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Context analysis of Country policies, local theories, research data and Projects in schools related to homophobia in Bulgaria

"Homophobia is a term used to refer to a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards lesbian and gay and in some cases bisexual, transgender people and behaviour although these are usually covered under biphobia and transphobia. Intersex and asexual people are also sometimes included. Definitions refer variably to antipathy, contempt, prejudice, aversion, and irrational fear. Homophobia is observable in critical and hostile behavior such as discrimination and violence on the basis of perceived homosexuality of people. In a 1998, the author, activist, and civil rights leader Coretta Scott King stated that "Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood."

Among more discussed forms are institutionalized homophobia (e.g. religious and state-sponsored), lesbophobia – the intersection of homophobia and sexism directed against lesbians, and internalized homophobia – a form of homophobia among people who experience same-sex attraction, regardless of whether or not they identify as LGBT.

Two words originate from homophobia: homophobic (adj.) and homophobe (n.). A person who displays homophobia or is thought to do so is described as being homophobic and labeled as a homophobe." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homophobia>)

In this context the Bulgarian lawmakers adopted Law on Protection against Discrimination in 2004. It is the only instrument against sexual discrimination. In 2005, alongside adopting the law, the policymakers established a Commission for Protection Against Discrimination¹, the institution which has to guarantee the Human Rights of all targeted people. The law says: Article 4. (1) (Supplemented: SG, 70/2004, effective as of 01.01.2005) that any direct or indirect discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship,

¹ According to the Law on prevention on discrimination, Art. 41. (1) The Commission consists of nine people, including at least four lawyers. The National Assembly elects five members, including - President and Vice-Chairperson of the Commission and the President of the Republic of Bulgaria shall appoint 4 members. The Mandate of the commission members is 5 years. Practically the 5 years mandate has expired in 2010 and up to this moment 6/2011 there is still no decision for the new members. That makes the Current Commission illegitimate and its decision could automatically be contested.



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origin, religion or belief, education, views, political allegiance, personal or social status, disability, age, sexual orientation, marital status, property status, or on any other ground, established by law or an international treaty whereto the Republic of Bulgaria is a party, shall be prohibited." It was a serious step for building a tolerant and understanding society and it is the first law which defends the rights of non- heterosexual citizens of Bulgaria.

During the last five years the Commission against discrimination established 14 cases of people who are victims of sexual discrimination and recommended punishment for perpetrators. In relation of the work of the Commission, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee published a report for 2010 in which for the first time discrimination based on sexual orientation was included. "In 2010 the problems with regard to the rights of people with different sexual orientation continued to be serious. Since the beginning of 2004 the Law on Prevention of Discrimination covers discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in all fields. At the same time, despite the fact that Articles 162 and 164 of the Criminal Code stipulate penalties in cases of instigation of animosity or hatred on the basis of race, nationality, ethnicity and religion, the instigation of hatred and violence against LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals) is not explicitly included in the Criminal Code provisions. As a result, hate crimes motivated by the sexual orientation or the sexual identity of a person are not considered a criminal act. In other words, it is a paradox that the Criminal Code does not cover crimes motivated by hatred against LGBT people, although prohibits hate crimes based on ethnicity, religion or belief, race and political affiliation.

Bulgaria is still one of the countries which does not recognize any form of cohabitation between people of the same sex. Civil marriage remains the only legally recognized union between two persons, explicitly defined in law as "a voluntary union between a man and a woman." The lack of recognition of same-sex couples automatically places them at a disadvantage, depriving them of the civic, social and economic rights awarded to heterosexual couples.

In 2009 the Pazardzhik Municipal Council adopted an Ordinance on Public Order. Its Article 14 prohibits "the public demonstration and expression of sexual and other orientation in public places." When activists contested this article, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination stated at a meeting on May 11, 2010, that the municipal council had committed direct discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and instructed the council to repeal the ordinance. The ordinance was repealed at first instance by the Pazardzhik Administrative Court. The decision is currently being contested in the Supreme Administrative Court.



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Over the year, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination found discrimination with regard to three complaints filed against Weekend and Galeria **newspapers**. The first of the three procedures was completed in May 2010. The complaints are related to an article entitled "Shame! Gay Scandal at CSKA" published by Weekend on September 26, 2009. The newspaper, which is owned by New Media Group AD, published personal photos of CSKA's goalkeeper copied from Facebook. The commission found discrimination and required that the paper's management develop and implement self-control rules and mechanisms in order not to allow discrimination.

In June 2010, Galeria, its editor-in-chief and its publisher were convicted for direct discrimination, abuse and persecution and were fined BGN 2,500 and BGN 2,000, respectively. Apart from the fine, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination imposed involuntary administrative measures on the publisher, Kroz AD, and again required that the management develop and implement self-control rules and mechanisms in order not to allow discrimination. The decision was logical given the three consecutive publications in the first, second and third issue of the newspaper, with the third one – entitled "Faggots Rally against Galeria" – published as a response to the complaint filed with the CPD after the first two publications.

In October 2010, the CPD fined the editor-in-chief and publisher of Weekend, Martin Radoslavov, BGN 800 and advised the journalist who had prepared the article to abstain from "presenting unconfirmed and unproven facts and circumstances as factual truth," as well as "not to try to create stereotypes and negative attitudes towards people with non-heterosexual and homosexual orientation led only by her aspiration for the sensational." The publication that caused this was entitled "Sensation! The Belneyskis' Killer Is Homosexual" and was published on November 3, 2009.

Despite the fact that the decisions on these three cases are a positive example, a series of other statements and publications remain without consequences. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the ethics committees in the press and the electronic media, as well as the Electronic Media Council are not enough proactive in cases of hate speech on the basis of sexual orientation.

Except the problems which are mentioned in Bulgarian Helsinki Committee report, Bulgarian non-heterosexual citizens have really serious problems concerning homophobia, hate speech, hate crimes and negative attitude towards LGBT people.

Apart from the media attitude, Bulgarian society is still witnessing homophobic statements from **politicians and public figures**. For example, during the last five years the head of



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"Ataka" party, extreme right Bulgarian party, who has 17 deputies in Bulgarian Parliament, says "The border between homosexuality and pedophilia is really thin". Three Bulgarian Gay Activists initiate a low case to him. (March 2006).

In 2008 the head of Bulgarian National Union party wanted to ban gay organizations in the country, opposed the gay parade, organized by the Bulgarian Gay Organization "Gemini", and organized a "Week of intolerance towards homosexuality and pedophilia in the Bulgarian society". The First gay parade in Bulgaria was held in Sofia on 28 June 2008, with 150 participants who were attacked with Molotov cocktails and nail bombs. The Police arrested 88 neo-nazi attackers -some were football hooligans. Thanks to the good work of policemen nobody was wounded. The head of BNU was arrested and convicted to six months probation for hooligan crime.



Boyan Rasate with a member of the Bulgarian National Union. The sign of the t-shirt says "Don't be tolerant, be normal".

The other controversial political person who made public statements against the Bulgarian LGBT movement is the Vice-President of VMRO-BND. (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Bulgarian National Movement). Now he is a municipal councilor, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Order and Security and member of the standing committees on legislation and municipal property. He is one of the persons who take decisions about implementation and security for all events in Sofia Municipality, including Pride parades. He became really active with his antigay attitudes since 2009, when he declared "My personal opinion and the opinion of VMRO is that this parade is absolutely unnecessary and harmful to the Bulgarian society. And whatever was done in my power to convince my colleagues of the political group of GERD in the municipal council ..." (22 of June, 2009, Bulgarian National Radio, „Horizon in midday„_leading Irina Nedeva).



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All these examples give us the picture of a quiet tense situation in Bulgaria. The results are mentioned in the 2008 report of Aksinia Gencheva, national expert on LGBT issues, where she says that “Bulgaria is a country in which lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) citizens continue to face discrimination and exclusion in all social spheres. Although this type of discrimination is prohibited by 1 January 2004 law in the areas of employment, social security, health, education and housing, it continues to exist”.

According to the same report “representative and reliable information about LGBT population in Bulgaria “is very limited”. The problem is exacerbated because the national census does not include in its questionnaire information regarding the sexual orientation of the individuals as recommended by the EC and there is no government research and monitoring mechanisms on the problems of the community.

In addition, statistics on LGBT people are extremely poor and are only provided by NGOs or, rarely, from research of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and media studies. Information on community problems come mainly from international sources. Local researchers and research institutes claim that there is no interest in studying the problems of LGBT citizens, and therefore lacks funding for such research.

According to the LGBT minority report, LGBT issues are not taken into account in any social or political sphere, something which automatically precludes the existence of government policy and mechanisms to monitor and reduce inequalities.

Since 2008 to 2011 four **Gay Prides** have been organized in Sofia.

The first attracted 150 people, the second – 300, the third – 800 and the last, which was on the 18 of June 2011 – about 1200 participants. This means that independently of bad attitudes and real danger of attacks the progress in defending human rights of LGBT people is huge. All gay pride parades were supported by foreign embassies and non-government organizations from Bulgaria and Europe.

For the first time in the third Sofia Pride Parade a party represented in the Bulgarian Parliament issued a statement of support (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria as well as Bulgarian Greens “Zelenite”, and the Bulgarian Socialist Youth). There were no major incidents and the police reacted adequately to provocation attempts by nationalists. At the same time, the fact that the organizers were forced to pay the Sofia Directorate of Interior Affairs BGN 4,158 for protection (a huge portion of the event's budget) is totally unacceptable, given that securing and preserving public order is an intrinsic obligation of the police and is paid for by taxpayers' money.



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The fourth Sofia Pride took place on June 18, 2011. The only protesters against the Sofia pride LGBT parade have been from a NGO called "Forum for Defending Children and Family" whose protest was seen by Bulgarian media as "cultured", as all they did was to hand out brochures entitled "The Myths about Homosexuality".

Three of the four Gay Prides have been anathematized by the **Bulgarian Orthodox Church**. About the first Pride the church says that "Such public events promote immorality and try to replace longstanding family values". Concerning the second pride parade The Plovdiv metropolitan Nikolai, in his sermon to laymen, condemned it as a manifestation of sin and vice. In the 2010 the Holy Synod condemned the gay parade. The Synod, clergy and Orthodox Christians - members of the Holy Bulgarian Orthodox Church strongly oppose this "public, abrupt and embarrassing demonstration of Sodom sin manifestation that violates their rights". It has disastrous consequences for physical and spiritual health of people and destroy traditional values of the Bulgarian people and present temptation to our children and youth".

From there, the church urged the municipality to prohibit the holding of the "gathering, saying that Sodom and citizens should not participate in this" abomination of desolation. The Supreme governing body of the church also urged parents to protect their children to witness the event, which violated the" dignity of the human person, the importance of family love between a man and woman and the foundations of morality." (<http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=249367>).

All homophobic statements from Bulgarian politicians, the church and extreme right organizations strengthen the stigma about LGBT people in Bulgaria. We can see the proof of it in the **FRA report** 2010: "Using a 10-point 'comfort scale' (with '10' indicating most comfortable), individuals were asked to indicate their level of comfort with an LGBT person holding the highest political office. The EU average was 6.5 points, with Sweden (8.7), Denmark (8.4) and the Netherlands (8.2) scoring highest, and Romania (3.4) and Bulgaria (3.2) scoring lowest."..." In some Member States, public authorities have not been able or willing to ensure the safety of participants in LGBT demonstrations from attacks by counter-demonstrators. Within the past five years, attacks of this kind have occurred in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden. Such incidents were often accompanied by homophobic public statements or abusive speech. In several Member States (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy and Malta), calls for improving the rights of LGBT persons have invariably been met with negative responses from some politicians and representatives of religious institutions or groups. In some Member States, LGBT NGOs have also experienced problems in renting premises for political or cultural



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activities, and organizers of public LGBT debates have encountered problems in obtaining access to cultural and political venues."

When we talk about homophobia in **educational system**, it's impossible to separate the homophobic attitudes of society and only speak about education. The prejudices are created in early childhood age and it is often a common perception in society that the Roma people are thieves, the Muslims are theorists and of course gay people are sinners and they make sex with children. It's the frequent idea of most of the newspapers as well and they sell a lot with it. One of the serious problems in Bulgaria concerning homophobia is hate speech and negative attitude to LGBT people: usually it is normal to read in the newspaper titles like "18 years in prison for a gay who killed his boyfriend" (<http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=31720>), in the body of the text we can't understand if the killer is homosexual or the victim is..

There is only one **survey** about homophobia in educational system which was implemented by a Bulgarian Gay Organization "Gemini" in 2007-2008 and is part of the "**Deafening silence: the case in my school**" Project, funded by a small grant of the Program MATRA / KAP of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project is aimed at improving the school environment by establishing projects supporting anti-discrimination policies against minorities- ethnic, sexual orientation and disabilities.

According to this survey, LGBT youth in schools is subject to discrimination and harassment (a study of the level and nature of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender and ethnicity, conducted among 181 students between 9th and 12th grade BGO Gemini 2007 – 2008 (<http://www.bgogemini.org/bg/school/resultati.html>)).

According to the data, the curriculum is heavily based on gender, imposing heavy heteronormative and sexist roles of men and women. The survey shows that 70% of LGBT students /respondents/ leave school or miss classes because of systematic harassment and 50% have attempted suicide after such abuse. No mention of reaction or taking preventive measures by the Ministry of Education or other government agencies against these trends in schools.

The report goes on to argue for clear evidence of discrimination and harassment against LGBT people in the educational system, on which it can be assumed that such a homophobic environment leads to low levels of academic preparation and lack of experience and social skills in children and LGBT adolescents, making them more vulnerable than their peers in the labor market.



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Students are more tolerant to lesbians than to gay men. When asked what they will do if it appears that their classmate is gay, 26.5% of respondents believe that "this is his problem." 22.7% of respondents would protect him as long as the consequences do not concern them directly. 17.7% expressed only sympathy without taking any other action, 3.3% intend to ridicule him "as everyone else."

Of these surveyed 181 students from class IX to XII, 14.4% definitely do not want to have gay friends. Of the respondents, 87.7% identified themselves as heterosexual, 10.5% as bisexual, while 1.8 percent said they were gay. The figures quoted for the sample survey performed in 4 schools in Sofia.

The monitoring of eight textbooks, for high school students shows that they deal very briefly with sexual orientation, gender identity and minority rights.

Based on the project the following recommendations were submitted by ILGA-Europe under the Universal Periodic Review of United Nations human rights issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Bulgaria, and in particular by Aksinia Gencheva national experts to the Bulgarian government:

- organize campaigns to raise awareness, targeting the general public to combat prejudices that underlie violence related to sexual orientation or gender identity;
- make sure that the language of the media is clean and non-discriminatory regarding sexual orientation and gender identity and that hate speech, motivated by homophobia and transphobia, will not go unpunished;
- make sure that education is aimed at developing the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of each student to their full potential and to meet the needs of students with any sexual orientation and gender identity;
- take active and appropriate measures for dealing with harassment and discrimination in schools;
- make sure that the Bulgarian legislation and policies recognize the various forms of family;
- take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure non-discrimination to each family based on sexual orientation.



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Interviews with representatives of the education system

1. Introduction

During the field work phase data have been collected from school representatives regarding the attitude and stereotypes related to homosexuality in all levels of schooling. Two public schools and one private /primary to high.

The field work has been done in the city of Sofia and 11 interviews have been performed as follows:

Level of schooling	Directors	Teachers/pedagogic advisors
Primary (6-11 years old)	1	3
Secondary (11-15)	1	2
High (15-18)	1	3

2. The main issues

2.1. School Policy

Homophobia is not an issue actively dealt with in the schools where the interviews have been held. All the respondents state that there is silence in school on sexuality and LGBT issues.

Most of the interviewed professionals make an instant association with sexual education when they hear the words "homophobia" and/or "homosexuality".

One of the reasons is that the school curriculum does not include any subject or classes dedicated to the issue. Introducing the discussion on homosexuality and tolerance towards differences depends on the teacher's own personality and understandings. In the secondary and higher school classes /age 11-18/ it is done usually during the school subject called



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"Psychology and ethics" where there is a class dedicated to "Love", where the main focus is on sexual differences and sexually-transmitted diseases. Another subject used for opening a discussion on homophobia is "World and personality", where in the text book the suggested themes are "1. Sexual differences; 2. Love between man and woman" and some issues regarding the rights of the minorities in general, or with a focus on ethnic minorities.

Another space that can be used, in theory, by teachers for opening a discussion on homophobia and tolerance is the so called "Teacher's class" ², or "form tutor session". Again this is happening mainly in the higher level of schooling/age 15-18/ and depends on the single teacher's openness on the issue.

Based on that, the answer of all interviewees that the publications and school policies do not make reference to gay and lesbian authors appears logical.

None of the interviewees states that they get directions /recommendations/ materials related to homophobia. The directors don't find it necessary to give any indication to the teachers about it.

At the same time, all the respondents agree unanimously that the school is a place where homophobia and homosexuality should be brought up "to teach children tolerance".

2.2. Perception of the issue in school

"Looks like there is no discourse" a pedagogic advisor in a high school, including secondary, answered when asked "What is teacher's discourse on LGBT pupils and issues in the context of school?".

Since this is an issue not very much discussed in school, when talking about stereotypes about homosexuality usually the staff relate that to gender roles. During the course of conversation became clear that practically most of the staff perceive the homosexuality as something in contradiction with the common understanding of gender roles. Often teachers refer

² Art. 90, para. 4 of the Regulations for implementation of the Education Act states: "In the beginning of the school year, the Director shall appoint by order class teachers of all classes. According to Art. 90, para. 5 class teacher organizes time of class, extracurricular activities with students and keep compulsory school records for the class." Hour class is included in the weekly schedule of classes beyond the number of required classes and activities it is implemented on the basis of an annual plan, developed jointly by the tutor and students.



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homosexuality to “feminine boys” which are “tell- off, they need psychologist”. None speaks about women homosexuality. At the same time the common position of the interviewed is that attitude towards children is “like towards children” without being gender based.

Four of the respondents state that if there is an openly LGBT colleague she/he will not have problems, but none of them knows about such person. The common opinion is that most of the staff “does not have problems if someone is homosexual”, but 3 state that the “parents are afraid if there are homosexual teachers”.

In their experience, the parents never asked the issue to be brought up (or not) in class. There is only one case of a girl in high school whose mother told the teacher that she will not allow her daughter to be present in the class regarding the sexual transmitted diseases /STDs/.

Eight of the interviewed professionals, including the pedagogic advisor, are definite that they don't fear public outcry, but only 4 have talked about homosexuality in class and it was a positive experience.

Regarding the situation of the pupils that do not conform to the traditional gender roles, the interviewees share that they recognize such pupils and usually define them as “feminine boys”. None of the respondents talk about girls that do not conform to the traditional gender roles. The common teachers' feeling is that these children/ pupils are “made fun of”, but none reports of other types of violence/abuse. The general impression of teachers is that these children are treated fine by the other class mates or teachers.

The staff of the schools does not find any barriers for providing supportive school environment for LGBT pupils. Moreover, they believe the environment is tolerant to these pupils, but none can explain on what ground they get this impression and what it is exactly meant by “tolerant”.

The common state of mind of the teachers and directors is that LGBT students and colleagues shouldn't be treated differently and that “we do not have to pay attention to their difference”. Five of the interviewees -1 primary, 1 high, 1 director, 1 psychologist and 1 pedagogic advisor - are definite that it is necessary to start introducing LGBT and homophobia issues since primary level of schooling, something which will provide favourable and tolerant environment later on towards LGBT pupils.



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It is interesting to mention that in the private school the dialogue with the parents is more open and there is a bit more active involvement of the parents in school life. This itself could be a good ground for introducing the issue.

Unlike private schools, the public one are more into communicating with parents in the primary level, while in the higher levels the parents are almost absent at school.

2.3. Personal experience

The issues related to homophobia have never been brought up in class according to the results of the interviews performed. Part of the professionals (four) share the idea that they have been presenting the issue of "different sexual orientation" to the pupils "but not homophobia". This has been done in the form of discussion on the issue and/or in some cases discussions on some mainstream movies. When asked about some examples they are related to Brokeback Mountain and some of the TV series, such as Nip/Tuck and L Word.

All the interviewees have been tackling the issue of racism and human rights in their classes in all levels of schooling. The teachers feel much more comfortable and prepared to discuss racism, tolerance towards ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. The main policy is that people should be accepted the way they are. Talking about human rights, none of the teachers introduced the issue of LGBT.

It appears that it is more often in primary school that the teachers talk about gender roles and definitions of feminine and masculine. This is not that much of an issue in the higher school level. When talking about it, the primary school teachers share the view that they are sending the message that "the boys and the girls are equal and they have to help each other". However, the expectations shared in the schools are that "the girls should be more modest and less aggressive [than boys], as this is typical for girls".

Unanimously everybody believe that it is useful and needed to deal with diversity, human rights, sexual orientation and gender roles in school. One of the interviewees says: "It is so much more important than the other issues we are dealing with". It is the lack of preparation and information that the professionals recognize as a main difficulty to pay more attention to homophobia and LGBT issue. According to the responses, most of the interviewees find the school as an appropriate place to provide such information and only one believes that it has to be outsourced to an "external [specialised] service for LGBT pupils.. and not in school".



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It is a common reaction of all the interviewees that they **would** feel comfortable to speak about sexual orientation and homophobia with the pupils if they are provided some preparation and supporting materials. It is important to mention that the interviews have been held a month before the 4th Gay Pride in Sofia, a time of intense public discussions and debates on the issue of homophobia and homosexuality. It could be said that the willingness of the staff to introduce the issue in school, in most of the cases is more socially desirable than consciously defined need of the interviewed.

At the same time, since there is no practice to deal with the subject of homo/sexuality in school, it is true that the teachers themselves feel unprepared for it. Putted in a broader context, still in Bulgarian society sexuality is considered a private issue.

The biggest part of the interviewed can not recall any example of books, movies or events on the issue of homosexuality and homophobia that they can recommend/ suggest to pupils or parents.

When it comes to the personal level of acceptance of homosexuality one states "it seems strange, I don't like my close ones to be this way..", one is without opinion, one states that she does not divide the people on this ground and all the rest state that they accept homosexuality and respect the right of LGBT people.

Most of the representatives of the school staff do not define themselves as engaged with any of homophobia or LGBT issue.

2.4. Bullying

All the interviewees are definite that in their schools there is no bullying based on sexual orientation. There are no signs of homophobic bullying recognized by the staff. Although few of the teachers state that there is bullying against children perceived as "different" but it is not a matter of homophobia. There is no report for homophobic bullying in the schools where the interviews are performed. The pupils are encouraged to report any kind of bullying, but it is a rare case, according to the teachers. There is no special register of the incidents.

The general understanding is that there is no age that can be fixed as a starting point of bullying. The teachers impression is that there are forms of bullying at every age.



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Name-calling is common in all levels of schooling. The most used insults are “faggot”, “girly” and “pedal³”. It came clear that children in primary school use these words because they know that they are offending, but are not aware of their meaning. Often it appears that the children are offended if someone call them “gypsy” and don’t react when being named “faggot”. In case of small children, the teachers usually explain that these are offending words and one doesn’t have to offend the others. When it comes to bigger children, they have been invited to “individual conversation” or sent to the psychologist of the school to handle the matter.

Everybody agrees that they don’t really much know how to face and deal with homophobic language. The typical reaction is to make a remark and stop the pupils from doing it, which does not include any explanation about the issue and/or why such attitude is wrong. There is a common position that the teachers must react when hearing or witnessing homophobic and/or racist language, though often they lack ideas and instruments to do it. All agree that it is in their duties to prevent homophobic thinking and attitude.

2.5. Supporting materials

None of the interviewees is aware or ever heard of any project in schools that deals with the issue of homosexuality/homophobia/gender roles⁴. It is common opinion that the school textbooks are definitely hetero-normative and teach sex-role stereotypes of women as weaker sex. Homophobia and/or homosexuality are not issues at all present in books. The interviewees express readiness and willingness to use audiovisual tools to present the issue of homophobia and homosexuality in their classes, although they are not clear in which ones. They are willing to participate in testing such a tool.

³ “pedal” in Bulgarian “педал” is a word used to offend man with homosexual orientation. The word is close to “pederast” /bg/= faggot

⁴ There has been One project "Deafening silence - the case in my school." Released in 2008 with the aim to improve the school environment by modeling the anti-discrimination and anti-homophobic attitude in school. The schools involved in the project will be invited for the focus groups.



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3. Recommendations

Everybody recognizes the importance of parents involvement in the process of introducing the issue of homophobia and homosexuality and testing the tool.

Training/ preparation of the teachers is needed, not only for testing the tool, but as a general introduction to the issue. There are suggestions to organise focus groups on the issue with parents as well as teachers.



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Focus groups report Bulgaria

1. Introduction

The aim:

- Get information about stereotypes and education on LGBT issues in schools

The results are intended to reveal understanding about how to tackle the issue of sexual identity and homophobia in schools (with discussion of possible tools and methods targeted to the different ages of children and youngsters) so to face the stereotypes and challenge them with educational tools.

For the purposes of research, issues discussed with the participants are divided into thematic areas such as:

- Who's responsibility it is to deal with LGBT issues in society?
- The existing education materials and schoolbooks
- Level of awareness of students about sexual diversity and LGBT issues
- What space is there in school for education to LGBT issues (sexual orientation, diversity, respect, identity, rights)?
- At what age of pupils could it start? Who could do such a lesson about rights of LGBT and sexual identity? How could such a subject be introduced and treated?
- Verbal homophobic bullying

Conditions in which the survey was conducted

Time: July - December 2011

Place: Sofia city



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Number of focus groups: 3 - one per level of schooling (primary, secondary, high school)

Number of participants: 25

It is important to say that the focus groups are the second stage of the study on the stereotypes and it has been preceded by performing individual interviews with representatives of the education system- school principals, teachers, psychologists in schools, pedagogic advisors etc. While the willingness to discuss the issue and the interest shown were on a satisfactory level it can not be stated the same when it came to participation in a broader format such as focus groups.

To participate in a focus group and future activities envisaged in the project, some of the approached school requested a letter for support from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science. Such letter has been received stating that the participation in the current research project is a "...issue that should be resolved by the directors of the schools and with the consent of parents, having become acquainted with the methods of conducting the research and the expected specific benefits".

This document has been important for the implementation of the focus groups and appeared to have twofold effect. Some of the participants accepted the claim in the letter as "authorization" and reduced their stress from doing something not officially approved. Another part perceived it as "delegation of responsibility and freedom of decision" which also had a double effect, meaning that some institutions felt "unsure to take such decision".

At the end, for the purpose of the research and the timing of the project the first group of representatives of high- school has been organized as informal focus group of individuals/ professionals working with children in high schools.

The other two groups targeted at primary and secondary school level have been organized in public school with the principal approval.

The three focus groups have been implemented with the participation of the schools professionals /teachers, school psychologists, pedagogic advisors/ and representatives of the research partner.

The representatives of the schools didn't manage to arrange the participation of the parents. The explanation about it can be found in the fact that there are no close relationship between school and parents, which is a finding from the individual interviews as well.



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Representatives of Parents group have been involved in the informal focus groups /2/.

All the statements included in the report have to be considered as individual and do not represent official position of any school.

2. Results

It appears that reaction on the issue of **Who's responsibility it is to deal with LGBT issues in society** and **Is the school a space to tackle the issue** the representatives of the primary and secondary schooling level share common opinion, namely that the LGBT and sexual issue is a responsibility of the Family. They expressed a strong opinion that the school is responsible for providing literacy and education in terms of more like scientific knowledge and education in moral values and norms. All of them share that the expectations towards the School as institution are great and they can not meet them all. There is a strong opinion that the families are avoiding their responsibilities /such as sexual education/ and trying to assign them to the school.

On the other hand, the representatives of the high school believe that the school can be a space to discuss and inform about LGBT issue and that sometimes the students are the ones requesting such "conversations". This position shared "does not mean that the families are free from the responsibility to educate their children and provide them with sexual culture".

The two Parents underlined here the need of shared responsibility in educating the children, including the sexual education. Another argument has been the fact that the children practically spend half of their time in school, but they couldn't give definite position if the school is a place for debate on LGBT issue.

The two opinions are quite similar which in a way can explain the lack of position on the question **Do publishers of schoolbooks have a responsibility in this respect?** It is common position that the schoolbooks should be focused on the "study material rather than the sexual aspects". Another issue specific for Bulgaria is that often it appears that for one school subjects there are few schoolbooks by different publishers /respectively authors/ and that often causes a great confusion in the beginning of the school year in defining which one to be use in the concrete school.

The participants in all the 3 focus groups unanimously find that the **existing education materials and schoolbooks** do not represent the **diversity of families and sexual identities**. All of them find the existing schoolbooks as heteronormative and believe that they should remain that way. This statement corresponds strongly to the common opinion that the



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Bulgarian society is “still very conservative” and that “the sexual matters are responsibility of the family and/or any outside the school spaces”.

The parents, as far as they have observation on the school books, do not find them as introducing diversity and sexual identity. Common understanding is that this issue should be presented in separate, specialized book and not to be mixed with other subjects

None of the school books tackles the issue of sexual identity or anything different than the hetero stereotype and gender models. It is up to the teachers to pay attention to this questions if find it needed. In most cases that is in literature or history classes where pupils often put questions for the private life of the discussed personalities. That practically means that teachers can count on their personal knowledge, experience and attitude. A very small part of them, mainly in high school, feel ready and comfortable to face such discussion.

This in a way can explain the generality of the **awareness of students about sexual diversity and LGBT issues**. Since this is not an subject of discussion at school and the “families rarely raise these issues” according to the professionals the students idea about sexual diversity and LGBT issues is brought down to “man like other man” and “girls like other girls”. The pupil's idea about sexuality, sexual identity, LGBT is formed basically from the mass culture- movies, magazines, books, music stars and personal experience in general.

The discussion on the student's awareness has been transformed on the discussion about teacher's awareness on the LGBT issues in all the three groups.

It makes impression that none of the participants' talks or pays attention or even use the word Transgender. Teachers “have idea about gays and lesbians, bi-s, but transgender is something different”. In the course of the debate on the awareness it became clear that there is almost no distinction between the concepts of identity and orientation.

The final conclusion shared by the participants in the tree groups is represented by this quotation of a teacher in secondary school: “We both /teachers and students/ are not aware enough, but sometimes our students are much more aware than us...”

When it comes to the question regarding **what space is there in school for education to LGBT issues** (sexual orientation, diversity, respect, identity, rights) the participants are unanimously on the position that there is no strictly defined space or particular subject in the school programme dedicated to the issue. It is mainly in the high school where teachers find space in the so called “teacher's class” or “mention the issue in the psychology and philosophy classes or literature and history”. The case is not the same in the primary and secondary



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school where teachers do not find “necessary to put an accent on the LGBT issue” but they “would react/ discuss it only if the students ask about it”.

Again these reactions are coming to show that the schools are not definite and still need to debate on whether the LGBT and sexuality in general should be a part of the school education or not. There is no common position about it by now.

The parents on the other side are also not definite whether it should be a part of the school agenda or not. They are more likely to believe that “as much as we talk about it as much interest we will provoke in the children, which is not good”. Practically the basic position is that the school is a place to study and “not to deal with sex” in a different manner than giving information of STDs and Prevention of undesired pregnancy.

In this context, when asked **to imagine to do sex education and rights education in school** the participants in the 3 groups reacted very differently. The groups of primary and secondary school showed some disagreement with the concept, but both agreed that “if we have to do it, it should be after the 4th grade /means age 10-11/ so *at least to spare the children at least until then*”.

The primary and secondary school groups show high level of anxiety in this debate. This is caused by several factors. First is that they don't believe the sexuality and LGBT rights are matter of school subject/ attention, but families. Another belief of the teachers is that education about sexuality and in particular LGBT issues “could provoke early sexual contacts and can influence the sexual orientation of the pupils /understand “to make them become homosexuals”/.

Unlike the first two groups, the bigger part of the high school professionals believe that education on sexuality /incl. sexual identity, rights and LGBT issues/ can start on early age as long as it is presented according to the age of the pupils. Part of the participants is trying to introduce these issues in their classes, but it still depends on the teacher's personality, rather than being school priority or policy.

Together with these worries, all the participants /including the high school representatives/ share that they don't feel prepared to present such a subject and to discuss it with the students. Some participants express the opinion that they “are conservative people in a conservative society and representative of a conservative institution”. This situation makes the introduction of the LGBT issue in school a challenge they are not prepared for at all. The participants rather prefer to have external lecturers who are acquainted with the issue and



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could present in adequate way. Basically the idea is that such a professional should be “sexologist”.

Everybody agree that it would be more suitable and in the field of competence to “talk about rights in general”, “ethnic and cultural diversity” rather than focusing and putting an accent on homo/sexuality.

Nevertheless, imagining the process of teaching tolerance in school, all the participants are unanimous that they need contemporary educational platforms which are defined as “audio- visual, movies, models of reproductive human systems, role playing”.

The representatives of the high school level share that they use popular movies for discussion on the issue in the “teacher’s class” and define this method as “the most close to the students”. It has to be noted that these initiatives are more coming

Here it has to be noted that **none of the participants recognize homophobia as an important issue in schools** that need special attention. Most of the participants find as hotter subject the ethnic tolerance and the aggression in schools as a whole.

When it comes to **verbal homophobic bullying** the impressions vary in the different groups. The representatives of primary and secondary school share that “name- calling is common, but it is far from being considered as bullying”.

The participants recognize as most common insults “faggot”, “girly” and “bugger”. The general impression is that the kids use these words knowing they are offending. Children use them knowing that they are offensive, but do not accentuate on the meaning of the word. That doesn’t mean they are not aware of the meaning. Such an example is the following conversation: “A: Stupid Fagot!”- B: Do you know what this word means? - A: A man who likes other man”.

According to the participants, such insults are used “more as an inert expression than as targeted messages loaded with content”. Probably because of that they believe that the pupil subject of the offense does not feel “really offended”.

The situation is a bit different in high school level. There the participants have impression that “some students are teased because of their strange, usually feminine behavior” with an accent on it.

In all the three groups the participants are definite that homophobic language is quiet a rare case in school and unanimously believe it can not be considered as bullying.



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In the rare cases when teachers face such situation in school react in a standard and may be the only known way- they talk with the student. The approach is common and it is targeted at presenting explanation that such behavior is not polite and will not be tolerated. There is lack of intention to explain why it is inappropriate or to bring the discussion on a deeper level targeted at the meaning of words and their relation with people's dignity and rights.

Common opinion is that the homophobic language is directed extremely to boys. No reports of girls victims of such.

3. Conclusions

The theme for the presentation of sexual difference and identity in education is still very complicated and unpopular. This is largely due to lack of awareness and training of educators on the one hand and the low threshold of tolerance for sexual diversity driven by heavy heteronormative society on the other. The classes devoted to sex education focuses primarily on the reproductive systems, STDs, contraceptives, but not on the identity and orientation. Rare are the cases in which sexual orientation is discussed, and this is mainly due to personality and perceptions of the teacher. Transgender almost does not appear as a theme. This context of Non-Talking of the difference is largely due to a widespread belief that if we talk about sex and sexual difference as a whole, this will encourage children to have early sexual activity and "wrong" sexual orientation. In this sense, Non-Talking is considered as a protective mechanism that prevents children to fall out of the norm and prevention of homosexuality /such a book recently came out on the Bulgarian market called A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality by Dr. Joseph Nicolosi and Linda Nicolosi/.

Although adolescents are more informed and earlier, this is not taken into account from the educational system and not reflected in it.



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General Country Remarks

Legislation

During the past years many changes have been adopted in the legislation related to discrimination based on sexual orientation. The biggest success is the adoption of Law on Protection against Discrimination in 2004.

Policy

Direct representation on policy level of LGBT people is still a missing link, since there are no politicians with official Coming Out. The society information based on media statements and rumors that some politicians are with homosexual orientation only supports the already existing perception that homosexuality is something that needs to be kept in secret which is an instrument to manipulate the politicians.

Workplace

There are not so many people who do not hide their sexual orientation at work, which explains the fewer cases of overt discrimination on account of indirect discrimination in the workplace.

NGO

The presentation of the LGBT community in the public domain until 2003 was carried out by a single organization BGO Gemini, which was quite a controversial image.

Since 2003, more NGOs are formed aimed at LGBT rights such as Resource Center Bilitis, Foundation Queer Bulgaria, Sofia Pride, gay sports clubs as a Dolphin and Tangra, etc..

Media

Heteronormative state of the society is reflected in the media, but on the other hand, there is open space to change attitudes, which is not used effectively enough by LGBT activists who comment predominantly negative experiences of discrimination, but not positive ones.

Often the manifestation of LGBT issues in the media reflects the single journalist's perception rather than objective facts from the reality.

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Health

In the field of health care there are no specific health services or programmes for LGBT. There are no special medical tests or any medical researches targeted at the needs of LGBT people because they are not recognized as a different/ separate social group with particular needs.

Sport

The sport is driven mainly by the stereotypes related to which sport is masculine or feminine and the related sexual orientation. Brilliant example of that is that it is quiet unacceptable a football player being a gay, while if a woman is a football player most probably she is lesbian. Although such stereotypes, there are sports clubs and competitions of LGBT communities.

Religion

In general the Religion is mainly used as an adequate justification for homophobic attitudes in the society. Basically the Bulgarian society is not a devoted fellow of religious dogmas and values, but when it comes to homosexuality they become a main "argument against".

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