gender norms, power, and types of GBV.
- Human development and reproduction.
- Sexual and reproductive health.⁹

Evidence shows that well-implemented CSE can improve knowledge and decision-making, increase contraceptive use, and reduce sexual risk-taking.¹⁰ CSE that addresses gender norms and power dynamics can also contribute to preventing GBV and other forms of violence.¹¹

CSE is more holistic than simply instructing about anatomy or how to prevent unintended pregnancy. It is an important component of violence prevention. Young people need opportunities to learn how to recognize coercion, communicate boundaries, challenge harmful norms, and build relationships grounded in respect and equality.

The fragmented approach to sexuality education in the United States leaves young people without equitable access

The United States has no national requirement for CSE. Instead, states and school districts determine whether and how sexuality education is provided, resulting in major differences in content, quality, and access.¹² As of September 2025, 41 states and Washington, D.C., require sex and HIV education, but only 26 of them require the information to be medically accurate. Forty-three states and Washington, D.C., require programs to cover or stress abstinence from sex, with 14 states requiring abstinence-only education versus teaching about birth control and contraceptives, despite strong scientific evidence that abstinence-only education is not effective.¹³ Ten states also prohibit discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity for all or certain age groups.¹⁴

Federal funding cuts further threaten access to evidence-based adolescent health programs. In June 2026, the Trump administration canceled 53 of 66 Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program grants while issuing new guidance for grantees to better adhere to different executive orders that emphasize heteronormative relationships, abstinence, and complete restrictions on gender identity and sexuality.¹⁵ These cuts risk undermining access to evidence-based information at a time when young people already face vastly unequal access depending on where they live.

Protecting bodily autonomy requires investing in prevention

GBV takes many forms, but its consequences are connected by a fundamental violation—the denial of a person’s ability to make decisions about their own body, health, and future. CSE cannot prevent every form of violence on its own, but it is a critical component of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

Policymakers, educators, and funders should:

- Recognize CSE as a primary prevention strategy for gender-based violence.
- Establish evidence-based national standards for comprehensive sexuality education.
- Restore and expand federal funding for evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention and adolescent sexual health programs.
- Invest in educator preparation and community engagement.
- Strengthen research and accountability by supporting ongoing evaluation of CSE programs, especially in collecting data on outcomes related to violence prevention.

Policy Spotlight: Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth Act of 2025

The Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth (REAHYA) Act, introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2025, proposes to support medically accurate, age-appropriate, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed education aligned with the National Sex Education Standards. The legislation would invest in curricula, educator training, and equitable implementation while supporting efforts to prevent unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and GBV.

Source: Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth Act of 2025, H.R. 3527 and S. 1910, 119th Cong., (2025).

Read more about the violence hidden behind closed doors in the United States in our full report, **Behind Closed Doors: Exposing and Addressing Harmful Gender-Based Practices in the United States.**



References

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