

# Between Innocence and Sexual Subjectivity: Childhood, Adolescence, and Sexualities

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Although sexuality is seen as an important part of the lives of individuals as well as a significant social issue with regard to the general health and well-being of individuals, an issue that invites considerations of human rights and social justice, the combination of sexuality and children seems contradictory or even dangerous. That may be because, since the Romantic era, childhood has been framed by a discourse of innocence. On the one hand, the concept of innocence brought about a higher level of protection and care of children; however, on the other hand, it positioned them as asexual or presexual beings and denied them sexual agency and responsivity. This concept of innocence also tends to be applied unequally, more frequently around certain (privileged) groups of children, while other children are neglected based on their race, class, ethnicity, or geopolitical location. Child sexual innocence has also become an important point of contention in what have been called “the culture wars.” By culture wars we refer to the conflict between the conservative and liberal approaches to the organisation of society which has invoked moral panics around human sexuality, particularly around the presumed sexual innocence of children. Sex education has become a primary axis of the culture war that erupted in the 1990s in the USA and we see similar conflicts in Slovakia, Poland or Hungary. Conservatives in a global anti-gender movement focus on sex education, especially around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth. While in some places in some countries the rights of children in general, transgender children, and LGBTQ+ identified children and adolescents are included in human rights advocacy around sex education, their legal rights are debated and sometimes won, in other places and other countries lawmakers introduce and pass laws that restrict sex education and legitimise legislation against LGBTQ+. Hungary,



for example, passed a law banning LGBT content in schools, children's TV, or books. Polish lawmakers have recently proposed a 'Stop LGBT' bill, which would ban pride parades and other public gatherings deemed to 'promote' same-sex relationships.

Feminist research has always been closely connected and overlapping with research in the field of sexuality and feminist theory has helped to unpack the connections that have been made for political purposes between sexuality and the true protection of children. Therefore, we see the feminist examination of childhood and adolescent sexualities as a necessary focus for contemporary societies currently facing a conservative backlash.

Our aim for this special issue was to create a space for these topics in *Gender and Research*. To this end, we offer three texts that describe experiences from three continents, all of which show that a feminist transnational perspective can be useful for a comparison of national and regional specifics of the anti-gender backlash. We see in these articles that activists are fighting similar battles across the planet.

The first text analyses the sex education curricula in Kazakhstan. Aizada Arystanbek shows the symbiosis of nationalism and the patriarchal mechanisms that shape sexuality and argues that the lack of comprehensive sexuality education in the country is consistent with the positioning of women as passive subjects, whose bodies are weaponised to delineate cultural and national differences. We are confident that readers from around the world will likely find similarities when reading of features in their approach to teaching sexuality.

Anelise Gregis Estivalet's analysis focuses on the anti-gender movement in Argentina and Brazil and shows that, however much the ideas and demands of this movement spring from religious sources, they are currently increasingly seeking to legitimise their narrative with reference to science and the legal order. She argues that the anti-gender movement is trying to present its demands as more universal and defensible to a more secular people and government, and perhaps is making headway. This finding is a warning to those who believe that they are more protected from feminist backlash because of the church's reduced role in state politics in their own countries.

While not specific to the anti-gender movement, the text by Penny Harvey, Juhwan Seo, and Emily Logan, 'Queer at Camp: The Impact of Summer Camps on LGBTQ Campers in the United States', focuses on adolescents' sexual development and what could arguably be considered the normative but secretive practices of LGBTQ-identified youths. The backdrop of anti-LGBTQ forces shapes both the secrecy and the agency of these youths. Summer camps are often a place where young people, away from their parents, and not only in the United States, explore their sexuality, talk to peers about sex, and have their first sexual experiences. These authors show that, in terms of the intersection of childhood and sexuality, camp is an understudied site of development and resistance. Through an analysis of retrospective interviews with

former campers about their experiences at summer camp and a subsequent analysis of podcasts and blogs on the same topic, the authors explore key areas of camp life: first sexual experiences and being queer at camp. Their findings highlight the blurring of the boundaries of sexuality (sexual orientation) and of what is considered sexual among children and young people.

The original articles are accompanied by book reviews that cover other important aspects of the theme of this issue. Alvaro B Gamio Cuervo reviews Clare Bartholomaeus and Damien W. Riggs' book *Transgender People and Education*, which explores the possibilities of trans-inclusive educational environments in several English-speaking countries around the world. Transgender identities and experiences have only become a focus of research interest in educational research in the last decade, but the outcomes of their exploration provide thoughtful insights for thinking about social institutions, their structure, normativity, and inclusive and transformative potential for the future.

Handan Titiz Ceritoglu reviews Louisa Allen's book *Sexuality Education and New Materialism – Queer Things*. This book introduces the inspiring new materialism perspective into current theories of sex education. According to Allen, new materialism aims to overcome the Cartesian dualism that shapes education systems and affects the minds of students. Using the new materialism 'as a queer tool, to *queer* queer theory', Allen points out that sexuality education is not only an intellectual topic of study, and it cannot be addressed through discourse and empiricism alone. It is a bodily topic and has a sensual and even pleasurable focus.


Eva Čivrná reviews *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence*. This book, edited by Sharon Lamb and Jen Gilbert, seeks to answer the questions: What is sexual development? How can we study it? What role in this can be played by adults and institutions such as the media, the family, and the education system? These questions are answered by experts from various social-scientific fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, and history. Their contributions are anchored in diverse disciplines, international contexts, and methodological approaches.

Exploring the connection between childhood and sexuality is not merely an academic subject. As the authors contributing to this issue show, it is a crucial and meaningful issue in the real lives of children and young people and in the politics of the societies they live in. Societal ideas about the place of sexuality in relation to children and adolescents both shape and are manipulated to shape the laws that are meant to protect them and create the opportunities through which they can develop their sexuality. For this reason, we have included reports from practitioner and non-governmental organisations on this issue: Planned Parenthood in Slovakia and the F\*éra programme of the Nesehnutí organisation in the Czech Republic. These organisations often substitute for inadequate sex education curricula in schools, by providing young

people with education and services, both in schools (when permitted) and outside the school, while still struggling with a precarious existence dependent on grants and combating the hate speech and acts of moral alarmists. These organisations of womyn practitioners work collaboratively with womyn professionals in academia in model and inspiring ways.

Together we hope that this small collection will broaden readers' understanding of the misuse of the concept of innocence and increase their awareness of the political and social challenges faced by marginalised youth, while introducing them to new methodologies that can take us beyond the binary models of liberal/conservative and progressive/regressive and to the alternative pathways of sex education that are available in troubling times.

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