



Challenges and opportunities in teaching gender equality in Irish secondary schools

Sarah Arnold & Izzy Fox

To cite this article: Sarah Arnold & Izzy Fox (2025) Challenges and opportunities in teaching gender equality in Irish secondary schools, *Gender and Education*, 37:3, 364-380, DOI: [10.1080/09540253.2025.2462051](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2462051)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2462051>



Published online: 12 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 127



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Challenges and opportunities in teaching gender equality in Irish secondary schools

Sarah Arnold ^a and Izzy Fox ^b

^aDepartment of Media Studies, North Campus Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland; ^bDepartment of Media Studies, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Challenges related to the teaching of gender equality in Irish secondary schools are multifaceted and include: insufficient gender equality training for teachers; tendencies towards conservative and religious ethos schools; lack of space in which to address gender topics and issues (including gender identity, gender stereotyping, gender discrimination) in the curriculum and, especially, growing resistance to gender equality and gender mainstreaming from a variety of stakeholders including schools, teachers, parents and students. This paper stems from a transnational European project – GEMINI – aimed at gender mainstreaming through media literacy and presents findings from a study of 12 Irish secondary school teachers in different secondary school types who detail their interest and engagement with gender equality and gender issues, but identify multiple forms of resistance to the delivery of gender equality education. Teachers express fears about rising misogyny among students and raise concerns about the influence of controversial sexist figures like Andrew Tate, especially among boys in Ireland. Findings contribute to the literature on challenges to gender mainstreaming and media literacy in Ireland.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 7 April 2024
Accepted 4 December 2024

KEYWORDS

Gender; education; school; equality; resistance

Introduction

There are many challenges to teaching gender equality in Irish secondary schools, including a lack of training and guidance for teachers; the conservative/religious ethos of some schools; the limited teaching hours provided to these topics; as well as a backlash from students, parents or even other teachers. This study forms part of the GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights) research-action project funded by the EU's CERV Programme. The project engages with key stakeholders, including secondary school students, their teachers, as well as creative media producers and focuses on different national contexts across the EU to explore "the representation of gender identities in TV series and how they can contribute to gender equality" (2024). This article identifies the educational context in terms of policies, provision, priorities and the perspectives of secondary school teachers in Ireland who are teaching gender equality,

CONTACT Sarah Arnold  sarah.arnold@mu.ie Department of Media Studies, Iontas Building, North Campus Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare W23 F2H6, Ireland

© 2025 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

either as part of a prescribed module or as a mode to engage with a literary or non-literary text. The research discussed here involved twelve interviews with a diverse cohort of teachers, in terms of age, gender and years of teaching experience. The interviewees also taught a variety of subjects including English, Religion, and/or Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) which are the main subjects in which gender issues are taught. The findings discussed in this article highlight the reasons why teachers are often reticent about teaching gender equality, including, as proposed by the GEMINI project, through television serial drama. While our interviews were intended to understand if and how teachers use media texts to teach gender equality, our main findings pointed to broader challenges to teaching gender equality topics including stereotyping, discrimination and non-binarized gender, in any form. For instance, the rise in popularity of far-right misogynistic online influencers, such as Andrew Tate, among teenage boys, in particular, has had a very real impact on how and when teachers tackle gender equality in the classroom. We draw from literature that articulates the characteristics and parameters of the online manosphere, featuring figures such as Tate, who use social media to spread misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic ideology. These talking points, including the espousal of a toxic and aggressive form of masculinity, are then repeated by students in the classroom often in the form of resistance to discussions of gender equality and diversity. This resistance to gender equality has occurred despite gender mainstreaming being a key priority across EU policies and legislation for the past three decades.

Literature review

Gender equality and Europe

Gender mainstreaming, which seeks to “institutionalize equality by embedding gender-sensitive practices and norms in the structures, processes, and environment of public policy”, has been a core value of the EU since 1996 and has informed many aspects of EU policies, strategies and projects since then (Daly 2005; Booth and Bennett 431). At that time, the European Commission funded research into this area with the Fourth Medium Term Community Action Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (1996–2000) (Booth and Bennett 431). Gender mainstreaming became enshrined in EU law with the ratification of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1998, with gender equality becoming ‘a central objective of EU political commitment’(431).

In recent years gender has become even more prevalent within EU policies, as well as being identified as a key priority across European agencies such as the Council of Europe (Col 2020), where gender equality is widely understood as “equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys” (UN Women: Training Centre glossary 2021). At the EU level, there is also an acknowledgement of the issues that delay, limit and prevent gender equality from being achieved, such as gender-based violence and gender stereotypes (EIGE 2019a, 2019b).

In spite of the implementation of gender mainstreaming across EU policies for almost thirty years, there has been a gap identified between ‘rhetoric and practice’ (Vida 2021; see also: Cavaghan 2017; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2009). A full discussion of the problematics of gender mainstreaming as a strategy is beyond the scope of this article but there are a couple of key aspects that are worth noting due to their relevance to the GEMINI

project. For instance, the binary nature to which gender is referred across EU documents (see GEMINI report 2024) is limited and a more intersectional approach is encouraged. In this sense, the GEMINI project recognizes the priority given to gender mainstreaming across the EU, including within education, while also acknowledging its various limitations and the impact of this on schools, students and teachers.¹

Gender in secondary school education in Europe

Within the European Union, gender mainstreaming and gender equality are established as social priorities with education a key driver of these goals. These goals are enacted through national and local policies and through integrating gender mainstreaming in European nation-state curricula. The European Institute for Gender Equality foregrounds the role of formal education in the achievement of gender equality:

Gender equality in education can ... be achieved through adapting national school curricula with a gender perspective in mind. This can include modules on women's sexual and reproductive rights, for example. Textbooks and other teaching materials should also be modified to eliminate gender bias (2019).

The European Union also advocates for sexuality education which involves 'teaching about the cognitive, emotional, social and physical aspects of sexuality' and sees this as important for gender equality and for the positive development of young people (Picken 2020). Nonetheless, there is a consensus that education is less a driver of gender equality but instead reproduces "the values and culture of [European Union] societies without challenging their possible limitations on the life opportunities and experiences of its pupils" (Col 2014). At the Col (2014) conference 'Combating gender stereotypes in and through education', for example, it was largely agreed that educational curricula in the European context remained patriarchal, with a dominant focus on men in certain subjects and neglect of women's experiences and voices (4). Importantly, it was acknowledged that there was not a universal approach to or understanding of gender mainstreaming across European educational institutions which resulted in unevenness in the approach to gender equality through education. In fact, many studies of educational textbooks across various European states evidence the persistence of gender stereotypes that particularly limit the role and place of women in society (Gouvias and Alexopoulos 2018; Osadán et al. 2018). Gender stereotypes, therefore, persist, despite policies towards gender equality in and through education. In Ireland, EU-level policy sees little action, where very limited provision of gender education exists in the school curriculum.

Similarly, teachers and educators themselves may perpetuate gender stereotypes unconsciously, for example, through assuming the aptitude of students as gendered; in their interactions and engagements with students; and in their feedback and support of students that may take on a gendered tone (Kerr 2000; Kollmayer, Schober, and Spiel 2018). Individual studies of European countries have reported indifference to gender topics among teachers (Spain); a lack of teacher training on gender topics (Croatia; Finland) with only those interested in gender opting to teach it (Lahelma and Hynninen 2012; Rogošić and Baranović 2024). European nation-states also vary in how much gender mainstreaming feeds through the curriculum. Réda's comparative study

of Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Romania noted the huge variation in attitude towards and embedding of gender issues in the curriculum, but an overall deficit in and some resistance to teaching gender within the curriculum (2021). Developing curricula that prioritizes gender mainstreaming is perhaps the largest challenge for European countries since there are so many competing demands placed on education, for example, to develop a workforce, to reinforce national values, and to develop digital and ITC literacy (Keating, Ortloff, and Philippou 2009). In Ireland, a recent government announcement to introduce gender and sexuality topics to high school-level students has seen teaching unions highlight the profound deficit in teacher training for such sensitive subjects (O'Brien 2024).

Backlashes to gender equality in Europe

Further, there is a small but vocal minority of anti-gender groups and activists who target schools and educational curriculum by claiming that gender theory is being dangerously propagated to students (Kuhar and Zobec 2017). This is done under the guise of parental concern that children are being dangerously indoctrinated into gender ideology (Fábián and Korolczuk 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Across Europe, there have been numerous organized protests against what is termed 'gender ideology' aimed at school curricula and at gender-inclusive policies and cultures in schools (ibid; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). This is linked to an emergent far-right ideology that advocates for patriarchy in which sex roles are hierarchical and productive of social and economic power, and which denies the rights of people who do not identify with the narrow identities available under patriarchy (Carian, DiBranco, and Ebin 2022; Enloe 2017). The backlash or opposition to gender equality and inclusivity is multifaceted and broadly targeted at: the move away from patriarchal definitions of sex roles, LGBTQ+ identities; gender ideology; and sex, romantic relationships and consent (Edström, Greig, and Skinner 2024).

Elizabeth Corredor notes the connection between anti-gender politics and religion, especially the catholic religion whose leaders have continually undermined efforts towards gender equality and inclusivity in recent decades (2019, 620-621). Although many religions are resistant to contemporary trends towards gender equality, in Ireland the catholic church has a particular role to play since, historically, it has been the dominant religion and moral force. Although recent years have seen a decline in Irish catholic hegemony, the population at large still identifies as Catholic, for example, through baptism, confirmation, or church marriages (Inglis 2017). There is still a strong presence of the catholic church in the Irish educational system, with almost 90% of primary and 50% of secondary schools having catholic patronage (Griffin 2019). The presence of a powerful institution defined through exclusivity and gender conservatism has salience in the context of gender mainstreaming in Ireland.

However, it is not only the catholic church that creates barriers to gender mainstreaming in Ireland. A broader anti-gender rhetoric has emerged not only through local politics and via institutions like the catholic church, but also through larger global anti-gender and anti-feminist movements and trends. Young people in Ireland have encountered this rhetoric largely through online and social media (Donnelly 2023). Online and social media anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse is typically generated by and targeted

towards males with the spaces in which this discourse circulates called the ‘manosphere’ (Ging 2019).

The ‘manosphere’ is the term adopted within academia to describe a broad range of groups of men who use online fora, digital networks, social media etc. to advocate for men’s rights, a return to gender hierarchies, and to develop strategies aimed at consolidating male power at the individual and group level. While not an exclusively Western phenomenon, far-right and white supremacy ideology is represented in the manosphere (Ging 2019; Jones, Trott, and Wright 2020). The manosphere is not inherently anti-woman and anti-gender but many of the emergent groups and identity categories are structured on the belief that gender equality initiatives reduce the social and economic power available to men. Anti-feminist and anti-gender groups create communities and identities on the basis of exclusion and opposition (Ging 2019).

Figures like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate represent some of these views and are very representative of a heightened emotional vulnerability and immaturity that appeals to male adolescents through the promise of power and status. Scholars have noted how Tate, in particular, appeals to young boys by reinforcing hegemonic masculinity through dominance over women, and, importantly, by packaging these views in entertaining and ‘maverick’ content (Haslop et al. 2024). Teachers, like those in our study, are reporting the influence of these views among young people and raise concerns about the impact of this on gender mainstreaming in Ireland as elsewhere (Ging et al. 2024; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). Haslop et al. have advocated for improved digital literacy as a counter to rising anti-gender sentiment among young people in schools and Ging et al. have argued that gender justice requires more than a once-off workshop, and needs to be embedded not only in the curriculum but also in the school culture (2024).

Our study starts from the position that gender mainstreaming is more urgent than ever given the various challenges to gender equality and the rising anti-gender politics. We identify the challenges teachers face and the anxieties they feel towards delivering gender education as well as the resistance and outright opposition they face when doing so. We point to the extensive barriers to gender mainstreaming from the perspective of these teachers and, in conclusion, pose possible strategies to overcome these barriers.

Methods

The article stems from research undertaken on the European Union CERV-funded GEMINI project which engages young people with gender issues through serial drama. The project researches European young people’s consumption of serial drama and their attitudes to gender; serial drama representations of gender and gender issues; and teachers’ engagement with teaching gender issues as well as their use of media texts to teach gender topics. We used the term gender to describe someone’s self-described status as non-binary, female, male or trans. Gender identity is taken as the inner sense of self someone has as one or more of the genders. Gender issues and topics refer to the social, cultural and political meanings and of and actions in relation to gender. However, defining gender is a dynamic rather than a delimiting activity. Therefore, the GEMINI project avoids operationalizing absolute and essentializing definitions. GEMINI’s mixed methods research includes the use of survey instruments, interviews, focus

groups and textual analysis. This article represents data collected from interviews with 12 teachers in Irish secondary schools between December 2023 and February 2024 aimed at developing an understanding of educational practices in the Irish context. We used qualitative research because we were concerned with learning if and how gender is taught within the Irish curriculum and how teachers feel about teaching gender issues. The study necessitated a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews because we wished ‘to identify issues from the perspectives of ... study participants and understand the meanings and interpretations they give to [phenomenon]’ (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2020, 10). Since the project will culminate in an educational toolkit for secondary school teachers to use, their perspectives on teaching gender issues are of paramount importance.

Recruitment of interview participants was undertaken in November 2023 with a sampling strategy of 10–12 interviews that was inclusive of different levels of teaching experience, age groups, genders, teachers from different school types (e.g. single-ed; co-ed) and different regions. This followed ethical approval from Maynooth University’s ethics committee (Ethics Review IDs: 36582; 37651; 38652). Table 1 shows the details of the participants and the school types. We had data saturation by 12 interviews. A gatekeeper, who is networked into Maynooth University’s School of Education and to Irish secondary schools, was used to reach a wide body of school types and teachers of different subjects/levels. The gatekeeper made the initial email contact with participants, who then connected with the GEMINI researchers. Nonetheless, there is an under-representation of schools from the West of Ireland and further studies would benefit from larger samples since the may well be significant approaches to gender education across different regions. Upon initial acceptance, information sheets and consent forms

Table 1 . Interviewees

| Pseudonym | Gender | Subjects | School Type ^a | Age | Geographic area |
|-----------|------------|--|---|-----|-----------------|
| Alan | Male | English; Digital Media Literacy | Co-ed community college | 23 | East |
| Chloe | Female | English; History; SPHE | Co-ed catholic voluntary school | 36 | East |
| Patricia | Female | English; History; CSPE | Co-ed, community college | 25 | Midlands |
| Helen | Female | English; History | Co-ed, community college | 38 | East |
| Rachel | Female | English; History | Girls private catholic voluntary school | 31 | East |
| Grainne | Female | English; SPHE | Co-ed catholic voluntary school | 55 | Midlands |
| Brian | Male | English; History | Co-ed community | 50 | Mid Leinster |
| Alex | Female | English | Co-ed community school | 32 | Mid Leinster |
| Deirdre | Female | English; Religion | Co-ed community school | 42 | North East |
| Jamie | Non-binary | English; History | Girls private catholic voluntary school | 32 | East |
| Maura | Female | English as a First Language | Boys private catholic voluntary school | 59 | Midlands |
| Sharon | Female | Resource; Literacy and Numeracy; Childcare | Education for Early School Leavers | 51 | Mid Leinster |

^aVoluntary secondary schools are private schools, often with a religious patronage and historically were more academic in focus, although they offer more practical subjects today. Community colleges are part of local Educational and Training Boards, which historically focused on practical and technical training and now have both academic and practical focus. Community schools were established to provide a mix of academic and practical subjects and may have religious or mixed patronage. Early school leavers’ education offer a range of qualifications and courses to those who are not in mainstream schools and colleges.

were provided. Interviews lasted between 45 and 85 min. Participants were asked about their experience of teaching gender topics to students, training and education on teaching such topics, their perception of students' understanding and engagement with these topics, their use of media narratives in their teaching practice and their interest in a toolkit that might assist in teaching gender topics. Thematic analysis was adopted, and we used a deductive approach by drawing from already established knowledge about the provision of gender education and media studies on the secondary school curriculum (Braun and Clarke 2019; Rivas 2012). Interview data was read and re-read by the interviewers and broader themes were identified. Secondary analysis produced codes related to concepts of teachers' *anxieties* about their training and experience, their perception of *resistance* to gender in the curriculum and their schools, and what they say as emerging *oppositions* in the classroom, social media and the public at large. Each of these is elaborated on in the next section where we present the findings of the interviews.

Results

Teachers' anxieties about teaching gender topics

At best, gender education in Irish secondary school settings is inconsistent, with many teachers we interviewed referring to the provision as 'ad hoc' (Deirdre). The subjects in which it is taught, the amount of time allocated, and the priority it is given, relies heavily on the knowledge and interests of individual teachers, outside of the limited provision specifically made for teaching these topics. Gender education, in other words, falls into the same trap identified in the scholarship on educational policy – European gender mainstreaming policies do not map onto localized practice seamlessly, in part because existing structures of education are somewhat inflexible (Gouvias and Alexopoulos 2018; Lahelma 2014; Weiner 2000).

For example, gender and sexuality are taught in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), a stand-alone subject, and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) modules, often taught as a component of SPHE or Religious Education (RE). The positioning of RSE within the subject of Religion is problematic for a number of reasons. For instance, many Senior Cycle students view RE as being less important than their (other) exam classes (some schools offer RE as an exam subject); the same attitude is reserved for SPHE in Junior Cycle. In addition, the notion of these issues being taught through the lens of Religion, is particularly jarring in a country that is still reeling from the conservative legacy of religious institutions influencing all aspects of gender and sexuality in Ireland, from education, to healthcare, to the laws of the land.

Consequently, a review of RSE in 2018 at both primary and post-primary levels identified the need for updating the curriculum, as 'a key priority' (2018). While a new SPHE syllabus has been developed, described by one teacher as 'really, really good', including sections on gender identities, sexualities and consent, SPHE is still awarded fewer hours than examination subjects. At Junior Cycle, for instance, students are taught 100 h of SPHE; of which gender education is just one component. Chloe, an SPHE teacher we interviewed, while acknowledging the recent diversification of the syllabus, highlighted the lack of provision allocated to these newer topics: 'I have an

hour a week of SPHE and let's say throughout the school year ... maybe 1/4 of that I might spend on trans issues', which they argue is not enough. This is particularly concerning considering that most teachers we interviewed identified the rise of misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, particularly amongst the teenage boys they teach, with many repeating the problematic talking points of controversial online influencers like Andrew Tate.

SPHE is also not a degree subject at the third level and it exits as an add-on subject on teacher's timetables, meaning that teachers who are not qualified may end up teaching the subject. As noted, this is not an issue exclusive to Ireland, with studies reporting the challenges in teacher training and preparedness across Europe (Kollmayer, Schober, and Spiel 2018; Rédai 2021). This training deficit manifests in various ways in Ireland. For example, unless a teacher is teaching SPHE, they will usually not receive continuous professional development (CPD) training on how to teach gender and sexuality. In addition, schools are often not in the position to release every teacher teaching SPHE to attend CPD, which often consists of the largest cross-departmental cohort of teachers. As a result, teachers often feel ill-prepared and reluctant to take on these topics, particularly in light of the 'gender critical' backlash of recent years. For instance, Patricia stated: 'I think my fear is more so misinforming them, like saying the wrong thing, or them picking me up wrong'.

While the teachers who formed the sample were very engaged in gender issues and made efforts to be sensitive to gender equality, equitable representation in course content and in nurturing an inclusive school culture, many of them saw multiple barriers to gender mainstreaming in Irish secondary schools. These barriers ranged from their nervousness and discomfort in teaching or promoting gender mainstreaming to resistance from the various stakeholders including teachers, parents, schools and the students them. Further, the creeping influence of far-right anti-gender ideology especially among male students was a concern among the teachers who saw this as posing a significant challenge to facilitating gender equality in Irish secondary school education (Kuhar and Zobec 2017; Venegas 2022). There was, therefore, a continuum of barriers that ranged from unease with engaging with gender mainstreaming to outright hostile rejection of the principles of gender equality and its inclusion within the curriculum and in school culture.

Some teachers admitted to feeling nervous about discussing gender topics because they didn't have enough knowledge, training or expertise to cover them effectively. Rachel, for example, said 'if you had ... a trans girl in the class, and you were talking about those issues, I don't want to feel like I'm speaking for that person when I don't have that lived experience.' Mostly, the teachers articulated discomfort on the part of other teachers. The word 'uncomfortable' was used by Jamie, Rachel and Patricia to stress how teachers felt about addressing gender topics. Jamie said 'There's still, I think, a reasonably large enclave of teachers who would be made kind of uncomfortable by these issues at all and have quite a bit of unwillingness to even engage with them in any way.' Patricia recounted a conversation with a new teacher, tasked with teaching a relationship and sexuality course that they hadn't taught before nor had any training whatsoever. Another teacher, she said, 'outright refused' to teach a course on consent and sexuality. This nervousness was attributed to a lack of training and to a fear of reprisal and of the broader societal politicization of gender. The emergence of small but vocal

conservative, anti-gender activism in recent Irish society (Ging et al. 2024), coupled with a lack of overall attention to gender in the school curriculum and a lack of training on teaching gender topics has contributed to this nervousness around teaching gender issues (Mac an Ghail, Martin, and Conway 2002; NCWI 2023).

Resistance to teaching gender topics from teachers, parents, schools and students

The rise of coordinated and impactful resistance to gender education has been well-documented, particularly in countries that have historically or in recent years taken on right-wing, religious fundamentalist and/or authoritarian orientations (Dalmaso-Junqueira and Moeller 2024; Payne and Smith 2018; Rédei 2024). In our study, teachers referred to covert rather than overt resistances. For example, some teachers were seen as indifferent to teaching gender topics or resistant to them based on personal ideology. While some associated this with older age teachers, others pointed to younger colleagues' disagreement with gender mainstreaming principles. Patricia said that those teachers who have been many years in the sector would simply not be open to updating their teaching. 'If you have an older ... close-to-retirement male teacher, I ... I doubt he's going to be sat there talking about Maya Angelou and ... the inequalities that she faced as a woman and a black woman, he's going to do the Seamus Heaney poems he's done for the 40 years of his career.' Patricia saw the lack of engagement more as a kind of inertia on the part of teachers who had established teaching habits and were less inclined to refresh their teaching. Alan, on the other hand, was concerned that some teachers' own discriminatory views may cause their resistance to gender mainstreaming. 'I even feel like some teachers ... they might still have some of these like sexist tendencies or racist tendencies.' Jamie shared a particular anecdote of a teacher who was 'vocally, quite resistant to the idea of discussing gender issues in the classroom ... And it caused quite a few arguments in the staff room.' Jamie stated that there were no repercussions for this behaviour from the school and the teacher in question continued to teach one of the few courses with gender topics, while excluding those topics.

Resistance to gender mainstreaming among parents was also cited as an issue. While none of the teachers stated that this was an overt issue nor that parents had successfully censored curriculum content, many of the teachers shared anecdotes about parents' complaints about the promotion of gender equality and inclusivity or about gender topics within the curriculum. Shared a story of parents who withheld their child from school on religious grounds on a day that there was promoting gender equality topics. Trans rights and inclusivity were said by some teachers to cause the most ire among parents who were uncomfortable with their children understanding gender outside of the traditional binary. Chloe said "that there is some resistance to [education about trans people] from parents and then that poses a challenge in the classroom because children are coming into the classroom with an attitude that 'this is wrong', it's weird, it's gross." The same teacher said that she's "trying to combat potentially years of what they have heard at home or in their communities." Alex recounted an instance where an advocacy and information group came to the school to speak about gender, which was followed by resistance from students and then multiple complaints from parents. "The parents ended

up calling the school ... really, really unhappy that we were teaching their kids about transgender people and even having these conversations.'

Three of the interviewees referred to efforts by parents to exclude gender content from the curriculum, for example, books on the English curriculum. Maura mentioned that some parents objected to *Of Mice and Men*. Chloe said that "we have had parents actually ... saying that they're going to take their son or daughter out of SPHE classes whenever relationships or sexuality is mentioned." For Patricia, parents' resistance wasn't necessarily on overt ideological grounds. Instead, parents recognized that gender was not a core part of the curriculum and therefore not useful from an academic and exam point of view.

There's always going to be parents who are going to be very sensitive to ... 'you don't need to talk about those kinds of issues. So why are you discussing them? How is that going to help them?' There are parents who are so ... exam focused, [who say] 'they need to be doing a, b and c to get what they need to get? Why are you talking about issues that don't need to be talked about?'

Overall, while parents' resistance was not thought to have a direct impact on what gender topics were taught and how schools practiced inclusion, all of the teachers were cautious about and sometimes fearful of the consequences of parents' resistance and disagreement with the teaching of gender topics, with one teacher, Grainne, admitting to feeling nervous about attending a parent-teacher meeting where parents might vocalize their upset with gender mainstreaming.

Schools were sometimes perceived to be indifferent to gender mainstreaming or in tension with its principles. For example, three of the interviewees referred to the catholic identity and ethos of the school and the challenges that posed for gender mainstreaming given that catholic ideology is misogynistic and transphobic. Rachel said that the catholic identity of the schools posed challenges for students who were among those groups that the catholic church discriminates against. "It can be very kind of difficult for some students, like queer students, for example, to ... fully express themselves." Rachel added that, while there are "more openly gay students or openly queer students ... they're not ... fully supported by [school] management." Grainne referred to feeling "a little bit nervous that [teaching gender issues is] not aligned with catholicism." She added that the resistance was also coming from "other religions as well" who may "fear that we're pushing our agenda. And there's a religious kickback against it." The conservatism of catholic ethos schools was represented in a variety of ways that had the effect of reinforcing binary genders and negating gender identities that do not conform to that. Maura said that her school was resistant to taking out language that referred to 'men' in public-facing communication when she raised the possibility of having more inclusive language. Rachel recounted an example of when her school invited an infamous public figure with outspoken misogynistic and transphobic views to speak to students. Some of the students organized a protest against this. Schools were generally not seen to create significant barriers to the teaching of gender topics and teachers were keen to stress some of the events and activities arranged by schools to promote equality, diversity and inclusion such as Stand Up [LGBTQ + awareness] weeks. However, the deep-rootedness of religious ideology in the Irish educational system was felt by teachers and especially pronounced in schools with a Catholic ethos. To date, there has been little critical attention to the tension between gender mainstreaming as a principle and gender

equality as an accepted social value, and the conservative, heteronormative ideology of catholicism which remains influential in school structures.

Students also resisted engaging with gender topics, according to teachers, and this resistance was very much gendered with women evidencing more openness to gender mainstreaming and men showing indifference or hostility towards it. Chloe articulated this when she said

there's a perception from a lot of the boys that there is no gender inequality in Irish society anymore, that it's all been solved. Whereas the teenage girls I taught were much more [aware of inequality], but they have skin in the game.

Boys' attitudes were perceived to be a significant challenge because they either thought that women had equality and, therefore, there was no need to focus on gender equality, or they were uncomfortable with approaching gender beyond conservative gender binaries. Grainne said that her male students "assume that women are equal ... I don't think they question it. ... Whereas I believe ... that's not the case." Some of the teachers felt that male students were assertively against gender mainstreaming. Maura recalled a story of when the school held a day promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion and understanding. She said that posters that had been put up in her classroom about the day were removed and that "a lot of the older boys refused to participate ... I was shocked." Brian pointed to a growing pushback against gender topics in the classroom and the challenges he faced in managing this.

At the moment in school there's a current trend and in among the boys in particular, to be very kind of very masculine, very ... toxic. I mean four or five boys in every class ... are very outspoken on these issues. And you know, once the issue opens up in the classroom, it can get very animated and keeping a lid on things and trying to maintain a sense of order can be a real struggle.

Maura also referred to a situation in which her male students used language and terminology adopted from the manosphere and that created hierarchies among women and between men and women (Ging 2019). These same students also regulated each other's masculinity by using insults that questioned the boys' heterosexuality when they engaged in activities perceived to be not masculine enough (such as singing in a choir). Tackling gender inequality was, therefore, challenging because students themselves, predominantly male students, either passively or actively resisted and opposed gender mainstreaming on ideological grounds. This opposition was attributed to various factors such as religion, family influence and social media use. Although teachers could not firmly locate the origins of this opposition, definite trends emerged, namely, the rise of the manosphere, incel culture and the misogynistic and anti-trans rhetoric of infamous figures such as Andrew Tate, who was referred to by most teachers.

Growing opposition to gender topics through social media

Widely documented today are the impacts of anti-gender social media spaces and personalities on young people (Roberts and Wescott 2024; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). Schools are perceived as the settings in which such rhetoric is perpetuated and amplified (Rédai 2024). Schools are also tasked with providing the antidote to

anti-gender ideology through gender education (Ging et al. 2024). The teachers in this study found tackling this rise in far-right anti-gender rhetoric challenging to deal with, and most had firsthand experience of encountering in schools phrases or names that are commonly associated with anti-gender, far-right ideology. Andrew Tate was, by far, the most often cited within interviews and across the sample group. Tate, whose infamy rests largely on male domination over women, homophobic rhetoric, and hegemonic masculinity, has become an especially popular social media influencer and celebrity among teenage boys in Western Europe and elsewhere. This popularity has been attributed by some scholars to Tate's synthesis of strategic provocative social media messaging, his use of traditional masculine symbols such as cars and guns, and his promise of power and status to young men and boys, in particular, who may feel their access to gender power is being diminished by cotemporary gender equality and diversity initiatives and politics (Haslop et al. 2024; Nicholas 2023; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). Teachers' reference to Tate was predominantly part of interview discussions about challenges to teaching gender equality and students' engagement with gender issues. All but one of the teachers used it specifically to talk about their concern with male students. Other phrases that were used to suggest teachers' concerns with the rise of anti-gender politics were 'far-right', 'toxic masculinity' and 'cancel culture' all of which were used to describe creeping pushback and opposition to efforts to be more inclusive of women and other minoritized groups in schools and in the curriculum. All of these phrases suggest a growing gender conservatism and anti-equality politics among male students.

Teachers recalled points in time when they had started to recognize and sense this growing opposition to gender equality. Brian stated

[T]he whole Andrew Tate thing ... has popped up ... *quite* a lot in the last few years ... but [in] the last four years literally since [Tate] has started being such a phenomenon for young boys, in particular – I mean ... this discourse has entered the classroom literally solidly from then.

This teacher pointed to the need for better media and digital literacy among the students. Deirdre speculated that the popularity of Tate could be attributed to the pandemic years in which students spent huge amounts of time online and unsupervised. Interviewees also spoke about how students had begun to bring discussions of (and support for) Tate, right-wing politics and anti-gender views into the classroom. Patricia thought that students might be innocently testing boundaries but spoke of instances where she had to explain Tate's misogyny and criminality to the students, who challenged her. "[male students] will sit in a class ... and they will say, 'Oh, Andrew Tate's a great man.' And you go, 'Andrew Tate is a man who has been convicted of trafficking women'. And they go, 'none of that was proven.'" Alan recalled many instances of students using the term 'cancel culture' and claiming they were being censored when they had an opposing view about something and suggested that was reflective of their inability to engage in discussion and debate when there was disagreement about a point. Brian was especially concerned about the return of very conservative views of gender that encouraged a binary of males as active providers and females as passive. This discourse had become quite prevalent among male students.

I've just seen a whole bunch of people literally fall down a rabbit hole in the last few years in the school. A significant bunch of people. I mean we're a school of about 400 kids now, and I would say that 50 or 60 of the boys in the school would be on the extreme edge of those views.

Because teachers have very little training on gender equality and because gender mainstreaming is not advanced explicitly in the curriculum and in schools, teachers felt ill-equipped to address this.

Conclusion

Despite gender mainstreaming being embedded across EU policies and legislation since the 1990s, there remain multiple barriers which inhibit comprehensive teaching of gender equality in secondary schools in Ireland, echoing trends in other European nations (Esteves 2018; Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and José González 2018). In addition, due to the rise in influence of far-right online agitators such as Andrew Tate, these barriers are, in some ways, becoming more difficult to overcome. This is not unique to Ireland, with scholarship from the US, Hungary, Australia and Spain demonstrating the advance of such views rather than their retreat (Ging et al. 2024; Nilan and Gentles 2024; Roberts and Wescott 2024). However, there are some issues that our study has identified that are particular to the Irish context, and which reflect the tensions between the legacy of catholic gender conservatism in society and schools, and the growing impetus towards equality and the expansion of rights for minoritized populations (Calkin and Kaminska 2020; Kitching 2024). For instance, the religious ethos of some schools; the positioning of gender issues within more marginal subjects; the lack of training and guidance for teachers; as well as the concomitant reticence of some teachers to engage with these topics, are all inhibiting factors to the goal of embedding gender mainstreaming across the Irish secondary school curriculum. Short-, medium- and long-term solutions are required to resolve these issues. For example, there was conditional support from the cohort of interviewees for a toolkit of teaching resources that the GEMINI team is currently developing. However, most teachers also acknowledge the rigidity of the curriculum and such a toolkit would need to be adaptable to fit within the current syllabus. Given the existing pressures on teachers in Ireland to deliver an already overloaded curriculum, adapt to recent changes in assessment models (from State exams to continuous assessment), and to work in an under-resourced educational context, any proposals for gender education must pay attention to the labour burden they involve (Harford and Fleming 2023).

Finally, this study had a limited sample of only twelve teachers who volunteered to be involved in the research, suggesting a pre-existing interest in these issues. However, due to commonalities across all interviews, certain aspects such as the influence of the manosphere on teenage boys, as well as the reasons for the inconsistency of how and when gender issues are taught across different subjects, require further investigation. In addition, there is a need for a systematic study of the implementation of the new SPHE curriculum, as well as the barriers to gender mainstreaming across Irish secondary school education, including the nuances that occur between and within different school settings. This study identified many of the barriers to teaching gender equality as recounted by the lived experience of a small group of teachers. Before broader solutions are sought, it will

be important to widen the study to include a larger sample of teachers of different ages, regions and locales, school types and genders and, in particular, including those who are indifferent or resistant to teacher gender equality to gain a better understanding of what causes this.

Note

1. The European Commission Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 defines gender as binarized, thus reinforcing heteronormativity and excluding non-binary identities. The GEMINI project instead understands gender as fluid, as an innate self-expressed identity that is not wholly related to one's sex. GEMINI does not see gender as immutable. However, GEMINI also recognises that localised ideologies and other identity categories like race, religious, and social class may influence how one can express gender and what attitude one may take to gender equality and gender identity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Union (CERV Programme) under grant number 101088073.

Notes on Contributors

Sarah Arnold (sarah.arnold@mu.ie) is Associate Professor at Maynooth University. Her research focuses on gender and media and EDI and media work. Her publications include *Media Graduates at Work* with Anne O'Brien and Páraic Kerrigan (Palgrave 2021), *Gender and Early Television* (Bloomsbury 2021) and she has published articles on similar topics in *Cultural Trends*; *Media, Culture & Society*; *Women's History Review* and *Cultural Industries Journal*. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9774-2550>

Izzy Fox (izzy.fox@mu.ie) is postdoctoral researcher at Maynooth University on the Full Stack Feminism project funded by the AHRC/IRC as well as the GEMINI project funded by the European Union CERV programme. She has a background as a secondary school teacher. Her research interests include intersectional feminism, social media and youth culture. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3705-1904>

ORCID

Sarah Arnold  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9774-2550>

Izzy Fox  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3705-1904>

References

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis." *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health* 11 (4): 589–597.
- Calkin, Sydney, and Monika Ewa Kaminska. 2020. "Persistence and change in morality policy: The role of the Catholic Church in the politics of abortion in Ireland and Poland." *Feminist Review* 124 (1): 86–102.

- Carian, Emily K., Alex DiBranco, and Chelsea Ebin. 2022. *Male supremacy in the United States: From patriarchal traditionalism to misogynist incels and the alt-right*. London: Routledge.
- Cavaghan, Rosalind. 2017. "Bridging rhetoric and practice: New perspectives on barriers to gendered change." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38 (1): 42–63.
- Council of Europe. 2014. "Combating Gender Stereotypes in and through Education, Report of the 2nd Conference of the Council of Europe National Focal Points on Gender Equality, Helsinki, 9-10 October 2014." <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/-combating-gender-stereotypes-in-and-through-education->.
- Council of Europe. 2020. "Gender Equality Commission Steering Committee on Media and Information Society." Accessed on March 24, 2024. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/gender-equality/8286-gender-equality-and-media-analytical-report.html>.
- Dalmaso-Junqueira, Bruna, and Kathryn Moeller. 2024. "An analytic framework for theorizing the anti-gender agenda in education." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 32:1–18.
- Daly, Mary. 2005. "Gender mainstreaming in theory and practice." *Social Politics* 12 (3): 433–450.
- Donnelly, Beau. 2023. "Views of Irish boys as young as seven being 'conditioned' by disgraced influencer." *The Sunday Times UK*, 8 January 2023. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/views-of-irish-boys-as-young-as-seven-being-conditioned-by-disgraced-influencer-andrew-tate>.
- Edström, Jerker, Alan Greig, and Chloe Skinner. 2024. "Patriarchal (Dis) orders: Backlash as Crisis Management." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 49 (2): 277–309.
- EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality). 2019a. "Gender Equality in the National Parliaments across the EU and the European Parliament." Accessed on March 24, 2024. https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-national-parliaments-across-eu-and-european-parliament?language_content_entity=en.
- EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality). 2019b. "Grey Literature on education." Accessed on March 24, 2024. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/grey-literature-education>.
- Enloe, Cynthia. 2017. *The big push: Exposing and challenging the persistence of patriarchy*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Esteves, Maria. 2018. "Gender Equality in Education: A challenge for policy makers." *International Journal of Social Sciences* 4 (2): 893–905.
- Fábián, Katalin, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2017. *Rebellious Parents: Parental Movements in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- GEMINI report. 2024. "Understanding Young Adults and Gender Equality through Serial Drama". GEMINI Project. Accessed on November 23, 2024. https://gemini.unilink.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Attachment_0.pdf.
- Ghail, Mac an, Joan Hanafin Martin, and Paul F. Conway. 2002. *Gender politics and Exploring Masculinities in Irish Education*. Research Report, number 3, 1–270. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.5172.1362>.
- Ging, Debbie. 2019. "Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere." *Men and masculinities* 22 (4): 638–657.
- Ging, Debbie, Jessica Ringrose, Betsy Milne, Tanya Horeck, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Ricardo Castellini da Silva. 2024. "Moving beyond masculine defensiveness and anxiety in the classroom: exploring gendered responses to sexual and gender based violence workshops in England and Ireland." *Gender and Education* 36 (1): 1–18.
- Gouvias, Dionysios, and Christos Alexopoulos. 2018. "Sexist stereotypes in the language textbooks of the Greek primary school: a multidimensional approach." *Gender and Education* 30 (5): 642–662.
- Graff, Agnieszka, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2022. *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. London: Routledge.
- Griffin, Marie. 2019. "Catholic schools in Ireland today—a changing sector in a time of change." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 108 (429): 55–63.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie, and Mark Pollack. 2009. "Mainstreaming gender in the European Union: Getting the incentives right." *Comparative European Politics* 7 (1): 114–138.

- Harford, Judith, and Brian Fleming. 2023. "Teacher supply in Ireland: anatomy of a crisis." *Irish Educational Studies*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2222709>.
- Haslop, Craig, Jessica Ringrose, Idil Cambazoglu, and Betsy Milne. 2024. "Mainstreaming the Manosphere's Misogyny Through Affective Homosocial Currencies: Exploring How Teen Boys Navigate the Andrew Tate Effect." *Social Media + Society* 10 (1): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205630512412228>.
- Hennink, Monique, Inga Hutter, and Ajay Bailey. 2020. *Qualitative research methods*. London: Sage.
- Inglis, Tom. 2017. "Church and culture in Catholic Ireland." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106 (421): 21–30.
- Jones, Callum, Verity Trott, and Scott Wright. 2020. "Sluts and soyboys: MGTOW and the production of misogynistic online harassment." *New media & society* 22 (10): 1903–1921.
- Keating, Avril, Debora Hinderliter Ortloff, and Stavroula Philippou. 2009. "Citizenship education curricula: the changes and challenges presented by global and European integration." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41 (2): 145–158.
- Kerr, Barbara. 2000. "Guiding gifted girls and young women." In *International handbook of giftedness and talent*, edited by Kurt A. Heller, Franz J. Mönks, Robert J Sternberg, and Rena F. Subotnik, 649–657. Oxford: Elsevier Science.
- Kitching, Karl. 2024. "The reactionary use of concepts of secularism, pluralism and freedom of expression: implications for education studies." *Irish Educational Studies*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2024.2359690>.
- Kollmayer, Marlene, Barbara Schober, and Christiane Spiel. 2018. "Gender stereotypes in education: Development, consequences, and interventions." *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 15 (4): 361–377.
- Kuhar, Roman, and Aleš Zobec. 2017. "The anti-gender movement in Europe and the educational process in public schools." *CEPS journal* 7 (2): 29–46.
- Lahelma, Elina. 2014. "Troubling discourses on gender and education." *Educational Research* 56 (2): 171–183.
- Lahelma, Elina, and Pirkko Hynninen. 2012. "Gender equality in Finnish teacher education." In *Education for Social Justice, Equity and Diversity: An Honorary Volume for Professor Anne-Lise Arnesen*, edited by Torill Strand, and Merethe Roos, 109–130. Berlin: LIT.
- National Council for Women in Ireland. 2023. "Second level education key to eliminating violence against women, says National Women's Council." Accessed on November 23, 2024. https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/second_level_education_key_to_eliminating_violence_against_women_says_nwci.
- Nicholas, Lucy. 2023. "Young Masculinities, Masculinism, Backlash, and the Complexities of Fostering Change." *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 7 (2): 1–8.
- Nilan, Pam, and Tim Gentles. 2024. "Thinking sociologically about young people and the far-right." In *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Youth*, edited by Judith Bessant, Philippa Collin, and Patrick O'Keeffe, 39–52. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- O'Brien, Carl. 2024. "Teachers should not be forced to deliver 'sensitive' sex education classes – union." *The Irish Times*, September 3, 2024.
- Osadán, Róbert, Mária Belešová, and Lenka Szentesiová. 2018. "Sissies, Sportsmen and Moms Standing Over Stoves. Gender Aspect of Readers and Mathematics Textbooks for Primary Education in Slovakia." *Foro de Educación* 16 (25): 243–261.
- Paternotte, David, and Roman Kuhar. 2018. "Disentangling and locating the "global right": Anti-gender campaigns in Europe." *Politics and Governance* 6 (3): 6–19.
- Payne, Elizabeth C., and Melissa J. Smith. 2018. "Refusing relevance: School administrator resistance to offering professional development addressing LGBTQ issues in schools." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 54 (2): 183–215.
- Picken, Natalie. 2020. "Sexuality education across the European Union." EU publications. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/869234>.
- Rédai, Dorottya. 2021. "Comparative overview of the capacity of the education systems of five Central Eastern European countries to adapt to changing gender roles." CEU Democracy Institute. Accessed November 23, 2024. <https://cps.ceu.edu/publications/working-paper/comparative-overview-capacity-education-systems-five-central-eastern>.

- Rédai, Dorottya. 2024. "‘Leave our Kids Alone.’ Child Protection, Sex Education, LGBT+ Rights and Anti-Gender Politics in Hungary." In *Transnational Anti-Gender Politics: Feminist Solidarity in Times of Global Attacks*, edited by Aiko Holvikivi, Billy Holzberg, and Tomás Ojeda, 141–116. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Rivas, Carol. 2012. "Coding and analysing qualitative data." In *Researching society and culture*, edited by Clive Seale, 367–392. London: Sage.
- Roberts, Steven, and Stephanie Wescott. 2024. "To quell the problem, we must name the problem: the role of social media ‘manfluencers’ in boys’ sexist behaviours in school settings." *Educational and Developmental Psychologist* 41 (2): 125–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20590776.2024.2329083>.
- Rogošić, Silvia, and Branislava Baranović. 2024. "Gender Sensitivity of Teacher Education Curricula in the Republic of Croatia." *Open Education Studies* 6 (1): 1–12.
- Venegas, Mar. 2022. "Relationships and sex education in the age of anti-gender movements: what challenges for democracy?" *Sex education* 22 (4): 481–495.
- Verge, Tània, Mariona Ferrer-Fons, and M. José González. 2018. "Resistance to mainstreaming gender into the higher education curriculum." *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25 (1): 86–101.
- Vida, Bianka. 2021. "Policy framing and resistance: Gender mainstreaming in Horizon 2020." *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 28 (1): 26–41.
- Weiner, Gaby. 2000. "A critical review of gender and teacher education in Europe." *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 8 (2): 233–247.
- Wescott, Stephanie, Steven Roberts, and Xuenan Zhao. 2024. "The problem of anti-feminist ‘manfluencer’ Andrew Tate in Australian schools: women teachers’ experiences of resurgent male supremacy." *Gender and Education* 36 (2): 167–182.