

Schools for All? The Status of LGBTI Students and Teachers in Bulgarian Schools

During the period January - October 2015, Bilitis Resource Center conducted a qualitative research study which answers the question, “To what extent do secondary schools in Sofia, Bulgaria provide an inclusive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex students and teachers?” The research was supported by ILGA-Europe, the European Association of Organizations of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex people, which has more than 400 members. The research included analysis of the internal school policies for prevention of discrimination, bullying, and violence; interviews of students and teachers who self-identify as homosexual, bisexual, or transgender; and a questionnaire for school principals. The current report presents an analysis of the research findings.

The information was collected with the help of Dorotea Stefanova and Gloria Filipova - volunteers of Bilitis Resource Center.



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Contents

Part I: Introduction 3

Part II: Findings from Documentary Research 5

Part III: Conclusions from Interviews with Homosexual, Bisexual and Transgender
Students and Teachers10

Part IV: Recommendations.....17

Part V: Declaration for Non-Discrimination of LGBTI People in the Sphere of
Education.....21

Part I: Introduction

Introduction

Bulgarian Schools, which have been the embodiment of the scientific approach since the Bulgarian Enlightenment, are currently functioning within the frame of non-scientific prejudice when it comes to disseminating knowledge about sexual and gender identities in society. Few schools create space for discussion on issues related to sexuality, gender¹ and gender expression, which reinforces negative stereotyping of homosexual, bisexual, intersex and transgender students, leading to discrimination and violence. Homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are normalized and reproduced in the school environment due to the absence of adequate measures of prevention or intervention when they occur. At the same time, in recent years, schools are gradually improving their policies of inclusion in relation to differences of race, ethnicity, religion, and disability. We strongly believe that the time has come to open up the discourse to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex identities (LGBTI²) in the school environment.

Why It Is Important to Talk about Homosexual, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Identities At School?

The educational system, and especially the schools, frame the way people perceive the world and shape the shared values which become the core of our so-called “common sense.” The way people think about complex social issues such as discrimination, exclusion, social justice, and distribution of power in society are largely formed at school. Contemporary cognitive and social studies prove that global poverty and the inequalities faced by specific groups of people are a by-product of our social, political, and economic norms, but they also

¹ Note of the Editor: The academic question of how to translate “gender” in Bulgarian language in order to retain the meaning introduced to it by English-speaking feminists of the 1970s remains unsolved in Bulgaria. The author chooses to use the term “gender” without translating it. It should be noted that another approach, which uses the literal translation of gender into Bulgarian (под) is also worth exploring. (See for example, Valkova, M., (editor) (1999) *Mothers and Daughters: Generations and Trends in Bulgarian Feminism*. Sofia, Polis Publishing House. More on the topic can also be found in Stoeva, L. (2005) *Oops, and This Gender!* Altera Magazine, issue one, pages 18-25.

² LGBTI is an internationally recognized abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. Although many transgender and intersex people identify as heterosexual, they are still discriminated against along with homosexual and bisexual people, because the basis of discrimination against LGBTI is associated with inequalities related to gender as a social construct and gender expression. The term LGBT (without I) is used several times in this report, because the people interviewed did not recognize the existence of intersex people and did not use the full abbreviation. This demonstrates the total lack of visibility of this group. Transgender is a term for people who self-identify with a different gender from the one assigned at birth, sometimes – as gender queer, or gender non-binary: neither a woman, nor a man. Intersex are people born with reproductive organs which do not match either female or male type, and are usually subjected to corrective body surgery in early childhood, which is traumatizing and unnecessary. Some countries do accept “neutral” gender on birth certificates, for example Germany. (Editor’s Note: Intersex people were called hermaphrodites in the medical literature of the past, a term, which is still being used in Bulgarian textbooks for medical students).

demonstrate that social injustice is not inevitable. It can be overcome by relying on humanity's current knowledge. This process should begin from within the educational system.

Best Practices

Best practices for presenting scientifically-based information and cultivating positive attitudes of acceptance towards homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people in schools are usually of private origin, and they are rooted outside the Bulgarian educational system. They are usually linked to a project implemented by an NGO with international funding. Their effect is short-term and largely depends on the duration of the externally-funded project; the best practice commonly stops when the international funding is exhausted. Unfortunately, the best practices of learning about sexual and gender identities at school are not recorded, analyzed, or disseminated by the public institutions responsible for education and youth development. They remain project-based, and are not transformed into policies. Internationally tested models of learning about LGBTI identities at school have yielded positive results since the 1990s, however, the Ministry of Education has not shown interest in disseminating or integrating them into the education system.

During 2011-2012, Bilitis Resource Center introduced an interactive educational methodology at two public schools in Sofia for using a norm-critical approach to address negative stereotypes of minorities, discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics. We received positive feedback from the 4 participating teachers and over 100 students. The project, "It Takes all Kinds," was led by the Danish Institute for Human Rights, covered 10 countries in the European Union, including Bulgaria, and received high marks from the European Commission. The project's methodology was presented to the Ministry of Education along with a request for review and dissemination across the country. However, they provided no feedback, in spite of their expressed support for the project at the initial stages of implementation.

Another best practice is the "Day of Silence" conducted at the American College of Sofia. It is organized on an annual basis as a sign of solidarity with homosexual, bisexual, transgender and intersex students and teachers who are forced to be silent about their identities at many schools around the world. The end of the Day of Silence is marked by a "breaking of the silence" which has included open discussion on LGBTI rights and other relevant topics, with the participation of LGBTI activists and other guests,

In the last few years, a best practice for raising awareness about problems faced on a daily basis by LGBTI people and other minorities that have emerged are the so-called "living libraries" organized in different towns around the country. The initiative includes different people with minority backgrounds who talk about their lived experiences in front of an open audience. One of these living libraries was organized at a Sofia-based school in 2015.

Last, but not least, a best practice for raising awareness of students, teachers, and school administrators about the widespread forms of bullying at school, which are commonly neglected and normalized, is conducting a "Week for Overcoming School Bullying." This initiative has gained much popularity in recent years and is conducted at many schools across the country. However, we were not able to identify specific activities directly addressing the bullying of LGBTI students. We would like to stress that when bullying and violence are addressed in a general way, without mentioning the specific vulnerable groups that are common victims of bullying at school, and addressing the roots of violence against them, the prevention effect is limited and the most vulnerable often remain excluded.

Research Scope

The qualitative research conducted by Bilitis during the period January-October 2015, aimed to answer the question, “To what extent are the secondary schools in Sofia able to provide an inclusive environment for homosexual, bisexual, transgender and intersex students and teachers?” The first step was to review the internal regulation documents (codes of conduct, etc.) of the secondary schools that are publicly accessible through their web sites. We were looking for specific measures for prevention of discrimination, violence, and bullying, which demonstrate awareness of the fact that LGBTI students are among the vulnerable groups. The next step of the research was conducting structured interviews with 20 students and teachers who self-identified as LGBT. Among the students, there were: 5 identifying as gay, 4 lesbian, 3 transgender, 1 pansexual, and 4 bisexual. Among the teachers: 2 identifying as lesbian, and 1 as bisexual. We did not manage to identify any intersex students or teachers, which supports our hypothesis regarding the high level of stigmatization and invisibility of this group. Neither did we identify any gay or transgender teachers. This shows that such teachers carefully hide their identities in the workplace. The last step in the research was sending out questionnaires to 50 school principals, which inquired about their views regarding measures to support LGBTI students and teachers at school. Regrettably, only 10% of the principals responded to the inquiry. The current report presents the main conclusions from the research and our recommendations for improving school policies in order to make Bulgarian schools more inclusive of LGBTI people.

Part II: Findings from Documentary Research

Internal School Policies and the United Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School

In 2015, Bilitis Resource Center researched all publicly accessible secondary school internal regulation documents in Sofia to find out to what extent they ensure effective means for protection and inclusion of LGBTI students and teachers. In the first place, it should be noted that only about 40% of 180 secondary schools have published their internal regulation documents on their websites (such as codes of conduct, ethical codes, mechanisms and plans for addressing bullying.)

Among schools that have published internal regulation documents, only 2 out of 72 have mentioned sexual orientation among the grounds on which discrimination is prohibited.

One of them is the 31st Secondary School:

“Article 7) The employees at all levels should not allow any form of direct or indirect discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship, origin, religion or faith, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or public status, disability, age, sexual orientation, family status, material status, or any other grounds included in any law or international treaty ratified by the Republic of Bulgaria.

The second school that mentions sexual orientation in its internal policies on the prevention of discrimination is the 21st Secondary School:

“Article (3) Any direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, origin, religion or faith, disability, sexual orientation, material status, etc. is prohibited at this school.”

The internal policies of 6 other schools mention that “discrimination is prohibited on all grounds which are recognized by the laws of the Republic of Bulgaria,” without specifying those grounds.

Lack of Recognition of LGBTI as a Vulnerable Group

The internal policies document is the main school document which determines the responsibilities of all stakeholders in the educational process (teachers, administrators, students, and parents) in order to ensure an effective educational process, which includes the protection of the rights and dignity of each member of the school community. Bilitis started her research with the hypothesis that this document should include clear rules and policies for the prevention of discrimination at school, as well as for prevention and intervention of bullying and violence towards vulnerable groups, including LGBTI students and teachers.

Part II from the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004) is especially dedicated to the prevention of discrimination in the sphere of education:

Article. 29, (2): *The principal of the educational institution undertakes effective measures to prevent all forms of discrimination in the school environment on behalf of the pedagogical or non-pedagogical staff, and the students.*

Article 30: *The principal of the educational institution puts the text of the law, as well as all policies from the internal rules, which refer to the protection against discrimination in an accessible place.*

Article 31: *the principal of the educational institution who has received a complaint from a student that feels bullied by a person from the pedagogical or non-pedagogical staff or from another student is responsible for conducting immediate investigation, for taking measures to stop the bullying, and for disciplinary sanctioning.*

Bilitis’ research aimed to find out how effectively the above articles of the Law for Protection against Discrimination (01/2004) are being used in the secondary schools of Sofia. In the first place, our research aimed at finding references to the Law in the schools’ internal policies, and mentions of all groups featured in the law: (article 4, paragraph 1): “gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship, origin, religion or faith, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal and public status, disability, age, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, and all other grounds stated in a law of international treaty, which has been signed by the Republic of Bulgaria.” According to a change in the Law (State Newspaper from April 7, 2015), the category “gender” also refers to cases of change of gender.

Such references were identified only in very few school internal policies:

“Angel Kanchev” 137th Secondary School:

“The pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff is obliged to follow all policies stated in Part 2 of the Law for Protection against Discrimination (Protection in Exercising the Right to Education and Learning), and this obligation has been included in their job descriptions.”

Another internal document which has a direct influence on the provision of support in cases of bullying of vulnerable students, among which are LGBTI students, is the Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School and its annexes. An Order by the Minister of Education ((PД09-611/18.05.2012) obliges every school to adopt such a mechanism and to design a plan for its implementation. The mechanism for combating bullying at school was designed by a cross-sector working group which was created by the Ministry of Education in 2012 and involves experts from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Agency for Child Protection, the Agency for Social Support, the Ministry of Interior, the Central Commission for Combating Anti-Social Behavior by Youth, and non-governmental organizations, such as the National Network for Children, Foundation “Steps for the Invisible Children in Bulgaria,” Foundation “Association Animus,” the Union of Psychologists in Bulgaria, and UNICEF. The mechanism includes a definition of bullying as “conscious negative deeds, which are long-term, directed towards one and the same student and conducted by another student or a group.” The types of bullying are explained in detail, including physical, verbal, psychological, and social (isolation, ignoring, etc.). Furthermore, the document enumerates signs for recognizing physical and psychological bullying. It also addresses virtual (cyber) bullying, and describes the roles of all stakeholders in situations of bullying.

The Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School requires every school to develop and adopt preventative measures against bullying and counteraction measures to address existing cases of bullying in an effective way. It is stressed that counteraction against bullying requires a holistic approach, persistent and coordinated efforts for prevention of bullying, as well as the creation of safer school environment. Creation of a Coordinating Council for Counteraction against Bullying at every school is also recommended. Possible types of action in the classroom are described. The mechanism calls for the creation of space in which students can openly discuss bullying and form attitudes of empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences, as well as conflict resolution skills that prevent bullying. The mechanism also lists possible activities at the school level, for example: the creation of a safety network, and the definition of responsibilities of each staff member in relation to possible bullying interventions. The links between the school and other institutions responsible for prevention and dealing with violence and bullying are also described. Last, but not least, the mechanism recommends involving parents in the integrated system for counteraction against bullying at school.

The review of the Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School showed one important omission: there is no mention of the vulnerable groups that are common victims of violence based on grounds of difference, similar to the ones included in the Anti-Discrimination Law. The lack of such content contributes to the low awareness of bullying against minority groups. LGBTI students are part of these groups and among the most invisible. Some forms of bullying against LGBTI are completely “normalized” and neglected at school. One of them is verbal bullying, which takes place on daily basis. The mocking and insulting use of derogatory terms such as “pederast,” “soft wrist,” etc., is commonly ignored by teachers and administration, according to the information provided by the students interviewed.

The school plans for counteraction of bullying at school (based on the mechanism), also lack the enumeration of the grounds which have been protected by the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004). These grounds should be in focus when adequate measures for the prevention of and dealing with bullying are being formed.

We raise the question, “How is it possible for teachers and school administration become sensitive to the grounds for discrimination, violence and bullying, and how do they work for an inclusive school environment, if no inter-school policy document includes a comprehensive enumeration of these grounds?”

Discriminatory Elements in Schools’ Internal Policies

The internal policies documents pay a lot of attention to the way students dress and their appearance at school. Some of these rules are openly sexist; for example: it is forbidden for boys to have long hair and earrings. Some private schools do not differ much from the public schools in the adoption of discriminative rules for the students’ outfit and haircut: “The boys should be seemly shorn with nice male haircut” (“P.R. Slaveykov” Private Secondary School).

According to Biilitis, formulations as “outfit and appearance which correspond to the norms of decency” (School 137) could be inherently discriminative, keeping in mind the traditional understanding of decency, which excludes any variety in gender expression and includes discriminatory binary standards for the appearance of people (as women and men). Some school policies are internally incoherent, because on one hand, they refer to the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004), and on the other, they include the above-mentioned ambiguous formulations, which are unclear and could be interpreted in a discriminatory way.

The rule that students who have entered into civil marriage are not allowed to attend the regular daytime form of schooling is no less discriminatory. This limitation can be found in most schools’ internal policies. Keeping in mind that early marriages are commonplace among young people from some ethnic minorities (for example the Roma), this rule decreases their access to education and further contributes to their marginalization³.

Some other formulations of schools’ internal policies are unclear and ambiguous, and they could be used as basis for discrimination. For example, the “breaking of conventional moral norms,” is punished according to some schools’ policies. It is unclear which norms are being referred to. The conventional moral norms in Bulgaria reject the visibility of LGBTI people in public. Hence, visible LGBTI students could be interpreted as breaking the accepted moral norms. Such ambiguous formulation should not be included in school policies because it contradicts the Law for Protection against Discrimination (01/2004). Instead, clear statements referring to specific provisions in that law should be included.

Grounds on which Discrimination is Prohibited

The most commonly mentioned grounds in school internal policies on which discrimination is prohibited are the following:

- race,
- ethnic origin,
- religion,

³ Bilitis is against the practice of early marriages of minors, or arranged marriages.

Nevertheless, we believe that blocking access to regular daytime education of young people who are in this situation transforms them into victims of multiple forms of discrimination.

- gender,
- nationality,
- language,
- ability,
- social status.

The exclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected grounds in most schools' internal policies speaks to the lack of awareness of expressions of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, which according to the FRA LGBT Survey (2013) are very widespread in educational institutions⁴. The mentioning of "gender" in the policies does not protect gender expression, transgender, or intersex identities. All students interviewed stressed that the transgender are among the most isolated and discriminated against students in the school environment, especially in relation to teachers.

The FRA Survey on the Status of LGBT People in the Countries of the EU (2013) clearly shows that over 80% of respondents have witnessed negative comments towards and bullying of LGBT youth at school. Two-thirds (67%) of all respondents confirm that during their studies at school, until the age of 18, they hid their LGBT identities.

Ninety-five percent of all Bulgarian respondents (over 1000 people who self-identify as LGBT) state that they have heard negative comments and have witnessed negative behavior toward a classmate under the age of 18 who had been perceived as LGBT. This percentage shows that schools in Bulgaria should take adequate measures to prevent negative verbal comments and harassment towards LGBT students.

The first step towards the development of an inclusive school environment for LGBTI students and staff is recognizing the scope of the problem. The document-based research conducted by Bilitis demonstrates that the discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity are not recognized in school internal policies and codes of conduct, since "sexual orientation" is mentioned in only 2 documents (out of 72 publicly accessible), while "gender identity" and "gender expression" are not mentioned in any.

The schools' policies should define the responsibility of the coordinating bodies for prevention of and dealing with bullying at school in providing support to LGBTI students and other vulnerable groups.

The internal policies researched did not provide any alternative method of reporting discrimination, violence, and bullying besides face-to-face reporting. The above-mentioned survey of FRA clearly shows that LGBT victims of bullying were unwilling to report the incidents because of fear of being outed in front of their classmates and teachers. The best practices in many EU countries include the provision of an alternative, anonymous way to report violence and bullying at school. This may include the placement of a special post-box for complaints, or the creation of a special e-mail account to be checked by a specific person who is trusted by the students.

⁴ <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2013/eu-lgbt-survey-european-union-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-survey-results>

Part III: Conclusions from Interviews with Homosexual, Bisexual and Transgender Students and Teachers

Findings

Bilitis aimed to interview students and staff who self-identify as homosexual, bisexual, intersex, and transgender. However, we did not find any intersex students, and among teachers we managed to identify only lesbians and bisexual female teachers; no gay and no transgender/intersex teachers were identified. This result speaks for itself about the level of invisibility of some of the identities targeted by the research.

Invisibility of LGBTI Students and Teachers

The majority of LGBT students and all LGBT staff we interviewed hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity at school because they do not feel comfortable talking about who they are in an environment in which nobody talks about sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. In some cases, there is also fear of violence/stigmatization/exclusion.

All three lesbian and bisexual teachers we interviewed believe that many of their colleagues know about their sexual orientation, but never ask or talk about it. The policy “don’t ask, don’t tell” is in place, instead of a policy of inclusion and support of sexual and gender diversity in the schools.

Normalization of Verbal Bullying of LGBTI Students

School authorities are mostly indifferent to cases of bullying based on sexual orientation and transgender identity, especially when the bullying consists exclusively of verbal insults. Some of the students do not even consider derogatory name-calling to be bullying because it is so widespread that it is considered a normal part of their daily experience. The teachers interviewed also think that the school authorities show indifference to discrimination towards LGBT students and staff.

All of the students interviewed have either been subjects of bullying/violence, or have witnessed bullying/violence directed to other students who were either LGBT or perceived to be LGBT. There is a greater number of visible LGBT students in schools with higher academic ranking⁵ compared to lower-ranking schools. The LGBT students attending lower-rated schools are as a rule not “out” and remain invisible, and they showed higher level of pessimism that their environment could change to the better.

The students from schools with a higher academic ranking demonstrated enhanced awareness of discrimination and violence against LGBT people that occurs in the school environment and remains unnoticed by the teachers. They reported inadequate reaction by the school administration in other cases of violence against LGBT people as well.

Lack of Preparation of Teachers and Administration to Deal with Bullying and Violence Based on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia

The homophobic and transphobic motives leading to violence at school are, as a rule, not discussed and neglected. Many of the students interviewed shared that in cases of proven homophobic violence, the administration usually tries to explain the case with some other

⁵ By higher academic ranking schools, we mean the schools whose students have achieved higher results at the secondary achievement tests carried out during the final year of high school.

motive, and hurries to end discussion of the case. One of the students reported an instance of discussing homosexuality and bisexuality during an Ethics class which resulted in a heated confrontation with another student in the group who was religious. In general, the interviewees agreed that teachers are either not prepared or not willing to discuss the topics of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in an adequate way.

All those interviewed shared the understanding that “the ideal school environment” would be friendly and supportive of LGBT students and teachers who come out and teachers/administration would be much more open to discussing topics concerning sexuality, gender expression, and gender identity as part of the curriculum, or during the meetings with the class advisor.

Lack of Freedom of Expression for LGBT at School

Most of the students are “out” only among very close friends who do not reveal their secret. When asked why they are not out to everybody at school, their answers show fear of stigmatization:

- *They would most probably not accept me as normal. They live in a society in which homosexuality is not accepted (A.B. male, bisexual, 17 years old, technical school).*
- *Acceptance comes from upbringing. Most of our classmates believe that homosexuality is a disease. Now it might be too late to change their opinion, even if they attend 10 lectures on the topic (P.P. male, gay, 17 years old, technical school).*

In some of the higher-ranked schools, students are open about their sexual orientation because there is a noticeable number of LGBT students at the same school. This increases their chances of positive self-identification because it is not as difficult to meet someone who is like them and get advice.

- *There are many LGBT students in our school! It is relatively easy to find someone to talk to and to share what you are experiencing, and to seek advice. Nevertheless, I would never show an expression of intimacy with my partner in front of a teacher (T. 18 years old, female, pansexual, out to her classmates).*

Surprisingly, at the same school, some students were outed to their parents by a teacher:

- *Our class advisers called our parents to inform them about the sexual orientation of me and my girlfriend. (We were lucky that our parents already knew.) It seems that they felt obliged to do that. We tried to explain to the teacher that it should be our personal decision when and how to come out to our parents. However, she maintained her conviction that she is obliged to tell parents. We knew that she had outed other students to their parents as well, and the result was not favorable for the students (T., 18 years old, female, pansexual).*

In one case, coming out at school has led to more acceptance and less homophobic remarks towards a gay student compared to the period when he was hiding his sexual orientation from his classmates. With his coming out, he took on a form of self-irony:

- *I was afraid to come out and to show interest towards someone from the same gender through 11th grade. In 12th grade, things changed: I did not care anymore how I was perceived by the others, and this liberated me. I began joking with others by saying things like: “I am going to take you to the bushes now,” or, “Now I will take you to the toilets.” This led to some good friendships with some heterosexual classmates*

and we have a lot of fun together (A.G. gay, 19 years old, 12th grade, technical school).

Transgender students are the ones who are least understood, and completely excluded in the school environment:

- *At the beginning of the school year, I persuaded my classmate, who is a trans-boy, to ask the class adviser to call him with the name which he had chosen for himself. He did it, but in a very low-spirited way. The teacher did not follow his request. When the teachers refer to him with his legal name, it sounds so unnatural, because he really does look like a boy. We can read the discrimination in their eyes. Nobody talks to him in class, because he also does not want to talk to anybody. He feels rejected and he is not friendly toward the others as a result. The students accept to some extent gay or bisexual classmates, but nobody understands transgender students.” (L.B. female, bisexual, 16 years old, language school).*

None of the students interviewed was able to identify an LGBT teacher who is out at school. They were sure that such teachers exist, but are afraid to come out, because of fear of negative parental reactions and the possibility of being fired. The students knew that school principals could always find another reason for firing an openly gay or lesbian teacher.

- *There must be such teachers, but they are not out, and I do not know who they are. There are many factors which threaten teachers who are out at school; it is difficult to find a job, and no one would risk being fired (P.P. gay, 17 years old, 11 grade).*
- *There are some teachers that are obviously not heterosexual, but none of them is out (K., trans boy, heterosexual, 16 years old, 9th grade, language school).*

None of the teachers we interviewed had come out to their colleagues or the students.

- *The policy at our school is “don’t ask, don’t tell.” I would not say that I am hiding, but I have never talked about my sexual orientation openly with colleagues or students. Some colleagues know that I live with another woman whose name is Maria, but we never discuss the character of our relationship. I have the feeling that they most probably know about me, but we never talk about it (I.P., lesbian, teacher, 28 years old).*
- *Some colleagues have visited us and they know my partner. I bring her with me on many occasions. However, some might think that she is just a friend, others might understand that she is more than a friend, but no one has ever asked me anything (E.D. female, bisexual, teacher at a high-rated school).*

Discrimination, Violence and Bullying against LGBT People at School

Most students interviewed were not able to immediately identify the existence of discrimination at school based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This is because the interviewees did not perceive everyday derogatory name-calling of LGBT students, which remains unsanctioned by school personnel, as an act of discrimination. Some of them began talking about discrimination only when asked about violence against LGBT people. For example, one interviewee, who is open about her sexual orientation at school, had informed a teacher and a vice-principle about mocking, name-calling and threats against her by other students, but they did nothing. This strengthened her belief that she should deal with such

situations on her own. During the interview, she admitted that school authorities were indifferent towards the issues faced by LGBT students, and this is a form of hidden discrimination.

- *None of the teachers protect the rights of the students to be who they are; nobody wants to (N.S., female, bisexual, 17 years old, private school).*

Paradoxically, the greater the visibility of LGBT students in the school environment, the higher the occurrence of homophobic and transphobic violence. Both public-school and private-school students shared this. We assume, that the higher rate of reporting of incidents by students from such schools was due to the fact they were better educated to recognize and report homophobic and transphobic bullying.

- *There are strong reactions against us on behalf of the other students. Some LGBT students, or students who are supposed to be LGBT, were physically attacked. When a student is bullied because of sexual orientation or transgender identity, the teachers do not stand up for that student, they keep silent. They do not want to take sides. (N.S, female, 17 years old, bisexual, private school).*

When asked if the teachers would react differently in cases of physical fights among heterosexual students, she replied that in both cases the teachers would be most concerned with avoiding a media scandal. Hence, they would do anything possible to hide the issues, and to find a temporary solution to prevent the scandal from growing. However, the root causes of the problems were usually not addressed.

Students from technical schools, in which the majority of students are male, reported the most severe cases of bullying. However, they had not informed any teacher or member of the school administration about their experiences because they did not believe that they would find help:

- *Yes, I have been threatened and beaten (A.K., gay, 16 years old, 10 grade, technical school).*
- *Yes. When I was in the 8th grade, the 12th-graders were doing all kinds of silly things. Once, in the dressing room, they realized that I was different and they began mocking me. I panicked and did not know how to protect myself verbally. Since then, every time they saw me in the corridors, they would push me and say some bullshit. One day we were smoking outside, sitting on the school fence with some friends, and one of the older student came, visibly drunk, and sat next to me and began hugging me. Then, he became very aggressive, asking me over and over, "Where is my cigarette lighter?" and he began hitting me with his head. I did not know who to ask for help... Another kind of bullying which has happened to me is that my Skype and Facebook profiles were hacked and some porn pictures were posted on my behalf, with statements that I was gay, which were supposedly my own confessions." (A.G., 19 years old, gay, technical school).*

Physical violence towards young lesbian and bisexual women is rare when compared to the violence against young gay or transgender men, but verbal abuse happens:

- *Once, when we were on a school trip, some boys from my grade shouted at me: "Hey lesbian, do you lick pussies?" Usually the boys do such things. Sometimes, teachers*

hear it, but do nothing. (L.B., female, bisexual, 16 years old, 10th grade, language school).

Many of the cases of violence against LGBT people, reported the interviewees, affect students who others perceive as homosexual, bisexual or transgender, even though they might not be. Such cases are not addressed in an adequate way either. This reinforces negative stereotypes of LGBT people.

- *We have a classmate called M., who is not gay, or if he is I do not know about it. He is one of those kind of students, you know, who are very serious about studying and that is the only thing they do in life. He is so small and tender. As a result, this small and tender boy has been hit many times, or verbally abused, and he is often called a “pederast.” Moreover, he cannot do anything to protect himself; he just shrinks and keeps silent. I have always protected him as much as I can (A.G., gay, 19 years old, technical school).*

In terms of measures that school authorities could take to prevent violence against LGBT people, the students propose including discussions on LGBT issues in the curriculum and actively involving the school psychologist in addressing hatred and violence toward LGBT people.

- *I think that the school should provide all students with the information that LGBT people are just people, that they do exist. The school should not reinforce the lack of acceptance of LGBT people by keeping silent on this topic. The school curriculum should include more classes dedicated to the prevention of racism, sexism, and ethnicity-based hatred. People should understand that love and understanding are the first step towards acceptance (N.S., female, 17 years old, bisexual, private school).*

The lesbian teachers who we interviewed had not been very active in addressing issues of discrimination and/or violence against LGBT students because they fear being outed. One of them reports having intervened against verbal attacks towards a gay student, but has not addressed the issue in-depth by opening a discussion on sexual and gender identities:

- *I knew about a student in my class; once there was verbal abuse against him, and the other students even tried to involve me in the conversation and to make me their ally. I said that this is not right and stopped the discussion. My reaction shocked them somehow. (S.A., lesbian, teacher, 33 years old, high-ranked school).*

Another one believes that she cannot do much, because on one hand, the verbal mocking does not present a serious offense, and on the other, students are just cruel in that age.

- *There has been mocking and name-calling, but just that, nothing more serious. Students are cruel at this age (14-15 years old). (E.D., 53 years old, bisexual, teacher at a high-ranked school).*

Reaction of School Authorities towards Cases of Discrimination, Violence and Bullying against LGBTI Students and Staff

Most often, school authorities do not recognize discrimination against LGBT students and staff. If the authorities have been informed about a specific case of violence against an LGBT student, they take some form of action. This leads to the conclusion that the school

authorities should plan special measures to encourage reporting of cases of violence and discrimination against LGBT people.

- *Homophobic discrimination is usually hidden, and if the school authorities learn about it they do their best to explain that there is another reason for the discrimination. They would not admit that the discrimination happened because of sexual orientation (A.K. gay, 16 years old, technical school).*
- *The case is usually discussed at a pedagogical council meeting. The principal also reacts very responsibly and talks to all sides. However, there should be much more talking taking place in ordinary circumstances in order to prevent such cases (I.P, lesbian, teacher, 28 years old).*
- *I do not know of such measures. They (the school authorities) do not understand discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Y.K., lesbian, 19 years old, 12 grade, elite school).*
- *There have been no cases so far which the authorities have considered serious enough to require action. If there is discrimination on other grounds, the school authorities do not usually react, because it is only verbal. (E.D. teacher, bisexual, 53 years old).*
- *There have been reactions only in cases of physical violence, but the ongoing verbal abuse is typically not recognized. If a student reports verbal violence, a teacher may occasionally react, but it would not be taken as a serious issue, which requires the reaction of the pedagogical council (K.P. bisexual trans boy, 18 years old, 12 grade, language school).*

Lack of Open Discussion about LGBTI at School

There is a general lack of awareness among students and school personnel that LGBT students are part of every school community. Many people express negative stereotypical attitudes towards LGBT people, but some are open to change this attitude when they realize that one of their friends is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The data from our interviews concluded that the highly ranked (so-called “elite” schools) create more space for personal freedom of expression, which increases the visibility of LGBT students (not staff), as a result of which, a climate of acceptance of diversity is created. The acceptance is, however, hierarchical, and depends on a student’s place in the informal hierarchy of the school.

- *There are at least three LGBT students in my class: its me, a transgender guy, and another girl, who is lesbian. When my classmates learned that I am bisexual many of them asked me, “How did I know? How did I decide? How do I have sex? I think that they are asking those questions because they are interested in the topic, and at the same time, they have very little information about it. In general, everybody treats me well... It also very much depends on where one stands in the “food chain” at school. The more popular students are usually accepted well if they turn out to be gay/lesbian, while the less popular ones are more discriminated against (L.B., female, bisexual, 16 years old, 10th grade, language school).*

Another observation is that young men are usually more concerned about deviations from normative heterosexual orientation, and more discriminative against classmates who are gay. This is the effect of traditional patriarchal norms, which are stricter towards men than

towards women, because male power and leadership is very much associated with fitting into the norms. The male-centered schools (technical schools with majority of male students) are as a rule more discriminative towards LGBT people and there is less visibility of such students. Group pressure also affects male attitudes much more than female ones:

- *Heterosexual men, especially my classmates, are terrible hypocrites! When they are together, each of them is very concerned about the opinion of those around him, and they pretend that they share a consolidated negative attitude towards LGBT people. Nevertheless, when they are on their own, many of them are open towards accepting gays. They even accept that we are “normal,” although I hate this word, and prefer to use “natural”... There is a guy in my class who is very aggressive, and has also demonstrated aggression towards me in front of the others. However, when the two of us are alone, we find a common language. He knows what I am and he does not find it to be a problem. We find topics of common interest.(A.G., gay, 19 years old, technical school).*

How do teachers talk about LGBT issues? The interviewees stressed that even teachers who are sensitive to discrimination based on other characteristics, such as religion or ethnic origin, are either not aware, or not willing to discuss issues arising from one's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. The topic of homosexuality and bisexuality is sometimes touched upon in classes dealing with history, literature, psychology, or philosophy, but nobody ever talks about transgenderism. This is not a surprise, having in mind the very little information on this topic in the general context, the mass media, and the public discourse.

Most of the teachers reinforce the stereotypes about LGBT:

- *They say that sexual orientation or gender identity should not be discussed in public; that it is not appropriate to reveal one's homosexuality (A.K., gay, 16 years old, technical school).*
- *They say, “I do not accept these people, but I don't create problems.” They make general statements, if the topic arises in class, without directly addressing anyone (P.P. gay, 17 years old, 11th grade, technical school).*

At the same time, it seems that the students' interest towards discussing topics of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression at school is growing:

- *The topic is very rarely discussed, but it looks like more and more students are interested in discussing this topic at school. For example, for my exam in verbal skills (in German) I chose to talk about homosexuality: discrimination or integration. Nobody made a negative comment about it. At the same time, nobody congratulated me for choosing this topic. I think, that attitudes are still reserved and overall negative when this topic comes up (E.T., 18 years old, female, 12 grade, bisexual).*

Teachers are reactive to cases of violence against LGBT, but they are not pro-active in addressing the topic with the purpose of preventing violence.

- *Most teachers defend students with visible differences, such as ethnic, religious, or physical differences. However, nobody talks about gays and lesbians. This is a taboo topic. When a conflict arises between a gay guy and a heterosexual guy, they would stand up and try to end the conflict. That is all that they would do. None of my teachers has ever touched upon this topic (L.B., female, bisexual, 16 years old, language school).*

One lesbian teacher we interviewed took a pro-active stance in addressing a case of verbal violence between 6th-grade students: she decided to raise student awareness of homosexuality, bisexuality and the transgender identity. This resulted in parental discontent

and an urgent parents-teacher meeting. She was blamed for talking about LGBT people in front of 6th-graders (12 years old students).

- *I had this particular case when some sixth-graders were fighting, and when I asked why they had started the fight, it turned out that a boy had called a girl a “lesbian” and she began hitting him. I spent the whole class discussing what it means to be gay or lesbian, that such people exist, and why we have a negative attitude towards them. I questioned some of the stereotypes. Soon after this conversation, a special parent-teacher meeting was organized and I was blamed for talking about sensitive issues to very young students. I was told that there were no such students in our school, and so on... This became a big discussion in the school community and invoked negative reactions from many parents. (I.P., teacher, lesbian, 28 years old).*

This case is exemplary of the absence of policies in relation to the provision of general knowledge on LGBT issues at school. The provision of such knowledge should be part of the general curriculum and not left to the choice of an individual teacher. Only when schools begin disseminating scientific information about actual diversity arising from sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, will they be able to question the negative stereotypes about LGBTI people. All public schools should reinforce in-depth understanding of homosexuality, bisexuality, intersexuality and transgenderism as part of the actual diversity in society, in order to overcome discrimination and negative stereotyping resulting in violence.

Part IV: Recommendations

Subjects / Classes which Provide Space for Discussion of LGBTI Identities

Subjects that are part of the philosophy cycle in grades 9-11, including logic, psychology, ethics, history of philosophy and aesthetics, as well as the subjects related to civic education: personality and society, etc., and all humanitarian subjects: literature, history, and social sciences, provide space for reflection on cultural norms regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This could be done in relation to discussing a particular historical figure, a literary character, or as a philosophical discussion about a social norm. Some students, mainly those from elite schools, have had presentations and discussions on sexuality and gender within the above-mentioned subjects:

- *We had this debate in 9th grade during Psychology and Logic, which made us feel uncomfortable because the teacher was very religious. When I had to present on this topic, I made her cry, because I managed to show in a very expressive way how I feel at school. (N.S., female, bisexual, 17 years old, private school).*

This is, however, not the case in every school. Some interviewees commented that the LGBT topics are never discussed, even within the context of philosophical subjects:

- *In the classes on Philosophy and Ethics, we have never discussed that all human beings are born equal. Neither have we discussed that there are people who are LGBT. Nor the attitude of the other people in society towards LGBT people (A.G., gay, 19 years old, 12 grade, technical school).*
- *Such discussions took place several times during Biology class. According to me, the teacher presented the topic very inadequately and made efforts to persuade everybody*

that people with non-heterosexual orientation are a “mistake of nature.” (J.K., lesbian, 19 years old, 12 grade, high-ranked school).

- *There was once a presentation which was even not on this topic, but there was a picture of two men holding hands, and it caused some boys to leave the room. Nevertheless, there was no reaction from the teacher, and no discussion took place. (K.P., transgender, bisexual boy, 18 years old, 11 grade, language school).*

The majority of students interviewed shared that the topics of sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity are not part of the school curriculum, and neither do teachers make space to discuss such topics when there is an opportunity, for example when discussing a particular historical figure whose homosexuality was well known. On rare occasions, if a student or a teacher touches upon the topic, everybody feels awkward, and the discussion stops soon after it has started. On one occasion, an intern-teacher asked the students, “Would you participate in Sofia Pride?” All students turned their eyes towards the student who was out as a lesbian. Nobody answered the question.

Some of the students interviewed have come across racist comments on behalf of teachers, which reinforced their belief that they should not open up discussions related to sexual orientation, in order to avoid homophobic comments.

The so-called “Advisory Class” provides multiple opportunities for the students and their class teacher to discuss topics of interest and topics of high relevance to their life at school. This opportunity is not adequately used because these classes are most often used to solve administrative issues such as absences from school, planned extra-curricular activities, etc.

- *In “Advisory Class,” we usually discuss various issues, but there is no time for educational lectures on health or other topics like we had in the past.. It is difficult to organize the class on the basis of topics of interest, because there are many other issues to solve... (E.D., female teacher, bisexual, 53 years old, highly-rated school).*
- *Several years ago, when I was a class adviser, we had the option to choose topics of interest for advisory class. However, there was barely enough time to review absences and to discuss other issues related to the schedule. We hardly touched upon any topics of interest. On the other hand, I avoided discussing topics related to sexual orientation, because at that time I thought that this would out me to the students. (S.A., lesbian, teacher, 33 years old, highly ranked school).*

Overall, LGBT students and teachers have not identified educational content which is openly discriminative against LGBTI people, with the exception of Religion class, which is optional. The mere absence of texts on these topics is perceived as a form of hidden discrimination by some interviewees:

- *They (the teaching materials) are discriminative because they are hetero-normative. On the other hand, the teaching materials in recent years include references to other minority identities, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, etc. This might be the result of implementation of the Anti-Discrimination Law. (I.P., lesbian, teacher, 28 years old).*

Measures that School Authorities Could Take to Prevent Discrimination and Violence against LGBTI Students and Teachers

All interviewees believe that more discussion on the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity will lead to more acceptance of diversity and less discrimination against LGBT

people in the school environment. They also think that the School Code of Conduct should provide protection of vulnerable groups, including LGBT students. The most important effect of including these characteristics in the list of protected grounds would be increasing the awareness of the school authorities about the actual rate of discrimination of LGBT in the schools.

Some students think that the teachers at their schools are not sufficiently prepared to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression; hence such discussions should be led by external experts. For example, teachers do not understand that referring to heterosexuals as “the normal ones” is discriminative. The interviewees believe that once the general knowledge about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender identities is increased, the students will become more tolerant of these differences.

- *Most teachers do not react when they hear the insulting word “pederast,” as if nothing has happened. I think that teachers should be educated first (A.K. gay, 16 years old, technical school).*
- *This is a difficult question, because if there is too much information and slogans on the topic of equality of LGBT in the school, then everybody will start thinking that we want special rights. This is not true, but it is very difficult to explain to people that LGBT rights are not special rights; they are just human rights. There should be some space for discussion of marginal issues like these. Space in which students would be able to ask questions. If there is no one to talk to about one’s identity, it is very painful. (A.G., gay, 19 years old, 12 grade, technical school).*
- *The school principals should employ only teachers who are open- minded and forward-thinking; teachers who could be role models for the students. The students should grow up in a non-discriminative environment, in which there is no hatred towards different people. (Y.K., lesbian, 19 years old, 12 grade, elite school).*
- *The topic should be discussed in the advisory class. Currently, there is no particular subject which can accommodate such discussion. In the advisory class, there is an opportunity to invite external lecturers, if the teacher does not feel sufficiently prepared. (S.A., lesbian, teacher, 33 years old, elite school).*
- *The students council could also do something about it. At our school, they are very actively preventing smoking. They could do something about sexual and gender identities too. (I.P. lesbian, teacher, 28 years old).*
- *We need widely accessible information in the form of flyers or presentations, like the ones we had for AIDS. That way, people who are interested in learning more will be able to. (K.P. bisexual trans boy, 18 years old, 11 grade, language school).*

The Ideal School Environment

LGBT students and teachers long for a school environment in which everyone is free to express oneself without hurting others. However, some do not believe that such an environment is possible in Bulgaria.

- *I imagine the perfect school as a place in which everyone is free to speak, love, and look however one wishes, without hurting others (Y.K., lesbian, 19 years old, 12 grade, highly-rated school).*
- *I can hardly imagine the ideal school in Bulgaria. My imagination cannot go that far. In my opinion, it is important to start talking to students about identities and*

human rights when they are very young. In high school, it is too late. They have already developed an opinion on those matters. (E.D., bisexual, teacher, 53 years old).

- *The ideal school is free of discrimination and prejudice; nobody feels discriminated against, and nobody discriminates against others. Not sure when this will happen (S.A., lesbian, teacher, 33 years old).*
- *Our education system still follows a path which ignores the topic of identities and diversity. That is why it is difficult for the students to respect diversity. If a school sets a goal to support every child, regardless of differences, and if it focuses on interpersonal communication and life skills development, then gradually, the actual diversity of students and staff will be acknowledged and appreciated. The ideal school embraces a culture of sharing and support. (I.P., lesbian, teacher, 28 years old).*
- *The ideal school is a school in which students are valued for who they are, and nobody needs to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. Nobody changes their opinion of someone if they learn that this person is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex. (L.B., bisexual, 16 years old, 10 grade, language school).*

Opinions of School Principals on the Policies for Prevention of Discrimination and Bullying of LGBTI at School

The last part of our research included sending out a questionnaire to 50 school principals of secondary schools in Sofia, including professional and humanitarian schools, which inquired about their viewpoint on the inclusiveness of the school policies towards LGBTI students and staff. Unfortunately, only 10% of the principals filled in and returned the questionnaire, which does not allow us to draw general conclusions, but only to present some examples. This low responsiveness once again demonstrates lack of interest of the school authorities regarding the topic, and unwillingness to cooperate with an NGO which works for LGBTI rights.

The principal of one of the schools in which we identified many LGBT students, and interviewed a transgender student, answered that she is not aware of the presence of transgender students in her school. She also notes that the school does not have a specific policy for protection of the rights of LGBT students and staff, and LGBTI students are not recognized as a vulnerable group. On the other hand, the principal agrees that the school internal policies would benefit from a more detailed definition of bullying/violence enumerating the various grounds on which the latter are prohibited.

The principal of another school does not think that it is necessary for staff and teachers to gain additional knowledge on the topics sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Neither does she agree that the school internal policies should enumerate all grounds that have been included in the Anti-Discrimination Law. Finally, she does not think that it is necessary for the school administration to provide special support to teachers who come out as LGBT.

The principal of a professional school does not think that the pedagogical adviser (school psychologist) should pay special attention to students who exhibit homophobic or transphobic attitudes. At the same time, she understands the need to have more detailed

school policies on prevention of discrimination and bullying based on exhaustive enumeration of all possible vulnerable groups.

The principal of an elite school states that the enumeration of vulnerable groups might be interpreted as providing special rights to some groups, and prefers not to include them in the school policies that are binding for all students. At the same time, she states that the school administration would provide support to teachers who come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, as long as the latter is not for amoral purposes.

In conclusion, based on our research findings, Bilitis stresses the need of a comprehensive approach and systematic work to improve the status of LGBTI students and teachers at school, and create an inclusive school environment. Hereby, we would like to promote the Declaration for Non-Discrimination of LGBTI People in the Sphere of Education that was elaborated and initially disseminated by the Organizing Committee of Sofia Pride 2015. It has so far been supported by 13 NGOs and 2 political parties.

Part V: Declaration for Non-Discrimination of LGBTI People in the Sphere of Education

Declaration for Non-Discrimination of LGBTI People in the Sphere of Education

The undersigned of this Declaration,

Having regard to Article 1, Article 2 and Article 26 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of the UN,

Having regard to Article 2, Article 19, Article 26 of the International Pact for Civic and Political Rights,

Having regard to Article 2, Article 12 and Article 13 of the International Pact for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

Having regard to Article 9, Article 10, Article 11 and Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,

Having regard to Article 11 and Article 17 of the European Social chart (revised),

Having regard to Article 8 and Article 10 of the Treaty for Functioning of the European Union,

Having regard to the Charter for Fundamental Rights of the European Union and more specifically Article 21 from it,

Having regard to Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to the member states regarding measures for combating discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, adopted on March 31, 2010, and more specifically point 31 and point 32 from it,

Having regard to Resolution of the European Parliament from February 4, 2014, regarding the Roadmap of the EU against homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (2013/2183(INI)),

Having regard to Article 4, Article 6, Article 14, Article 39, Article 41, Article 44 and Article 53 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria,

Having regard to the needs of students from all ages to receive comprehensive education about their fundamental rights, equality, freedom from discrimination and the principles of the democratic society,

Having regard to the need for education about relationships, family life, and sex, which should encompass not only the physical side, but also the emotional side of the latter,

Having regard to the need for educational content, which reflects the perspectives and the needs of people from minorities, including LGBTI people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex),

Having regard to the need for introducing standards for responding to bullying at school, based on best practices and integrating the specific measures and understanding of school bullying and victimization of vulnerable groups, including LGBTI people,

Having regard to the need of students for access to information and support on all issues, related to sexual orientation and gender identity, or gender expression,

Having regard to the need of the educational institutions to be safe and inclusive of all – students, teachers, and employees in the administration,

Having regard to the need of vulnerable groups to feel included and respected by means of recognizing and accepting their identities, including LGBTI people,

Having regard that the educational institutions should not only present theoretical knowledge, but also develop democratic culture among students by means of fostering their participation in initiatives, and in decision-making about the policies which affect them,

General Principles

Strictly condemn every form of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, and document that the fundamental rights of LGBTI people are not fully respected in all cases in Bulgaria;

Consider that at present there is no comprehensive policy for the protection of the fundamental rights of LGBTI people in Bulgaria;

Call on the executive to use its powers in full in order to integrate the principles laid out in this declaration and the recommendations for implementing of the internal policies, more specifically the ones in the sphere of education;

Human Rights Education

Call for the inclusion of the human rights issues in the educational programs for general education, and more specifically as a central part of civic education;

Call for the inclusion of human rights education as part of the compulsory schooling for acquiring the professional qualification of “teacher”;

Call for making human rights education also accessible for non-pedagogical staff of the educational institutions;

Sex and Relationships Education

Call for the development and introduction of educational programs on the topics of relationships, family life, and sex, which include not only information about physiology,

hygiene, and health education, but also discussion of feelings, emotions, and ethics in human relationships;

Call for the inclusion of age-consistent information about sexual orientation and gender identity, based on facts from contemporary science;

Integration of LGBTI Issues in Educational Programs

Call for the integration of topics, concerning LGBTI people, their identities, and their perspectives into the educational content and educational programs, along with relevant historical information about the LGBTI movement, LGBTI personalities or artists, whose work is being studied;

Call for periodic review and updating of the educational programs with respect to the needs of students, teachers, and making use of the expertise of non-governmental organizations;

Counteracting School Bullying and Implementation of Practices of Inclusion

Call for the introduction of policies and strategies for counteracting school bullying that openly refer to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds, as well as preparation of the teachers and the administration of the educational institutions to deal with such issues;

Call for all students, including those who are subject of homophobic or transphobic bullying at school to be informed about and have access to support services for victims of violence, including psychological support;

Call for the organizing of a centralized system for collection of statistical data on school bullying, which takes into account the cases of bullying based on the minority identity of the victim, including homophobic and transphobic bullying;

Call for the integration of such policies and their implementation on the local, regional, and national level;

Call for the introduction of effective mechanisms for protection of the victims of school bullying and violence, giving priority to ensuring the safety of the victim and informing the victim about the measures taken against the perpetrator. These mechanisms should ensure protection of the victims from the accusation that they have triggered the violence, and that they should hide their identities in the future. These mechanisms should involve effective and prohibitive sanctions for the perpetrators, which aim at correction of their behavior;

Access to Information and Support

Call for providing access to information and support to students, teachers, and non-pedagogical staff on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, including: the introduction of relevant materials in the library of the educational institution, access to psychological counseling from a specialist with relevant expertise on minority issues; access to electronic and printed materials, etc.;

Call on the school administration to respect the right to a personal life of anyone who wishes to be informed on these issues anonymously and in privacy;

Call for placing information in publicly visible and accessible places at school that is relevant to LGBTI students, such as: events, organizations, health or social services, in the form of flyers, posters, brochures, and other materials;

Call for providing access to a specific person at every school who would consult students, teachers and the non-pedagogical staff on issues related to minorities, and LGBTI in particular, also by means of tools which provide confidentiality and anonymity, such as e-mail;

Call on the educational institutions to provide support to self-organized groups, such as clubs and interest groups of people from minorities, including LGBTI students, teachers, non-pedagogical staff and parents;

Call on the educational institutions to provide access to materials that educate about human sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression in a reliable and constructive way, distinguishing between such materials and pornography;

Educational Institutions as Safe and Inclusive

Call for the creation of climate of inclusiveness in educational institutions that encourages LGBTI people not to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity, and helps them express themselves openly and without fear that they will be condemned by others; except for cases in which LGBTI people have chosen to keep their identity secret;

Call for timely reaction in removing inscriptions and symbols created by graffiti, posters, flyers or in any other way, which express hatred based on grounds which have been protected in the antidiscrimination law; which defame minority groups or promote anti-democratic ideologies;

Call for sanctioning of hate speech in public in the name of reinforcing the principles of equal treatment and acceptance of all vulnerable communities, including LGBTI people;

Visibility

Call on the administrations of the educational institutions to implement active and publicly visible policies supporting equality and non-discrimination, embracing the celebration of occasions that are important for the minority communities, including LGBTI people;

Call on administrations of the educational institutions to use language that is inclusive of all communities and which does not reinforce traditional stereotypes about gender;

School Democracy

Call on the educational institutions to present opportunities for all students to take part in decision-making about policies that affect them;

Call on the administrations of the educational institutions to ensure mechanisms which guarantee that the structures representing students are inclusive of all students, based on gender, age, race, ethnicity or origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, as well as health status or disability;

Call on the administrations of the educational institutions to cooperate with organizations of students, teachers and parents in the implementation of projects and initiatives, which include activities for which the administration lacks capacity or expertise.

17.06.2015

[Non-governmental organizations and political parties that have signed this declaration by 30.11.2015.](#)

- Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

- Bilitis Resource Center
- Deystvie LGBT Youth Association
- GLAS-Bulgaria Foundation
- LGBT Plovdiv
- Roma Initiative Foundation
- Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation
- Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue
- Health Problems of Minorities Foundation
- Political Party “The Greens”
- Bulgarian Fund for Women
- Social Foundation Indi-Roma
- Krokus foundation
- Political party DEOS
- Opportunities without Borders Association

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