

## SEXUAL EDUCATION IS POLITICAL

### LINKS AND RESOURCES ⓘ

- [sexuality](#) ➔
- [sexual education](#) ➔
- [diversity](#) ➔
- [sexual orientation](#) ➔

*As a part of her master thesis at the University of Vienna, Luisa Geserer summarised how sexual education organizations in Austria deal with defamation:*

*“Defamation of Sexual Education with Diversity Focuses. Strategies of Austrian Associations.”*

*Based on her research, she formulated “7 Recommendations for Dealing with Hostility.”*

The topic of sexual education continues to be discussed controversially in the media and politics. As practitioners, we do not like to use sexual education as a tool for political gain or to moralize about its content. Even when the public discussion focuses on positive elements or developments. We believe that in the long run, old-fashioned and simplistic ideas are spread by these public discourses. These ideas that are spread by populist methods are often detrimental to already marginalized groups.

### direct, honest and #unexcited

The socio-political achievements of sexual education are demonstrated through our behavior and become apparent in our daily interactions with one another. There are some ground rules that are important to us in this process.

We believe in ...

- ▶ **age-appropriate, human rights-focused, substantiated methods**
- ▶ **not limiting people in their right to make decisions or instrumentalising people in an unethical or immoral way.**
- ▶ **including everyone.**

Sexual education offers helpful tools in many areas. The discourse is important in every case in order to create a clearer picture of what we want for our collective future.

***Open dialogue about sexual education increases the chances for understanding.***

## DEFAMATIONS AND WHERE THEY COME FROM

In the last few years, hostility has risen toward inclusive sexual education, not only in Austria but in all of Europe. **This hostility almost always comes from right-wing, populist and fundamental religious groups.** Their networks and power have increased throughout the continent and the world.

In Austria, these shifts have become apparent through the increased hostility expressed toward sexual education and gender equality-focused organizations.

Inclusive, diversity-focused sexual education has become the target of more defamations as the number of antifeminist positions in public discourse increases. The focus of which is often on conservative and old-fashioned ideas of family, sexuality or relationship forms. Based on these criticisms, the practices of sexual education and violence protection that teach diversity and difference are defamed.

Not only do conservative, right-wing groups argue that children are being “re-educated” in a negative way, but that thematisation of LGBTQ lives and lifestyles leads to a destruction of societal values.

The hostilities are often similar in their content. Sexual education is often portrayed out of context or interpreted differently than intended. It begins by questioning the authority of experts or claiming them to be unprofessional or inappropriate. The next step is claiming that sexual education is part of a political-ideological agenda.

The focus of these defamations is often the sexual educators themselves or the materials and methods that they use. Through personal attacks and sexist, homophobic or nationalist discourses, educators and their tools (for example methods for the prevention of sexual assault) are discredited as inappropriate and destructive. **The methods used for these defamations are not random, but part of a larger anti-feminist discourse.**

Emancipatory sexual education is continually denigrated and vilified by right-wing and religious groups in magazines, newsletters or online forums. Most of these attacks are spread over spam emails or phone calls and sometimes take the form of personal insults and threats. This is often done anonymously. The offer from sexual education organizations to discuss these accusations is usually turned down.

## NOT A COINCIDENCE, BUT A STRATEGY

## WHO IS SPEAKING WITH WHOM?

Not only is the content of these accusations often absurd. It is also clear on a linguistic level that the arguments are unfounded, emotionally-based and intentionally meant to scandalize.

Anyone who has experienced something like this knows that the first reaction is to be overwhelmed. When you are constantly hearing such attacks on yourself and your work, the strain can be immense:

**insecurities, self-doubt concerning one's own work methods and often harmful psychological effects follow.**

The good news:

Most organizations have used these experiences to their benefit and found a way to get something out of them. Often the defamations have led a strengthening of the team, the individual sex educators, their work style and the solidarity they have with others who have faced similar defamations.

## So what can be done in these situations?

## SEVEN TIPS FOR DEALING WITH HOSTILITY

### #1

**STAY TRANSPARENT  
AND CONFIDENT**

*If you stay confident in your working methods and materials, you won't allow yourself to be intimidated by the accusations as easily.*

But how do you do this exactly? In the case of defamation, stay as transparent as possible about the methods and materials you use. If the accusations are absurd, as they usually are, sticking by your principles and values will demonstrate that you are committed to them. In that way, the most absurd accusations can be confronted.

### #2

**PRESENT EVENTS WITH  
HONESTY AND CLARITY**

*Events will be distorted, taken out of their context and portrayed falsely. What helps with this?*

Explaining clearly how the events portrayed really happened. This can be done in many ways, for example through open statements, letters to the readers in magazines or news reports about the events. By doing this, you can take the narrative into your own hands.

## #3

### CLARIFY ANY UNCERTAINTIES

*It is important to share information about why sexual education and its specific content and methods are necessary.*

The uncertainties that this will cause for some people are to be expected and should be taken seriously. Answering peoples' questions reminds them why it is important to have open discussions about sexuality, diversity and violence prevention with one another.

## #4

### REACTING VS. IGNORING

*Should you react to the aggressors or ignore them?*

This is a question that must always be asked in these situations. Often it makes sense to react, explain oneself and make the truth known. However, when you are faced with unremitting, often completely baseless bashing, ignoring can be the more effective path. That way, you can use the time to focus on your own goals instead of wasting energy on futile arguments with those people who are attempting to rile you up.

## #5

### ANALYSE THE AGGRESSORS

*What is behind these accusations? Is it individuals? Networks? Political parties?*

It can be helpful to look more closely at the aggressors and attempt to organise the defamations, even though it will cost you effort and time. That way the structures and networks that stand behind these accusations can be recognized and classified. Additionally, it becomes clear that these accusations are often not about isolated cases. But these populist and religious-fundamental groups have structured methods to defame inclusive sexual education. This can have the effect of strengthening your cause. It reminds you that you are not to blame and that there are well-organized antifeminist structures behind the accusations facing you.

## #6

### USE YOUR OWN RESOURCES

#### ***Be in solidarity with one another.***

It seems logical, but it is in exactly these situations when it is important to put this value to use. The support of partner organizations in these overwhelming and shocking situations is vital. What can be done when support is not immediately offered to you? You can contact other organisations and ask for them to write statements of solidarity. If you have these networks, use them. This will provide you with courage and self-confidence in your actions. media is such a big part of our reality?

## #7

### AGREEMENTS / CONTRACTS

#### ***Agreements and contracts are essential, especially when the topic is as controversial as sexual education.***

This applies to discussions and agreements in your own team about your sexual education standards, content and working methods. It is necessary to have clear agreements with the institutions that you work with about what methods and materials you will use. This way, you can avoid misunderstandings. a big part of our reality?

Source:

Geserer, Luisa (2018):

*Diffamierung Sexueller Bildung  
der Vielfalt. Umgangsstrategien  
österreichischer Vereine.*

Masterarbeit, Universität Wien.

*We have seen that constructive reactions and interactions with defamation and accusation are possible and have already been tested successfully. Don't lose courage. There are ways to productively engage with these situations.*

***Let us work together in solidarity to confront defamations of emancipatory sexual education!***