

Gatekeeping Gender Equality: Curriculum Politics in Lithuanian Education

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Abstract. This article investigates the challenges of implementing gender equality education in Lithuanian schools through the *Life Skills Programme*. By combining feminist pedagogy and discourse analysis, it reveals how gatekeeping by institutional actors and community resistance undermines national efforts at gender mainstreaming. The analysis demonstrates that gender equality education is a contested space shaped by ideological conflicts and power relations, rather than a straightforward curricular reform. The study highlights the need for ongoing engagement with both structural and human factors to foster meaningful change in post-socialist educational contexts.

Keywords: gender equality, education, Lithuania, Life Skills Programme.

Lyčių lygybės užtikrinimas: ugdymo turinio politika Lietuvos švietime

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami iššūkiai, su kuriais susiduriama siekiant įgyvendinti lyčių lygybės ugdymą Lietuvos mokyklose, daugiausia dėmesio skiriama Gyvenimo įgūdžių programai. Remiantis feministinės pedagogikos principais, Foucault įkvėpta diskurso analize ir autoetnografiniu požiūriu, atskleidžiama, kaip trikdžiai – nuo ministerijų iki savivaldybių ir mokyklų administracijų – bei bendruomenių pasipriešinimas (ypač iš vadinamųjų susirūpinusių tėvų) sistemingai silpnina nacionalines pastangas integruoti lyčių lygybę į švietimo turinį.

Straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad lyčių lygybės ugdymas nėra neutralus ar savaime suprantamas reformų procesas – tai ideologiškai ginčytina sritis, kurioje susiduria skirtingi galios santykiai, normos ir politiniai interesai. Nors formalūs dokumentai deklaruoja įtrauktį, realioje praktikoje dažnai pasireiškia atsargus, fragmentinis ar net vengiantis požiūris į tokias temas, kaip antai lytinė tapatybė ar lytiškumo ugdymas.

Tyrimas rodo, kad prasmingam pokyčiui reikia ne tik politinio valingumo, bet ir nuoseklaus darbo įveikiant struktūrines kliūtis, vertybinius konfliktus bei gerinti pedagogų pasirengimą. Tokia švietimo reforma reikalauja kantraus, daugiasluoksnio dialogo tarp politikos, institucijų ir bendruomenių.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: lyčių lygybė, ugdymas, Lietuva, Gyvenimo įgūdžių programa

Introduction and Methodological Framework

Gender equality in education is not only a pedagogical concern but also a fundamentally political one. Education systems, and the curricula they implement, are among the most enduring instruments through which societies transmit norms, values, and hierarchies (Apple, 2004; Arnot, 2002). As such, they become key arenas in which struggles over

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identity, recognition, and citizenship are played out. When gender equality enters the educational sphere, it rarely does so as a neutral policy initiative; rather, it enters as a contested idea, subject to negotiation, reinterpretation, resistance, or outright rejection. Positioned in these tensions, this article aims to investigate how gender equality is framed, negotiated, and resisted in national education policy in Lithuania within the frameworks of primary and secondary education, with a specific focus on the *Life Skills Programme* (Gyvenimo įgūdžių programa). It examines curriculum-making as a site of ideological struggle and institutional gatekeeping. As such, this analysis is situated within poststructuralist and intersectional feminist theory, viewing education as a site where power and identity are actively constructed.

This complexity gives rise to a paradox: while education systems are tasked with implementing international gender equality standards, they are simultaneously shaped by national ideologies that may resist or reinterpret those very goals. On the one hand, education is a site where international commitments to gender mainstreaming are expected to materialize – in lesson plans, textbooks, teacher practices, and classroom interactions (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007; UNESCO, 2015). On the other hand, education is deeply embedded in local institutional and cultural frameworks that may resist or reinterpret those same commitments. Curriculum development, in particular, becomes a battlefield of meanings. Seemingly innocuous phrases like ‘equal opportunities’ or ‘non-stereotypical roles’ are subject to political negotiation, often stripped of their critical edge to avoid backlash (Marshall & Arnot, 2002; Arnot, 2002).

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in post-socialist societies such as Lithuania, where discourses of gender equality intersect with national histories of occupation, liberalization, and efforts toward cultural retraditionalization (Žvinklienė, 2016; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). However, similar tensions have been observed in other national contexts, especially in relation to sexuality education, where the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in the curricula has sparked politicized debates over the national identity, moral values, and the perceived imposition of foreign ideologies (Ferreira, 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Epstein & Helms, 2017).

A recent Lithuanian example is certainly illustrative: during a parliamentary debate in 2022 over the proposed revisions to the Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence, an initial clause was aimed to introduce “non-stereotypical gender roles” into educational materials (Juškaitė, 2022). This provision was removed and replaced with alternative wording which referred instead to “respecting the dignity of each person”, a move intended to placate political actors opposed to what they termed ‘gender ideology’ (Juškaitė, 2022). Such shifts, while subtle on the surface, signal a broader reluctance to embrace the full implications of gender equality in education. Moreover, these debates reveal a broader global pattern in which the educational content related to gender and sexuality becomes a symbolic battleground for competing visions of citizenship, belonging, and cultural legitimacy.

Importantly, these political tensions cascade down the governance chain – from the Parliament to the Ministry, from the Ministry to municipal education departments, and

from there into the school administration offices and classrooms. Each level presents potential points of resistance, reinterpretation, or dilution (Husu, 2004; Bagga-Gupta et al., 2021).

As such, this article focuses on the politics of curriculum development in Lithuania, while specifically examining how gender equality is being framed, negotiated, and resisted in the national education policy, focusing on school education – specifically, primary and secondary education. The analysis centers on the *Life Skills Programme* as a key case of an attempted curriculum reform, exploring how gender equality language is diluted or contested during the policymaking and dissemination process. Emphasis is placed on the role of institutional gatekeepers who interpret, implement, or obstruct these reforms. By tracing how feminist concepts are translated through bureaucratic and political filters, the article highlights the structural and ideological barriers that hinder transformative educational change.

To examine these dynamics, this article adopts a qualitative, feminist, and situated methodological framework, while integrating two interconnected approaches:

- *Discourse Analysis*: Parliamentary debates, public commentary, curriculum documents, and institutional communications are analyzed in order to identify how gender equality is framed, silenced, or strategically reframed. Particular attention is paid to language shifts, such as the substitution of ‘gender equality’ with more politically palatable terms like ‘respect’ or ‘dignity’. This approach follows the tradition of critical discourse analysis that views language as constitutive of social realities and power relations (Fairclough, 1992). This article draws primarily on poststructuralist and intersectional feminist theory, which interrogates the power-laden production of knowledge and its implications for identity and institutional practice (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).
- *Theoretical Synthesis*: The analysis is grounded in feminist pedagogical theory and critical curriculum studies. These frameworks are used not only to interpret findings but also to critically reflect on the epistemological assumptions embedded in curriculum design and educational reform (Apple, 2004; Arnot, 2002). They offer conceptual tools to interrogate how power operates through seemingly technical processes of curriculum-making and educational planning.

These methods are not applied in a linear or compartmentalized way, but are, instead, interwoven throughout the research process. The autoethnographic component¹ informs both the choice of data and the interpretation of institutional dynamics; discourse analy-

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sis provides a structured lens through which to scrutinize official texts and policy statements; and theoretical synthesis allows for a broader critical reflection on the structural conditions and ideological struggles that shape the curriculum content.

By bringing these approaches together, this article aims to contribute to a growing body of feminist educational scholarship that understands curriculum not as a neutral vessel of knowledge but as a site of ideological struggle (Apple, 2004; Arnot, 2002; Weiler, 1988; Connell, 1993; Gore, 1993). In the Lithuanian context, the school curriculum becomes a symbolic frontier where meanings of gender, equality, tradition, and national identity are continuously negotiated.

It is also important to consider my positionality when approaching these matters. This work emerges from a position of both proximity and critique. I am a Lithuanian researcher educated abroad – specifically, within Western European academic settings that emphasized feminist and poststructuralist theory. My insider-outsider status has afforded both access and distance. On the one hand, I have been embedded in national-level equality initiatives, collaborating with state institutions, NGOs, and international donors. On the other hand, I often encounter skepticism about my ‘Western’ framing of gender or the perceived elitism of academic feminism. These tensions surface in training sessions, curriculum consultations, and policy discussions – spaces that are as emotionally charged as they are intellectually challenging.

Beyond Access: Gender Equality as a Multidimensional Concern

Education is not a neutral space. It is a domain where power is exercised, norms are enforced, and identities are shaped. As feminist scholars have long argued, the classroom is a battleground for gender ideologies, both explicit and hidden (Arnot, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989). In Lithuania, gender equality in education must be considered beyond the question of formal access; it must address content, delivery, interpersonal dynamics, and the institutional culture.

Oxfam’s framework of ‘beyond access’ (Unterhalter, 2007) proves particularly useful here. It challenges the assumption that equal enrolment translates into meaningful equality, instead insisting that the quality of education and the dismantling of school-based discrimination are central to any feminist educational agenda.

In Lithuania, however, this broader approach is still struggling to take root. *Gender-Based Violence* (GBV), *School-Related Gender-Based Violence* (SRGBV), and pervasive gender stereotypes are prevalent, yet largely unaddressed in formal curricula. In this article, GBV is understood as violence directed at individuals based on their gender identity or perceived gender roles, including physical, psychological, and symbolic harm rooted in unequal power relations (UN Women, 2020; Council of Europe, 2011). SRGBV, being a subset of GBV, refers specifically to acts of violence or harassment that occur in and around educational settings and are influenced by gendered power dynamics (UNESCO, 2019).

While the scope of gender-based violence in Lithuanian schools remains underresearched, examples from other countries help to illuminate the magnitude of the issue. In

2020, several activists in the United Kingdom launched *Everyone's Invited*, a website designed as a platform for students to anonymously share experiences of SRGBV (Everyone's Invited, 2020). Within days, thousands of testimonies were submitted, revealing systemic abuse in UK schools. This prompted a national review by Ofsted (2021), which found that sexual harassment and online abuse had become 'routine' for students, particularly girls, and that most incidents went unreported or unnoticed by school staff. The Ofsted review emphasized the disconnect between the institutional policy and the lived student experience, noting that many teachers were unaware of the extent of the problem or lacked the tools to intervene (Ofsted, 2021). Advocates have since linked SRGBV to adverse mental health outcomes, including suicidal ideation among teenagers (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

Given the prevalence of bullying in Lithuania and existing data on homophobic and gendered bullying (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2020; Lithuanian Gay League, 2015), it is reasonable to assume that a similar research initiative would uncover comparable findings. This underscores the importance of integrating gender equality into school environments – not only as a curriculum topic but as a structural and cultural commitment to safety and dignity. As such, gender equality must be recognized as a foundational component of both access to education and the right to a safe educational environment. Even when school policies formally commit to addressing GBV, effective implementation depends on whether staff identify incidents as gender-based and feel empowered to act.

In Lithuania, the primary vehicle for raising this awareness has been civil society-led training initiatives, often funded on a project basis by the European Commission (EC), which means that they last from 2 to 4 years, and are often contingent on changing EC priorities and regional competition. While effective in isolated instances, these initiatives cannot compensate for lack of sustained institutional support as well as for lack of teacher education frameworks, which continues to undermine long-term change.

Ultimately, the question remains whether the curriculum reform, particularly the inclusion of gender equality principles in national frameworks such as the *Life Skills Programme*, can serve as a durable strategy for confronting stereotypes and SRGBV. As this article argues, without political will and institutional accountability, even well-designed curricula risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than transformative tools.

Curriculum as a Site of Ideological Struggle: Gender, Power, and Pedagogy in Lithuanian Education

As critical curriculum theorists such as Michael Apple (1979) and Paulo Freire (1970) have long argued, education is an ideological act. The selection of the curriculum content – what is included, what is excluded, and how topics are framed – is always a political decision. John N. Moyer (2019) conceptualizes curriculum as a racecourse – something that not only sets a direction for learners but also restricts them to particular paths, boundaries, and destinations. In the context of the Lithuanian educational reform, especially regarding gender equality, curriculum becomes a highly contested space where

ideological, institutional, and epistemological forces collide. These reactions expose the curriculum's ideological underpinning: it is a vehicle not just for learning but for nation-building, moral instruction, and identity regulation.

As Alvarado and Ferguson (1983) note, what is presented in the classroom is never the world itself but a representation of the world – an assemblage of preferred discourses that are embedded in institutional structures. In Lithuania, the ‘preferred discourse’ often omits or sanitizes the concept of gender equality, replacing it with euphemisms such as “mutual respect” or “equal obligations in the family”. These shifts are not accidental; they reflect a calculated effort to depoliticize and neutralize potentially transformative concepts. The result is a form of epistemic gatekeeping, where feminist and human rights discourses are allowed only insofar as they do not challenge the dominant narratives.

Feminist pedagogy offers a contrasting framework, one that positions the classroom as a space of critical consciousness, where students are invited to reflect on their social location, question power dynamics, and co-create knowledge (hooks, 1994; Ellsworth, 1989). Feminist pedagogy also demands that the experiences of marginalized groups be recognized as valid sources of knowledge. In the context of gender equality education, this means centering the lived realities of girls, LGBTQ+ students, and those who do not conform to normative gender expectations. However, in Lithuania, such frameworks remain marginal within the official education discourse, where even acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ identities can provoke backlash. The current curriculum frameworks claim to be inclusive, but they often perpetuate a logic of conditional inclusion: gender equality is acceptable so long as it does not challenge heteronormativity or patriarchy. In doing so, they contribute to a pedagogy of evasion (Ellsworth, 1989), where the hardest questions are never asked, and the most uncomfortable truths are never named.

Finally, curriculum-making in Lithuania must be understood through its local bureaucratic topography. The multiple layers of authority – from the Parliament to the Ministry to municipal departments to school leadership – create numerous chokepoints where progressive curricula can get diluted, delayed, or derailed. Each layer is shaped by its own institutional culture, personnel, and political pressures, often resulting in what Verloo and Lombardo (2007) term a “layered meaning-making process”.

The challenges of developing a comprehensive sexuality and gender equality education curriculum, as well as implementing it in Lithuania, have been extensively mapped by Akvilė Giniotaitė (2018; 2019; 2020), Marius Bytautas and Sigitas Daukilas (2022; 2023), as well as Augustė Nalivaikė (2020). These theoretical tensions crystallize in the case of the *Life Skills Programme*, Lithuania's most recent attempt at a national-level curriculum reform that engages (at least nominally) with gender equality and sexuality education, which came into practice in 2023 as the most recent institutional and governmental means of developing a national gender equality and sexuality curriculum for school years 1 to 10, i.e., primary and secondary education. Up until then, these notions had been attempted to be outlined in the *Health and Sexuality Education and Preparation for Family Life Programme* (Sveikatos ir lytiškumo ugdymo bei rengimo šeimai programa, SLURŠ), which came into effect in 2016.

Akvilė Giniotaitė outlined the difficulties of implementing SLURŠ as a holistic set of challenging circumstances: “[M]okytojai neturi bendros lytiškumo ugdymo sampratos. Mokytojai arba nėra susipažinę su Sveikatos ir lytiškumo ugdymo bei rengimo šeimai bendrąja programa, arba ją vertina skeptiškai, kaip neatitinkančią jų pažiūrų ar nepateikiančią pakankamai praktiškai pritaikomų priemonių” [“Teachers do not have a comprehensive understanding of sexuality education. Teachers either are not acquainted with the Health and Sexuality Education and Preparation for Family Life programme, or view it with skepticism as something that does not align with their values or does not give enough means for practical implementation”; *translation mine*] (2018). Most importantly, “Mokytojai jaučiasi palikti likimo valiai, <...> bijo visuomenės, tėvų, kolegų reakcijos, kalbant lytiškumo temomis” [“Teachers feel left alone, <...> they are afraid of society, parents, the reactions of colleagues when talking about sexuality education”; *translation mine*] (Giniotaitė, 2018). Indeed, a teacher might personally support gender equality but feel professionally vulnerable if introducing such topics without official backing or clear guidance.

The development of GIP was viewed as a chance of improving SLURŠ. However, the development of its curriculum and the beginning of its implementation were marked by public outrage, negotiations and compromises (Murauskaitė, 2023). As of 2025, the debates around its implementation are still ongoing (Kubilius, 2025). It is of importance to note that whereas the public outrage focused predominantly on the aspects of sexuality education in the curriculum, the programme itself covers a wide array of topics, such as healthy living habits, first aid, addiction, conflict resolution and others – whereas aspects pertaining to sexuality education make up only 10–15% of the programme itself, which was a source of critique for the programme, too (Drėgvaitė, 2024).

Terminology and Space for Bias

Indeed, several aspects of the curriculum use diplomatic language, for example, by not outlining a connection between gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, a link that has been outlined by various gender equality and violence experts (UNESCO, 2019). A set of recommendations developed for the programme in 2021 by human rights experts urged to act in a different manner: “<...> Gyvenimo įgūdžių programos bendrosios programos įgyvendinimo rekomendacijos <...> neintegruoja lyties aspekto, taip pat neakcentuoja smurto ir smurto lyties pagrindu ištakų, t. y. turimų nuostatų, suformuojančių nelygybę ir palankią terpę smurtui bei patyčioms lyties pagrindu mokyklos aplinkoje” [“The recommendations for the implementation of the Life Skills Programme <...> do not include the aspect of gender, nor do they mention the roots of violence and gender-based violence, i.e., attitudes and beliefs that create a space for violence and gender-based bullying in the school environment to fester”; *translation mine*] (Drėgvaitė, Gabrieliūtė, and Zmitrevičiūtė, 2021). However, the final curriculum does not use GBV as a term; it uses ‘violence’ and outlines different aspects of domestic violence, such as psychological violence and physical violence, without making the connection to gender.

Terminology and its usage is crucial here, as critically revised terminology may allow for smaller spaces for interpretation and bias. The language used in curricula is never incidental; it is a central mechanism through which ideological boundaries are drawn and maintained. Critical discourse theorists such as Fairclough (1995) and Bacchi (2009) have argued that policy language both reflects and constructs social realities – what Bacchi terms the ‘problem representation’ within policy texts. In the context of the Lithuanian curriculum reform, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, terminology becomes a subtle but powerful battleground. Euphemistic phrases such as ‘mutual respect’ or ‘equal obligations in the family’ often replace more politically charged concepts like ‘gender equality’ or ‘gender-based violence’, as displayed in the debates around the proposed law changes in 2022 (Juškaitė, 2022). These substitutions are not neutral – they function to depoliticize the content that might otherwise challenge the dominant cultural narratives and power structures.

This discursive sanitization is a form of what Fraser (2000) would call misrecognition: the denial of specific social injustices by refusing to name them. When terms like ‘gender’ or ‘LGBTQ+’ are omitted or diluted, the curriculum fails to acknowledge the lived experiences of students whose identities do not conform to dominant norms. In doing so, it produces what Ellsworth (1989) calls a “pedagogy of evasion” – a mode of teaching that avoids discomfort at the cost of critical engagement. Moreover, the ambiguity left by vague terminology creates space for personal and institutional bias in interpretation and implementation. In this way, language itself becomes a tool of epistemic gatekeeping, where transformative pedagogical intent is subordinated to the politics of respectability and consensus.

Notably, the Life Skills Programme curriculum does use the term ‘gender equality’. The vulnerability, however, lies elsewhere. The curriculum itself, being recently developed, as a text, offers little guidance as to how teachers ought to interpret or deliver its content, displaying a space for personal and institutional bias in usage and interpretation. For example, in year 1, gender equality is listed under sustainable development, and is mentioned in the following context: “Analizuodami santykių įvairovę, klasės mokinių panašumus ir skirtumus, pomėgius, gebėjimus ir talentus tyrinėja, kas yra lyčių lygybė ir kuo ji svarbi bendruomenei” [“While analysing the variety of relationships, the similarities and differences between classmates, as well as hobbies, abilities and talents, [students] explore what is gender equality and how it is important for the community”; *translation mine*] (Emokykla, n.d.). In year 2, the notion of gender equality reappears and is named thus: “Diskutuoja apie lyčių lygybę, lyčių vaidmenis, žmonių santykius, meilę ir atsakomybę” [“[Pupils] discuss gender equality, gender roles, relationships between people, love and responsibility”; *translation mine*] (Emokykla, n.d.). Neither the curriculum, nor the Ministry offers definitions of these terms, leaving space for interpretation. Bearing in mind the complexity of the debates surrounding gender equality and its terminology in Lithuania, this opens an array of possible manifestations of bias.

While the curriculum does not avoid mentioning gender equality, it does, however, avoid explicitly mentioning a discussion on sexual orientation or gender identity. Sexual

orientation appears in year 6, listed under relationships and cooperation, cultural identity and community, and cultural diversity: “Analizuoja informacijos sklaidą, reklamą ir visuomenės nuomonės formavimą įvairiose žiniasklaidos priemonėse ir mokosi argumentuoti, kada žmonių skirtumai vaizduojami netinkamai (pvz., seksualinė orientacija, stereotipai)” [“Pupils] analyze information dissemination, advertising and the formation of public opinion in various media outlets, and learn how to argue when noticing that the differences between people are displayed in an unfitting manner (for example, sexual orientation, stereotypes <...>”; *translation mine*] (Emokykla, n.d.).

It is of importance to note that a set of recommendations was also produced to go alongside the curriculum, both for primary and secondary education (Šukytė & Požėla, 2023). These resources are publicly available online, however, they depend on the willingness of the teacher to look for them and use them. This can lead to what Arnot (2002) describes as the reproduction of inequality through both overt and hidden curricula. Teachers become unwitting agents of the status quo, enacting “preferred discourses” (Alvarado & Ferguson, 1983) that reflect their own biases rather than the transformative intent of the curriculum.

Of course, curricula alone cannot address these challenges – and teacher training is essential within these processes. While teacher training programmes for the *Life Skills Programme* were launched in 2023, they consisted of 270 academic hours (or 10 ECTS) to cover the entirety of the programme and were implemented by two universities – Vytautas Magnus University and Vilnius University, which means that a limited number of teachers could be enrolled in the courses at a time. When the curriculum came into practice in 2023, a teacher of any subject could teach it, however, starting in 2026, only teachers who had completed the training programme would be allowed to continue to teach the subject.

The combination of the limited available trainings as well as the space for terminological interpretation suggests a vulnerability in implementation. The limited access to training and the permissiveness in teacher background until 2026 risks creating a deeply uneven landscape of implementation, where some students receive progressive, inclusive instruction, whereas others are exposed to conservative, and even exclusionary interpretations; however, it is the understandable reality of implementing long-term reforms, especially given the backlash against the programme’s implementation.

To sum up, curriculum development and implementation in Lithuania serves as a nexus of ideological struggle, institutional power, and cultural resistance. It reflects not only what is taught but also what is allowed to be imagined. As such, the curriculum reform aimed at promoting gender equality must grapple not only with the content and pedagogy but also with the underlying structures of recognition, authority, and legitimacy that govern the educational practice.

Without this critical awareness, efforts at a reform risk becoming symbolic gestures – curricula that speak the language of equality but risk delivering the lessons of conformity.

Gatekeeping in Education Policy and Practice

Numerous gatekeepers must also be added into this equation of knowledge production as well as curricula-making and implementation. Gatekeeping, as a mechanism of control and exclusion, plays a central challenge in the educational system's response to gender equality initiatives. It can operate at multiple levels, from ministries to municipal education departments to individual school principals and teachers, and takes many forms: bureaucratic inertia, withholding of resources, refusal to implement national recommendations, or the silent editing of controversial terms in curricular language.

Husu (2004) defines gatekeeping as influencing access, resources, agenda-setting, and the external image of a field. In Lithuania, gatekeepers in these various levels can frequently resist directives from national equality bodies, citing “lack of official instruction”, “local values”, or “institutional unpreparedness”, going as far as to launch a petition to prevent the *Life Skills Programme* from being implemented (Zulonaitė, 2023) while attempting to prove that the *Programme* is in breach of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, however, unsuccessfully (Lietuvos teismai, 2024).

An illustrative example comes from personal experience while distributing a methodology guide on creating safe school environments. Despite being accompanied by official endorsement letters, several municipal departments refused to distribute the materials to schools in their jurisdictions. Their rationale was that gender equality was not explicitly mandated by the Ministry and was deemed ideologically controversial. This form of passive resistance reveals how municipal officials function as ideological gatekeepers, filtering national or international directives through their own beliefs and values. As a result, national efforts to mainstream gender equality in education often break down at the point of implementation – not due to resource scarcity but due to ideological disagreement.

Within the framework of the *Life Skills Programme* and its implementation, it is important to note the autonomy maintained by municipalities, school boards and schools in choosing how aspects of the curriculum should be implemented – according to the developers of the curriculum, approximately 70% of the programme materials are taught, with teachers mostly avoiding the topics surrounding sexuality education (Kubilius, 2025).

While institutional resistance to gender equality in education has been widely acknowledged, equally significant is the opposition that arises from below, particularly from the so-called ‘concerned parents’ and community actors. In Lithuania, recent debates around the *Life Skills Programme* have mobilized parent groups who perceive the gender equality content as threatening to the traditional family values – these actors often operate through school councils, local forums, or social media networks, framing gender-inclusive education as a form of ideological imposition, going as far as to spread disinformation about the programme (15min.lt, 2023).

This form of grassroots gatekeeping has been explored by Akvilė Giniotaitė (2022), who argues that parental resistance is not simply spontaneous, but structured by broader discourses of moral panic, national identity, and religious conservatism. Her research

shows that such parents frequently invoke the language of ‘protection’ and ‘parental rights’ to challenge curricular reforms, echoing transnational anti-gender movements documented across Central and Eastern Europe (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). These contestations often pressure teachers and school administrators into censoring or diluting the gender-related content, even when it aligns with the national education standards.

Moreover, the fear of parental backlash creates a chilling effect, discouraging educators from fully implementing progressive curricula. In this sense, ‘concerned parents’ function as informal but powerful gatekeepers, contributing to what can be described as ideological surveillance within the school environment. Their influence highlights the need to consider not only institutional but also community-level resistance in any analysis of gender equality in education.

Conclusion

This article has explored the fraught landscape of gender equality education in Lithuania, highlighting the systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers that impede a meaningful curriculum reform. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from feminist pedagogy, curriculum studies, and Foucauldian analysis, as well as grounded autoethnographic insight, it has argued that curriculum is not merely a pedagogical tool but a contested terrain where competing ideologies, institutional gatekeeping, and national anxieties are enacted.

The Lithuanian case exemplifies the complexities of implementing gender mainstreaming in educational settings, especially in post-socialist contexts where Western feminist discourses are often met with suspicion or hostility and are perceived as ‘Trojan horses’, carrying potentially damaging ideologies.

Gatekeeping practices, both formal and informal, undermine these reforms at multiple junctures. From municipal officials who withhold resources to teachers who reproduce stereotypes, the chain of implementation is vulnerable to ideological resistance and administrative inertia. These patterns demonstrate the necessity of thinking about the curriculum not as a static document, but rather as a dynamic process mediated by human actors situated within power-laden structures.

It is important to note, however, that the *Life Skills Programme* is the most ambitious attempt at a national gender equality and sexuality curriculum to date, and there needs to be more research, both qualitative and quantitative, to evaluate its implementation in schools. As witnessed in praxis, each municipality, school and classroom can serve as an individual cosmos holding the tensions this article has aimed to explore, and vary significantly. These variations can serve both as a vulnerability and a strength, offering possibilities of rupture and change. Ultimately, this article underscores that gender equality education is not just about content, but about structures of recognition, authority, and legitimacy.

Reform cannot be achieved solely through documents or policies – it requires long-term investment in relationships, trust, and a shared vision of what justice in education can look like.

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