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LGBTIQ+ YOUTH: BULLYING AND VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Everyone – including children and young people – has the right to education. This includes a safe and inclusive school environment. For young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people around the world, this fundamental right is violated because of bullying and other forms of violence in school. The United Nations is calling on all States to ensure quality education for all – LGBTIQ+ young people included. Research from around the world confirms that LGBTIQ+ students consistently report a high prevalence of bullying and other forms of violence while at school, with harmful consequences. Globally, around 45 per cent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth report being bullied at school.

What is the impact of bullying and discrimination at school?

Young people who face discrimination, bullying or other forms of violence because they identify as (or are perceived as being) LGBTIQ+ are more likely to feel unsafe, to avoid school activities, skip classes, achieve lower academic results or even drop out of school entirely. They are also more likely to have lower aspirations than their non-LGBTIQ+ peers and fewer employment prospects upon leaving education. This can in turn increase the risk of financial instability and homelessness. Violence at school can also have a negative and life-long impact on students' physical and mental health, including increased risks of anxiety, fear, stress, loss of confidence, low self-esteem, loneliness, isolation, self-harm, depression, and suicide.

What violence do LGBTIQ+ youth at school face?

LGBTIQ+ youth encounter higher rates of bullying than their non-LGBTIQ+ peers while at school. This can include physical, sexual and psychological violence and harassment, which can occur in classrooms, dormitories, playgrounds, toilets, changing rooms, on the way to and from school, in homes and communities and online. For many young LGBTIQ+ people bullying can be a daily occurrence.

The school environment can be hostile in various ways. LGBTIQ+ students are often more likely to be targeted through name calling, threats, malicious rumours, exclusion and being outed by other students. They might also be harassed or face unfair punishment from teachers and school administrators, including suspension or expulsion. Harmful gender stereotypes and misinformation about LGBTIQ+ people can be spread through teaching practices and curricula, as well as through school policies, regulations, and infrastructures. This in turn reinforces prejudice towards LGBTIQ+ children and youth. For example, 44 per cent of LGBTIQ+ 15 to 17-year-olds in the European Union felt their rights were rarely or never supported at school.

45 per cent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth report being bullied at school

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Online bullying can be as damaging as in-person bullying. Harmful posts are often quickly shared and difficult to delete. Online bullies can also hide behind anonymity. Schools and parents are often ill-equipped to deal with online bullying. There is increasing evidence showing that online and offline bullying are closely connected. This means that being a bully online is often associated with being a bully offline, and that being targeted online is likewise associated with being targeted offline. In a worldwide study with youth from 25 countries, online bullying was widely reported by LGBTIQ+ students. High rates of online bullying were reported by LGBTIQ+ youth surveyed in China (70 per cent), Singapore (58 per cent) and India (53 per cent).

Who are the targets of bullying?

While all young people are at risk, research shows that those who are seen as 'different' in one way or another are more likely to be bullied.

Students who are (or are perceived to be) LGBTIQ+ are often targeted for challenging social expectations around relationships, gender and bodies. For example, gender non-conforming students, such as non-binary youth, boys perceived as 'feminine', or girls perceived as 'masculine', are more likely to face harassment at school. A global survey on inclusive education and access to health of LGBTIQ+ youth found that over 33 per cent of trans girls and 30 per cent of trans boys considered leaving school because of the challenges they face. A study from El Salvador found that only 36 out of 100 transgender women obtained their secondary school certificate due to violence and exclusion. Similarly, a study from Australia found that bullying and medical treatment during puberty contributed to 18 per cent of intersex people not completing secondary education.

School staff can also be also targeted, particularly teachers who are perceived to challenge gender stereotypes, or those who are working to create a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTIQ+ students.

Children of LGBTIQ+ parents may also be bullied.

Who are the bullies?

School-related bullying and other forms of violence can be carried out by students, school staff or educational authorities. Students and staff who are aware of these acts but fail to react also contribute to upholding a culture of bullying. One study found that 35 per cent of LGBTIQ+ youth from Sub-Saharan Africa reported never feeling safe at school.

School staff, management and teachers have a responsibility to create a safe school environment for all students. Unfortunately, the failure of many schools to prevent and respond to bullying can lead to LGBTIQ+ students feeling more isolated and stigmatized. Bullies feel enabled by the inaction of teachers and other bystanders, meaning more students are likely to be harassed.

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What drives violence against LGBTIQ+ youth?

Violence against LGBTIQ+ people is often driven by a desire to punish those seen as challenging the expected roles and behaviours of men and women in society. Victims do not need to be LGBTIQ+ to be targeted. Any student who is perceived not to conform to gender roles can be at risk.

In a number of countries, there have been attempts to discourage or ban discussions of LGBTIQ+-related topics, generally, as well as specifically in schools. This includes discriminatory legislation as well as educational policies and curricula that create hostile and unsafe school environments for LGBTIQ+ and other gender non-conforming youth. In addition to violating basic rights, these policies legitimize prejudice toward LGBTIQ+ youth and expose them to even more violence.

Research from the United States suggests that the stress associated with policies that restrict rights or remove protections for LGBTIQ+ people, has a negative impact on their mental health. Organizations that run LGBTQ-focused suicide prevention hotlines have pointed to sharp increases in calls during times in which pieces of anti-LGBTQ state legislation are introduced. By contrast, research from Canada found that lesbian, gay and bisexual students in schools with policies that supported them were over 65 per cent less likely to think about or attempt suicide.

Progress is possible! Positive change in the EU:

Data from the European Union suggests that fewer lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people surveyed experienced negative attitudes at school in 2019 (56%) compared to 2012 (68%). When asked why they thought the situation in their country improved, most said that the 'visibility of LGBTIQ+ people and their participation in everyday life' was a major factor. Survey participants also named 'positive changes in law and policy' and 'support by public figures, community leaders and civil society' as important factors.

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TAKE ACTION!

STUDENTS SHOULD:

1 Listen to your LGBTIQ+ peers and educate yourself about their experiences.

2 Use respectful language and refer to a person by using the terms, pronouns, gender identity and name that they use to identify themselves.

3 Speak out against insults or slurs, bullying, discrimination, violence or harmful gender stereotypes being used against LGBTIQ+ people.

4 Report violence at or around school, even when it does not target you directly.

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

1 Prohibit and address discrimination: Repeal discriminatory laws and prohibit discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, including in education. Develop and implement comprehensive national education sector policies to prevent and address school violence.

2 Recognize gender identity: Legally recognize the gender identity of trans people (including trans youth) in official documents through a simple administrative process based on self-identification, and without abusive requirements such as forced medical diagnosis, treatment or sterilization.

3 Ensure inclusive curricula: Ensure that curricula, learning materials and teaching methods are LGBTIQ+ inclusive, free from stereotypes, and promote respect and non-discrimination in all schools and at all educational levels. School curricula should emphasise that LGBTIQ+ people can live healthy, fulfilling and happy lives.

4 Strengthen capacity: Provide training and support to policymakers, teachers and other school staff to understand their responsibility to prevent and address violence faced by LGBTIQ+ youth at school, including through challenging their own implicit biases.

5 Monitor, evaluate and learn: Systematically monitor and document data on LGBTIQ+-related violence in schools, set specific goals to tackle this issue and track progress toward achieving these goals, and evaluate how well policies are helping schools to tackle bullying, with a view to continuous learning and improvement.

6 Engage stakeholders: Collaborate and engage with key stakeholders including youth groups, LGBTIQ+ civil society organizations, teachers' unions, families, communities and relevant government ministries and departments.

7 Protect privacy: Ensure that all LGBTIQ+ people, including youth, can enjoy their right to privacy, including the choice of whether or not, when and to whom they choose to disclose any personal information.

8 Support helplines: Ensure that free, inclusive and anonymous helplines are accessible to LGBTIQ+ youth who are in distress, or who face violence or discrimination.

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SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS SHOULD:

1 Ensure that school environments are safe, inclusive and supportive for all students – including LGBTIQ+ students – by developing and sharing codes of conduct and monitoring potential hotspots for violence in and around the school.

2 Take action to prevent and address bullying against LGBTIQ+ students, including by countering negative and harmful stereotypes about LGBTIQ+ people. School management and personnel should continuously work on improving their own awareness and understanding of SOGIESC-related issues.

3 Offer teachers ongoing in-service training on how to create safe and welcoming environments for LGBTIQ+ students.

4 Establish safe, anonymous and effective mechanisms to report violence and discrimination, including telephone hotlines, online forms and trained staff as focal points.

5 Provide safe, confidential, child-sensitive, and trauma-informed counselling and mental health support for students. Act as a liaison for LGBTIQ+ youth in need of health services to connect them with competent and experienced community-based providers.

6 Provide students and their families with comprehensive, accurate, non-discriminatory and age-appropriate information about LGBTIQ+ people in curricula, teaching materials, library books and support mechanisms.

7 Refer to a person using the terms, pronouns, gender, and name that they use to identify themselves, allow transgender and gender non-conforming students to be listed with their preferred name and gender marker on class rosters, and provide them with access to facilities (including gender-neutral facilities) that align with their gender identity.

8 Do not disclose information that a person is or may be LGBTIQ+ without their consent.

9 Partner with local civil society organizations, the wider school community and other relevant stakeholders to undertake activities and observe days of LGBTIQ+ celebration or remembrance to demonstrate support and solidarity for LGBTIQ+ people.

10 Support and encourage student groups that work on LGBTIQ+-related issues.

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