BE A BUDDY, NOT A BULLY!

Experiences of sexual and gender minority youth in Tamil Nadu schools

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June 2019

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Report submitted to UNESCO New Delhi by:

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Key Message

I am happy to learn that UNESCO New Delhi has published a report on the experiences of sexual and gender minority youth in Tamil Nadu schools.

Education is a fundamental right of an individual and has been enshrined in the Constitution of India under Article 21A. It is also included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 26, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. While quality education for all is to be ensured, it is also important to create a safe and secure school environment.

The Department of School Education, Government of Tamil Nadu is dedicated to providing 'quality education for all', ensuring that schools are secure spaces without fear of discrimination or violence. In this regard, the pioneering research done by UNESCO New Delhi is appreciated. The various recommendations made in the UNESCO report which include suggestions such as joint efforts by school management, teachers and parents, inclusion of gender diversity in the curriculum and sensitization of teachers have been noted and will be encompassed in the policies and programme of the School Education Department.

We are committed to ensure that schools remain safe places for learning and that students have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and resources they need to reach their full potential.

(K.A. SENGOTTAIYAN)

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MESSAGE

I am pleased to write this message on behalf of the School Education Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, as UNESCO New Delhi publishes the first-of-its-kind research in the country which looks at experiences of bullying in schools.

Globally, every year, an estimated 246 million children are subject to some form of gender-based violence in schools – mistreatment, bullying, cyber bullying, psychological abuse and sexual harassment. Violence and bullying have real consequences in learners' lives, and have serious impacts on educational outcomes, with many students achieving lower grades than expected, avoiding school or dropping out completely.

Given the significant challenges faced by learners who are gender-non confirming, schools must create an amiable environment where learning can take place peacefully. Educational institutions must build a trusting, respectful relationship among students, school administration and families and provide a confidential way for students to report incidents. Mechanisms must be established to provide accessible, confidential, secure and effective means of reporting incidents of bullying, for victims and bystanders, including appropriate counselling and punishment for those engaged in bullying.

The School Education Department, Government of Tamil Nadu is committed to promote a safe and inclusive learning environment; respect for all; non-discrimination; gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence. We are putting in efforts to sensitize students and teachers about human rights, democratic values, respect for diversity and equality, respect for privacy and dignity of others.

We are pleased to collaborate with UNESCO New-Delhi in establishing policies and programmes to ensure a safe, secure and vibrant learning environment for all learners.

(PRADEEP YADAV)

FOREWORD

Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. However, learning environments are not always inclusive and safe places. They can be sites of physical, verbal, psychological and sexual violence, and social exclusion. For children and young people who are perceived as 'different' and who do not fit into dominant cultures in societies, schools can actually be alienating and marginalizing spaces.

Moreover, violence in educational settings is a daily reality that denies millions of children and young people the fundamental human right to education. Schools that are not safe or inclusive violate the right to education as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and contravene the Convention against Discrimination in Education, which aims to eliminate discrimination and promote the adoption of measures that ensure equality of opportunity and treatment.

The recent UNESCO report titled "School violence and Bullying: Global status and trends, drivers and consequences" highlights that bullying and physical violence is affecting around one in three children around the world and this has an adverse impact on the child's mental and physical health and well-being.
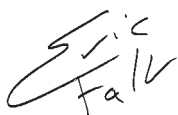
Ensuring all children and young people have access to safe, inclusive, health-promoting learning environments is a strategic priority for UNESCO. In response to this priority, UNESCO supported Sahodaran, a community based organization working among LGBT population to undertake this research, which is the first exploratory study in India focusing specifically on the issue of school violence, bullying and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). The report highlights the extent of the issue, the negative impacts of bullying, and the measures school education departments could take to address it.

On 29 September 2015, 12 UN entities (ILO, OHCHR, UNAIDS Secretariat, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women, WFP and WHO) released an unprecedented joint statement calling for an end to violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. The statement is a powerful call to action to States and other stakeholders in India to do more to protect individuals from

violence, torture and ill-treatment, repeal discriminatory laws and protect individuals from discrimination, and an expression of the commitment on the part of UN entities to support Member States to do so.

We at UNESCO recognize that no country can achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 - to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all - if students are discriminated against or experience violence because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. This study conducted under the overall guidance of the School Education Department, Government of Tamil Nadu highlights our shared commitment to prevent and address bullying in educational institutions.

We are confident that this report will be an effective tool for evidence based advocacy with school education departments and go a long way in promoting a comprehensive education sector response to SOGIE-based bullying, which includes enabling policy environments; inclusive curriculum and learning materials; professional development programmes for teachers and other school staff; support for learners including awareness-raising activities; and an overall school environment that is safe, nonviolent and that understands and appreciates diversity.

Eric Falt
Director and UNESCO Representative
to Bhutan, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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AIDS	Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
CBOs	Community-Based Organisations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDI	In-depth Interview
IRB	Institutional Review Board
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Intersex
SOGIE	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression
SACS	State AIDS Control Society
TGW	Transgender women
TSU	Technical Support Unit
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

GLOSSARY

BULLYING: Behaviour repeated over time that intentionally inflicts injury of discomfort through physical contact, verbal attacks, or psychological manipulation. Bullying involves an imbalance of power.

CYBER-BULLYING: The use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.

DISCRIMINATION: Any unfair treatment or arbitrary distinction based on a person's race, sex, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, age, language, social origin or other status.

GAY: A person who is primarily attracted to and/or has relationships with someone of the same gender.

GENDER: Refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: Violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, against someone based on gender discrimination, gender role expectations and/or gender stereotypes, or based on the differential power status linked to gender.

HARASSMENT: Any improper and unwelcome conduct that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another person. Harassment may take the form of words, gestures or actions that tend to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, humiliate or embarrass another or that create an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: Process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners.

SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: Acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics.

STIGMA: Opinions or judgements held by individuals or society that negatively reflect on a person or group. Discrimination occurs when stigma is acted on.

VIOLENCE: Any action, explicit or symbolic, which results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In India, there is paucity of research on bullying faced by students based on their sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Research evidence on bullying is crucial to make schools safe and inclusive for all students.

This report presents the findings from a mixed methods study conducted among sexual and gender minority youth to document the various forms and extent of SOGIE-related bullying, and responses to bullying by school authorities.

Forms of bullying varied according to grade levels – primary, middle/high school or higher secondary. Physical bullying was reported high among middle/high school (60%) and higher secondary (50%) students while sexual bullying was reported high when the participants were primary school students (43%).

Only 18% of those that were bullied said that they had reported incidents of bullying to school authorities, to which authorities responded as follows: 29% were asked to change their perceived feminine mannerism/behaviour to avoid being bullied and 49% were asked to ignore the incidents. Only 53% of those who had complained reported that authorities took action against the persons who bullied them.

About one-third (33.2%) reported that bullying played a key role in discontinuing school. More than three-fifths (63%) reported lowered academic performance while 53% reported having skipped classes.

Given the high prevalence and severity of SOGIE-related bullying in schools, measures to prevent and mitigate bullying include: implementing anti-bullying policies and establishing monitoring mechanisms, creation of awareness among students and training of teachers on diversity in gender and sexuality, development of confidential and supportive channels for reporting bullying, and providing supportive counselling services for those who experienced bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions need to be safe secure and vibrant for all students. Schools that are not safe or inclusive violate the right to education as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and contravene the Convention against Discrimination in Education.

Both in developed (Earnshaw et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017) and developing countries (e.g., Thailand) (Mahidol University et al., 2014), gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) or who are perceived to be sexual and gender minorities face disproportionately higher levels of bullying. In India, there is near lack of research on bullying faced by students who are targeted based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence shows that sexual and gender minority youth in India had been bullied when they were in schools.

The right to education in a safe environment is a basic human right. Violence and bullying in schools act as major barriers to learning and deny a child's fundamental right to education in a safe environment. Students who face SOGIE-related bullying are thus prevented from exercising that right. Furthermore, bullying leads to several negative consequences, which include psychological consequences such as depression and anxiety, academic consequences in terms of lowered educational performance and dropping out from schools, and social consequences in terms of loneliness and lack of support. These highlight the importance of why the policymakers, educational department officials and public health officials should provide adequate attention to address SOGIE-related violence and bullying in schools.

Ensuring all children and young people have access to safe, inclusive, health-promoting learning environments is a strategic priority for UNESCO, and it works towards eliminating school-related violence and bullying, including SOGIE-related bullying. In this context, UNESCO New Delhi office supported *Sahodaran*, a community-based organisation in Chennai, to conduct a study on bullying, stigma and discrimination faced by students based on their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in schools.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

1) To broaden awareness and understanding of SOGIE-related bullying in educational institutions and document the support mechanisms available; and

2) To strengthen advocacy efforts for evidence-informed policies, programmes and resource allocations to prevent and address SOGIE-related bullying in schools.

METHODS

A concurrent triangulation mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was employed, in which qualitative and quantitative data collection occurred simultaneously and data analyses were conducted separately, but findings from both qualitative and quantitative components were synthesized to arrive at inferences (See Fig. 1).
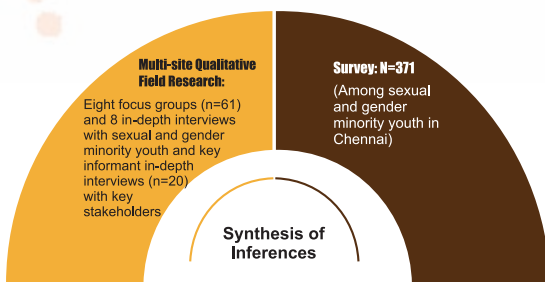
Figure 1: Summary of the Mixed Methods Research Design

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with sexual and gender minority youth, and key informant in-depth interviews with key stakeholders were conducted.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with sexual and gender minority youth

The FGDs aimed at enhancing understanding the perspectives of sexual and gender minority youth in relation to SOGIE-related bullying in educational institutions. In consultation with the team in Technical Support Unit (TSU), Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society and based on the location of the partner agencies of Sahodaran, 8 districts were identified as study sites in Tamil Nadu – Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai, Salem, Trichy, Tirunelveli, Tanjavur and Vellore (See Table 1). Eight focus group discussions (n=61) were conducted in each of the study sites. Participants were purposively selected (purposive sampling) to ensure diversity in terms of sexual identity and socio-economic class.

Key informant in-depth interviews with community representatives & stakeholders

Key informant interviews focused on understanding stakeholders' prespectives in relation to SOGIE-related bullying in educational institutions. A total of twenty key informant interviews were conducted among school teachers and head teachers as well as officials of Tamil Nadu School Education Department.

In-depth interviews with youth

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted among sexual and gender minority youth from eight sites in Tamil Nadu.

SURVEY

Using a structured questionnaire, a survey among a convenience sample of 371 sexual and gender minority youth was conducted in Chennai. Recruitment were done through word-of-mouth. Inclusion criteria included: age 18 years and above, self-identification as transgender women or same-sex attracted youth (of any sexual identity such as kothi and gay), and ability to give informed consent.

Survey Measures

The survey collected information on participant's sociodemographic characteristics, schooling details, and experiences of bullying. Questions were based on prior literature on SOGIE-related bullying in schools experienced by sexual and gender minority youth.

Sociodemographics

Demographic variables included were: age, highest level of education completed (e.g., illiterate, completed primary school, high school), main occupation (including sex work), personal monthly income (in Indian rupees), living status and self-reported gender identity (e.g., kothi, double-decker, gay, transgender, bisexual)

Schooling details

Schooling details included following variables: 1) Medium of education (English or Tamil medium); 2) School typology (government or private school); 3) Single gender school or co-education schools; 4) Whether completed

Table 1. Qualitative methods and Sample size (N=89)			
Districts	Number of focus groups	Number of key informant interviews	Number of in-depth interviews
Chennai	1	20	1
Coimbatore	1	--	1
Madurai	1	--	1
Trichy	1	--	1
Tirunelveli	1	--	1
Tanjavur	1	--	1
Salem	1	--	1
Vellore	1	--	1
Total number of participants (n=89)	n = 61	n=20	n = 8

schooling or not; 5) Reasons for leaving school and 6) School location (city/urban or rural).

Experiences of bullying

Experiences of school bullying was assessed using a 21-item survey. These 21-items are a combination of several sub-items that assessed various forms, frequency and severity of bullying, perpetrators of bullying, settings where the bullying occurred, responses of those who experienced bullying, school authorities and parents' responses to bullying, effects of bullying, support systems and suggestions to overcome SOGIE-related bullying.

Forms and frequency of bullying were measured by 16-items. These 16 items were broadly classified into four categories – verbal (3 items), physical (4 items), sexual (4 items) and cyber/social bullying (5 items). Answers were based on a five-point Likert scale: (1) never; (2) once or twice a year; (3) more than once or twice a year (but not once a month); (4) at least once a month; (5) at least once a week.

Items assessing verbal bullying includes: 1) Gossiped about you; spread rumours about you to make you look bad; 2) Looked at you disrespectfully – gave you nasty looks; and 3) Threatened you with a weapon (for example, a cutter, scissors, a knife or a gun).

The items that assessed physical bullying were: 1) Slapped, hit, kicked or pushed, pinched, pulled your hair, grabbed your body, threw things at you; 2) Lifted, pulled down or took off your shirt/skirt or trousers; 3) Stole, hid, or destroyed your belongings (for example, a book, a phone, money, shoes etc.); and 4) Locked you in a classroom, toilet or another room.

Four items assessed participants' experiences of sexual bullying: 1) Inappropriately touched your body parts including breasts, buttocks or genital areas; 2) Held you in a position as if to have sex with you or about to rape you; 3) Made unwanted requests for sex or talked about sex to you when you did not want to do so; and 4) Sent you unwanted porn clips or images.

Cyber and social bullying were measured by 5 items: 1) Threatened, abused or gossiped about you on the Internet / through a mobile phone; 2) Spread your secrets or lies about you through the Internet / mobile phone; 3) Took/spread pictures or video clips of you to harm you; 4) Impersonated you and posted things as you; and 5) Banned you – did not let you in their group.

Perpetrators of bullying and settings where it occurred

Two items assessed various perpetrators of bullying (you were bullied by?) and settings where bullying occurred (what were the places in school where you were bullied?). Both these items have multiple response categories.

Bystander's responses to bullying

Bystander's responses to bullying was assessed using a single item. Example of item: If there were bystanders/other students when you were bullied, what was their reaction?

Participants' responses to bullying incidents

Participants' responses to bullying were assessed using a set of items and sub-items. Examples of items: 1) Did you complain to others about incidents of bullying?; 2) if yes, to whom? (Teacher/principal, Parents, Friend, Others); 3) After your complaint…, whether any action was taken?; When you complained about bullying to…, what were the results?; After the action was taken, did you feel more could have been done?

In addition to the above listed items, one item assessed participant's typical response to bullying incident (When you were subjected to bullying, what was your typical response?) with multiple choices. Response categories included: 1) Resisting the perpetrators; 2) Crying; 3) Trying to escape; 4) Complaining to teachers or authorities; 5) Informing family members; 6) Skipping school for several days to avoid embarrassment or problems; and 7) Suffering silently without sharing it with anyone.

Consequences of bullying

One item assessed the effects of bullying incident on those who experienced bullying:

Do you think bullying had any effect on the following…? Response categories included: 1) Lowered social interactions with schoolmates; 2) Lowered performance in studies; 3) Physical injuries; 4) Anxiety and depression; 5) Having no or very few friends; 6) Absenteeism; 7) Guilt and shame; and 8) Lack of concentration in studies.

Causes of bullying and suggestions to overcome the same

Two items assessed causes of the bullying and suggestions to overcome SOGIE-related bullying in schools. Examples of items: 1) What do you think were the causes of the bullying that you were subjected to?; and 2) What would you like to suggest to schools and colleges to prevent their gender diverse students ("feminine boys or masculine girls") from being bullied?

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative component

Focus groups, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews were digitally recorded with permission, and detailed notes (with verbatim quotes that illustrate key concepts) were taken immediately after the discussions/ interviews. The data analyst performed first-level coding and first level of inferences from analysis of the notes. Coding was conducted manually. A preliminary code book was developed based on the available information and the topic guides for conducting FGDs, IDIs and KIIs. These codes were applied

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when conducting targeted analysis of the text segments. Focused coding and a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was used initially. Themes were identified by looking for similarities, differences and relationships between categories (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Illustrative quotations (corresponding to inferences) were taken from the extended notes of the FGDs and KIIs. To enhance the validity/trustworthiness of the findings, data source triangulation (using multiple sources – sexual and gender minority youth and key stakeholders) and methods triangulation (use of focus groups and key informant in-depth interviews) were used.

Quantitative component

Descriptive univariate analysis (e.g., frequencies/percentages) were conducted on all key variables. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS (version 21).

Synthesis of inferences (qualitative and quantitative findings)

The qualitative and quantitative findings were presented separately, but synthesized in the discussion section. For proposing recommendations, findings from both the components were taken into consideration.

ETHICS

The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of C-SHaRP. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Focus group and in-depth interview participants were compensated for their time.
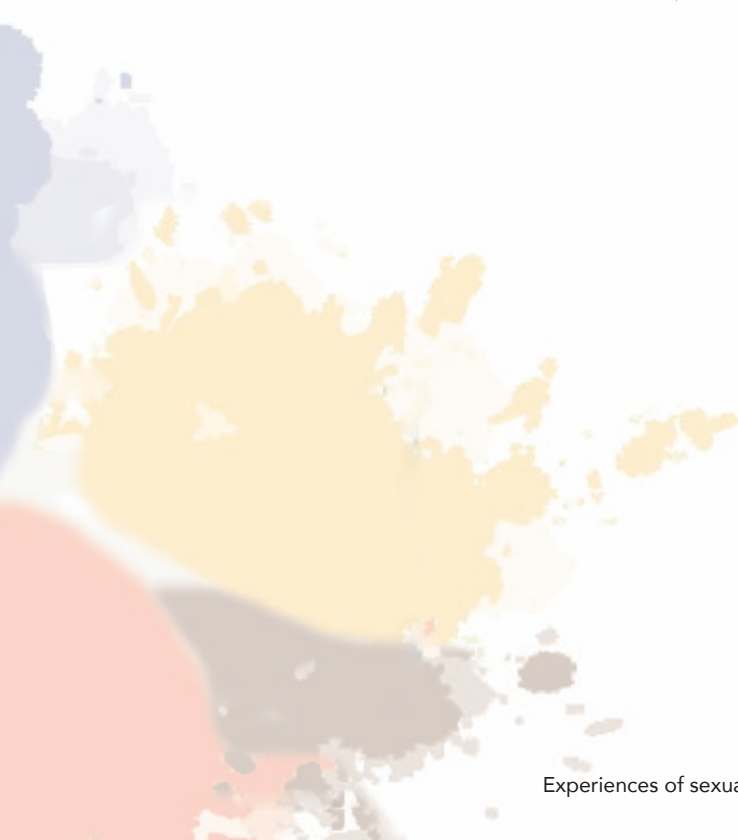
KEY FINDINGS

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (n=61) in focused group discussion

Age (in years)	
Mean	20.97
Median	21.00
Highest level of completed education	**n (%)**
Primary	1 (1.6)
Elementary	16 (26.2)
High school	14 (23.0)
Higher secondary	14 (23.0)
College degree	16 (26.2)
Occupation	
Unemployed	9 (14.8)
Mangti (Asking money from shops)	24 (39.3)
Sex work	16 (26.2)
Daily-wage labourer	5 (8.2)
Dancer	4 (6.6)
Voluntary organization	2 (3.3)
Private	1 (1.6)
Primary identity	
Thirunangai or Transgender	42 (68.9)
(English term) Kothi	19 (31.1)
Current living situation	
Living alone	3 (4.9)
Living with parents	28 (45.9)
Living with peers	24 (39.3)
Living with guru	6 (9.8)

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Eight focus groups were conducted among 61 participants (Transgender women = 42; Kothis = 19). Among eight focus groups, five were with trans women, two with kothi-identified men and one with both trans women and kothis.

Participants' mean age was 20.9 years (Median 21.00). A little over one-fourth (26%) had a college degree while an equal proportion (23%) reported having completed either high school or higher secondary. Nearly two-fifths (39%) reported begging as main occupation. About one-fourth (26%) reported involvement in sex work. Fifteen percent were unemployed at the time of interview. Half (50%) of the participants were living with their parents and more than one-third (39%) were living with their friends.

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted among sexual and gender minority youth from eight sites in Tamil Nadu.

Among the twenty in-depth interviews, 16 were with government and private school teachers, two with school principals and two with officials of Tamil Nadu School Education Department.

PERVASIVENESS OF SOGIE-RELATED BULLYING

Almost all focus group participants acknowledged the presence of SOGIE-related bullying in schools in the recent past and present. Transgender youth and same-sex attracted youth (kothis) reported having experienced multiple forms of bullying in schools by students, teachers, parents and society at large. Although the intensity of bullying differed from case to case, it is still prevalent in schools and colleges.

"Teasing and harassment of feminine-appearing boys are the norms in schools and colleges. Transgender people are seen only as sexual objects and not as 'people' who have feelings".

FGD, Madurai

We are subjected to lots of trouble for not following how a person born as a boy should behave. No one understand us. They simply blame us".

FGD, Tirunelveli

BULLYING TYPOLOGIES, PERPETRATORS AND SETTINGS

Participants reported that sexual and gender minority youth in schools were subjected to various forms of bullying on the basis of their perceived gender identity and expression, or sexual orientation. Forms of bullying reported were: 1) physical bullying; 2) verbal bullying; 3) social bullying; 4) sexual bullying; and 5) forced sex. A majority of those who reported having experienced bullying were more frequently harassed by male co-students as compared to female co-students or teachers.

"It was very hard to study in schools, because of other boys. They kept teasing us always. They teased us when we talked, they teased about our feminine behaviour… we could not concentrate on our studies".

FGD, Chennai

Bullying of gender-variant youth occurred in a variety of settings such as classroom, toilets, and school playground. During school hours, sexual and gender minority youth often experienced verbal (verbal taunts) or physical bullying (hit, punched or pricked using sharp objects) from male co-students.

"I could not even complete 7th standard. When teacher teaches lesson, boys sitting behind me used to prick me with compass and needles".

FGD, Tirunelveli

Similarly, a trans woman from Madurai said:

"I used to feel really very bad when others teased me with derogatory terms such as "ussu" or 'pombalai' [woman]. I did not feel like going to school. I discontinued going to school and went to work along with my mother".

FGD, Madurai

The intensity of bullying seemed to be higher during recess such as interval, lunch or physical training or after school hours. For some youth, accessing toilets during school hours seemed to be unsafe, uncomfortable and quite challenging. Many youth mentioned that they were sexually harassed by male co-students while using school *toilet*, which were seen as hotspots of bullying.

"We cannot go to the bathroom during recess. We have to either use bathroom before everyone or after everyone. Since I used to walk curling my hips a gang of boys [in higher secondary school] forcefully took me to the bathroom and forced me to have sex".

FGD, Tirunelveli

Two focus group participants shared their experiences of how they were reluctant using school toilets because of fear of being harassed by male co-students. They also cautioned that many sexual and gender minority youth experienced health-related problems such as urinary tract infections as a result of avoiding using restrooms for long duration of time.

"I avoided using toilets in my school because of fear or being tortured by other boys. I had a friend who stayed near my school. I used to go to his home and use their toilet. We need separate toilets in school. We were not comfortable using either ladies or gents toilets. Many of us got urinary infections [as they hold on & do not pass urine] because of this".

FGD, Vellore

"If there are separate toilets these kinds of harassment can be prevented. I personally used to wait until the school bell rings so that all boys might have returned back to their respective class rooms. I use the toilet after they left to classrooms. My teacher used to scold me for being late".

FGD, Trichy

Fear of negative repercussions prevented many sexual and gender minority youth from reporting the instances of bullying to school authorities, (teachers/school management) or parents. For example, a trans youth in a focus group narrated how she was physically assaulted by her peers after complaining about the incident of bullying to school authorities.

Many focus group participants acknowledged that only a handful of male co-students were involved in bullying while other students remained as bystanders. If other students tried to intervene they were also stigmatized or cornered by the perpetrators.

> *"If anyone tries to support us, they will be cornered. They will stigmatize them by asking whether they are our husbands. So no one will come forward to support us. Even if someone really wanted to help us, those who bully would tease and harass them".*
>
> FGD, Vellore

Participants reported that lack of awareness and understanding about sexuality or gender issues among teachers and school management staff was a major barrier in effectively addressing SOGIE-related bullying in schools. Some school teachers were abusive towards those students who experienced bullying.

When incidents of bullying were reported to teachers or school management their responses were mostly corrective in nature, whereby they either punished the perpetrators for doing so or simply blamed the person who experienced bullying for exhibiting behaviour that put them into trouble.

> *"All teachers liked me except Maths teacher. He used to beat other students on their hands with a stick but when it came to me he would beat me on my back. I got angry and asked him why he was doing like that. He simply said that he hated seeing creatures like me as I was feminine-looking and cursed the person who gave admission for me".*
>
> FGD, Tanjavur

> *"Four or five students in my class used to bully and tease me. I made a complaint to my class teacher. He took it seriously and informed the boys (perpetrators) that they will not get hall tickets (examination admit card) if they did not stop bullying me".*
>
> FGD, Tirunelveli

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

Participants' narratives indicated that many sexual and gender minority youth who experienced bullying or violence in school had lost interest and/or performed poorly in studies, missed or skipped classes, and were physically, emotionally or socially distressed.

Participants reported that negative school life experiences forced them to discontinue their education. For example, a focus group trans participant explained her reason for not going to college:

> *"They kept teasing me, called me using derogatory term like 'ombodhu' [literally means 'nine']. They also prevented my friends from talking to me. They threatened others saying that If they kept talking to me they would also become like me. I was left alone. I decided not to go to college because I thought teasing will be more in colleges…I was afraid of harassment and loneliness".*
>
> (FGD, Tanjavur).

Table 3. Types of bullying experienced by sexual and gender minority youth in schools		
Bullying types	**Perpetrators**	**Consequences of bullying**
Verbal • name-calling • insults • taunting • making negative remarks on looking at one's physical appearance or the way they walk • hate speech	• male co-students • male and female teachers	**Academic** • discontinuing education • skipping/missing classes • poor academic performance • loss of interest in studies
Physical • hitting • kicking • pricking using sharp objects • stealing things	• male co-students • male teachers	**Psychological** • self-isolation • low self-esteem • loneliness • fear • depression/anxiety • suicidal ideation • downplaying one's own sexual orientation or gender expression
Social • gossiping • spreading rumours • exclusion	• male co-students • male and female teachers	
Sexual • sexual assault • forced sex	• male co-students • male teachers	**Physical** • injured due to physical assault

Constant worry about when they will be bullied again and feeling bad after being bullied affected concentration in studies and consequently negatively affected academic performance. For a few sexual and gender minority youth, fear of being bullied contributed to lower academic achievement. A trans participant mentioned how she knowingly downplayed her academic performance due to fear of being bullied by peers if she became popular due to her academic excellence.

"I like economics a lot. In exams, I would purposefully leave a question unanswered because I was scared to stand up in class if my name was called out for scoring the first rank. I always made sure that I did not get first rank. Getting first rank would have further irritated the boys who bullied me and I did not want that to happen".

FGD, Tanjavur

Sexual and gender minority youth not only encountered problems in schools but also from their families. Fear of bringing shame to their family prevented many sexual and gender minority youth to downplay their gender expression or avoid reporting incidents of bullying to parents. Some participants reported that when their parents became aware of their child's gender-variant behaviour they became hostile rather than being supportive. This lack of family support put sexual and gender minority youth at heightened risk of distress and depression. A focus group participant reasoned:

"First of all parents should understand us, accept us. Sometimes teachers also bully us. Without parents' support, nothing can be done. Schools alone cannot do much on this."

FGD, Madurai

A focus group participant illustrated how family support could act as a protective shield against discrimination from others:

"My mother and sister knew that I am a transgender. If someone harassed me in school, I used to inform my mother. Even if my teachers complained about my [feminine] behaviour, my mother simply ignored them. She takes care of me."

FGD, Madurai

PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS, SCHOOL MANAGEMENT STAFF AND EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS ON SOGIE-RELATED BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

As we purposefully selected those teachers and management staff who were willing to be interviewed for this study, they proactively suggested several measures to effectively combat SOGIE-related bullying in schools. A teacher emphasized the importance of including a section on transgender issues in B.Ed. syllabus:

"I personally feel that many school teachers may not be aware of transgender. We need to include a section about transgender in B.Ed. syllabus so that teachers will be aware and if they come to meet any such students in their career they would be knowledgeable enough to handle them".

Female teacher, private school, Chennai

Another teacher narrated how she acted as a protective agent when she witnessed the incident of bullying:

"I called the students who were making fun [of a gender-variant male student] and told them that they [feminine male students] are also creatures of God. I asked the bullies to treat them well….like how they behave with other friends".

Female teacher, private school, Chennai

Although the authorities in the school education department seemed to be interested in bringing supportive policies and programmes, they cited lack of documented evidence on SOGIE-related bullying to act on this issue. This was evident from the discussion with an official of School Education Department in Tamil Nadu, who said: "I haven't heard about any incidents of bullying in schools. None of the schools have reported about any such activities. I assume that teachers will not be indulging in such activities. If we happen to get information regarding any such issues, we will take necessary action".

PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS SOGIE-RELATED BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

Participants provided recommendations that can be implemented at several levels. For example, at the policy-level, both focus group participants and school teachers suggested that the school education department should develop strategies to introduce the concept of diversity in gender and sexuality in the training curriculum of teachers as well as organising periodic trainings/workshops on gender/sexuality and diversity. Teachers and school management staff opined that such trainings would not only help them to understand gender diversity but also will clarify any myths about sexuality and gender diversity.

"I personally feel that teachers should first understand about sexual and gender minority youth. We need to organize sensitization meetings and workshops for teachers. Children learn a lot from their teachers".

Female teacher, govt. school, Chennai

"As a principal of a school, I would take steps to organize workshops for my staff and students about transgender."

Principal, Private School, Chennai

Contrarily, one government school teacher mentioned that there was no need for any such sensitization workshops as that participant felt that the proportion of sexual and gender minority students in schools is very low.

A school teacher reasoned the importance of including a syllabus about third-gender in students' textbooks: "if there is a syllabus about third-gender in school textbooks, we can very well explain it to the students. Children would love to listen from the teachers, would understand and obey whatever we say. So it is better to learn about transgender through textbook". (A female private school teacher-4, Chennai).

Participants' accounts established the absence of SOGIE-related anti-bullying school policies and reporting mechanisms. Fear of retaliation or negative consequences after reporting incidents prevented students from reporting bullying incidents to school authorities. Many focus group participants expressed the need for a trained counsellor or a designated reporting officer in schools who could offer support and guidance for those in crisis.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of the survey participants. Participants' mean age was 22.4 (SD 1.9). Fifty percent had completed high school or higher secondary, and one-third (32%) had completed a bachelor degree or higher. More than three-fourths (77%) had studied in government schools and 22% in private schools. About one-third (33%) identified as thirunangai or transgender, and the rest as same-sex attracted youth (kothi, gay, bisexual or double-decker). Twenty-eight percent reported working in private companies, while one-fifth (22%) reported engaging in sex work. The median monthly income of the participants was INR 10000 (range: INR 3000 to 40000). Forty-five percent were living with their parents, 32% with friends and 16% were living alone.

Schooling

More than three-fourths (77%) of participants studied in government schools and less than one-third (22%) in private schools. More than three-fifths (66%) studied in co-educational schools while one-third (34%) studied in boys-only school. Of total sample (n=371), forty-two percent did not complete 12th grade.

| Table 4. Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants (n=371)	
Variables	**Total (N=371) n (%)**
Age in years (median-22; range: 18-26) **Income in INR*** (median-10000, range-3000 to 40000)	
<10000	95 (25.6)
10000 & above	216 (58.2)
Education	
>high school	44 (11.8)
High school or higher secondary	185 (49.8)
College degree	120 (32.3)
Diploma	14 (3.8)
Others	8 (2.2)
Occupation	
Unemployed	31 (8.4)
Student	26 (7.0)
Private company staff	105 (28.3)
Voluntary organisation staff	8 (2.2)
Sex work	81 (21.8)
Self-employed	39 (10.5)
Daily-wage labourer	6 (1.6)
Asking money from shops	73 (19.7)
Others/No response	2 (0.5)
Identity	
Kothi	104 (28.0)
Double-decker	50 (13.5)
Gay	54 (14.6)
Thirunangai/Transgender	121 (32.6)
Bisexual	42 (11.3)
Living status	
Living alone	60 (16.2)
Living with parents	166 (44.7)
Living with male sexual partner	11 (3.0)
Living with wife	4 (1.1)
Living with peers	118 (31.8)
Others	12 (3.2)
*Numbers may not add up to total due to missing values	

Experiences of bullying in schools

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Participants were asked to report 'how safe they felt when they were in school'. Overall, two-third (65%) reported that they felt unsafe at school. Among those who felt unsafe at school (n=241/371), 69% felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression or gender identity; and 60% felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation.

DIAGRAM 1. "Percentage of SOGIE youth who felt unsafe at school because of..."
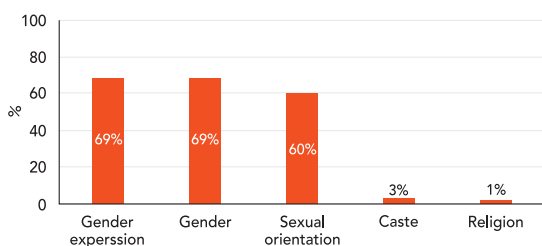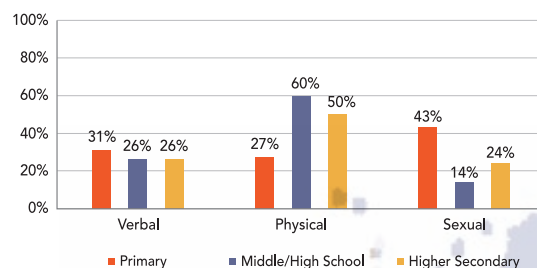

PREVALENCE AND FORMS OF BULLYING

Almost all survey participants reported having experienced bullying in school because of their gender expression or perceived sexual orientation. Forms of bullying varied according to grade levels – primary, middle/high school or higher secondary (See Diagram 2). More than two-fifths (43%) of participants reported having experienced sexual bullying in primary school when compared with higher secondary (24%) or middle/high school (14%). Similarly, when compared with primary school (27%), physical bullying

was relatively high when participants were in middle/high school (60%) or higher secondary (50%). Almost an equal proportion of participants reported having experienced verbal bullying in primary (31%), middle/high school (26%) or higher secondary (26%).

Further details of the various forms and frequency of bullying (verbal/non-verbal, physical, sexual and cyber/social bullying) are summarized in Diagram 4, 5, 6 & 7. Less frequent refers to having experienced bullying less than once a month and more frequent refers to at least once a week to once a month.

Diagram 2. Various Forms of School-based Bullying Experienced by Survey Participants

FREQUENCY OF VARIOUS FORMS OF BULLYING EXPERIENCED IN SCHOOLS

VERBAL BULLYING

Participants were asked how often they experienced verbal bullying (at school because of their gender expression or perceived sexual orientation. Nearly fifty-percent (47%) reported having experienced

frequent bullying (at least once a month or once a week) such as rumour-spreading. While one-third (33%) reported frequently experiencing some form of 'nasty' looks.

Diagram 3. Frequency of verbal bullying experienced in schools
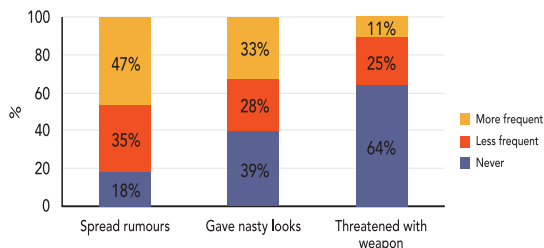
PHYSICAL BULLYING

Participants reported having experienced various types of physical bullying in school. More than one-third reported frequently experiencing physical bullying such as things been stolen (42%) or disrobing (38%). While one-third (32%) reported having been frequently hit or kicked. A little over one-fourth (28%) reported having been locked up in room.

Diagram 4. Frequency of physical bullying experienced in schools
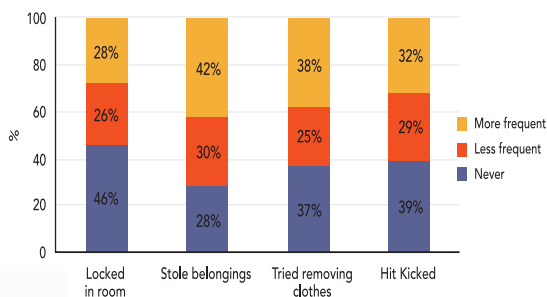
SEXUAL BULLYING

Half of the participants reported having frequently experienced inappropriate touching. Nearly two-fifths (38%) frequently experienced unwanted sexual talks. While one-third (33%) have been frequently threatened to have sex.

Diagram 5. Frequency of sexual bullying experienced by gender-variant youth in schools
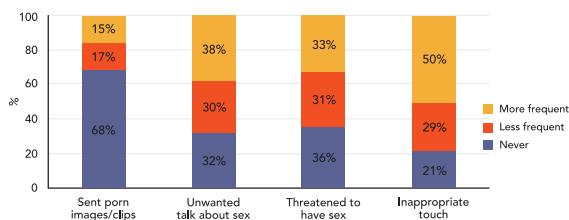
CYBER AND SOCIAL BULLYING

More than one-fourth (28%) of participants reported have been frequently isolated or left alone. Nineteen percent said that someone frequently impersonated them by positing inappropriate things in their name. While sixteen percent mentioned that their pictures and videos were frequently posted online with the intention to harm them.

Diagram 6. Frequency of Cyber/Social Bullying Experienced by Gender-variant Youth in Schools

BE A BUDDY, NOT A BULLY!
Experiences of sexual and gender minority youth in Tamil Nadu schools

PERPETRATORS OF BULLYING

More than three-fourths (84%) of participants reported being bullied by their co-students; 58% were bullied by their school seniors; 19% by male school teachers; and 11% by their school juniors (See Diagram 7).
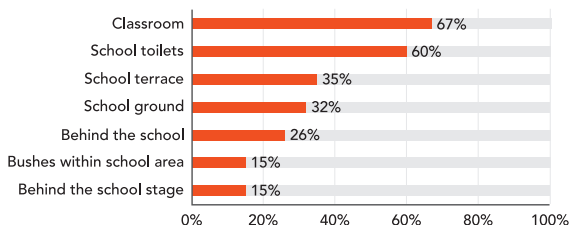
Diagram 7. Participants' responses to who bullied them
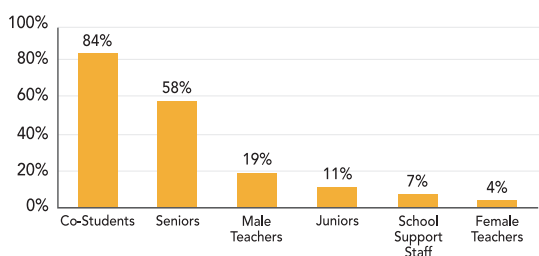
COMMON SETTINGS OF BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

Bullying of sexual and gender-minority youth occurred in a variety of settings within the school such as classroom, toilets, terrace and playground. More than two-third (67%) were bullied in classroom, three-fifths (60%) were bullied in school toilets and one-third in school terrace (35%) or school playground (32%) (See Diagram 8).

Diagram 8. Bullying Hotspots in Schools

CO-STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

More than half (53%) of the survey participants reported that co-students acted as bystanders and watched them being bullied, and only one-fourth (25%) reported that others intervened and helped them.

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO BULLYING

Of total sample, 18% reported bullying incidents to school authorities, 27% reported bullying to their friends, and 8% reported to their parents.

Among those who reported the incident to school authorities (n=65/371), 69% said that the school authorities acted on their complaints. The actions taken by authorities included: 1) asked participants to change their feminine mannerisms to avoid being bullied (29%); 2) asked participants to ignore the incident (49%); and 3) took action against the person who bullied them (53%[*]) (See Diagram 9). Parents responded to the complaints by asking their children to change their mannerisms/behaviour (61%) or ignore the incident (44%[*]).

Many participants said when they were subjected to bullying they either cried (67%) or suffered silently without sharing it

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* The percentage will not add to 100% because of multiple responses for this item.

Diagram 9. Actions Taken by School Authorities after Students Reported Bullying
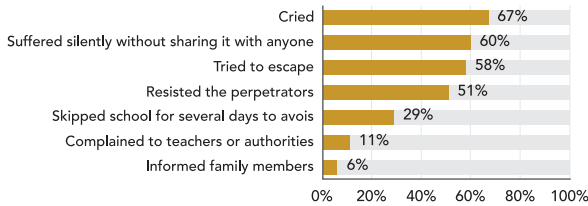
Action	%
Ridiculed by the authority	13%
Scolded by the authority	16%
Asked to change one's mannerism/behaviour	29%
Asked victim to ignore bullying	49%
Action was taken against bully	53%
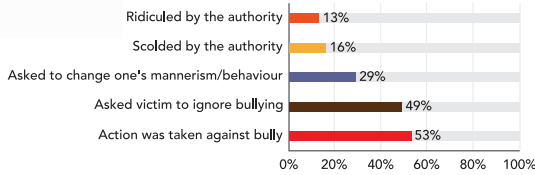
with anyone (60%). However, a little over half (51%) resisted the perpetrators. About one-fourth (29%) of participants simply skipped school for several days to avoid further problems (See Diagram 10).

Diagram 10. Participants' Responses to Bullying

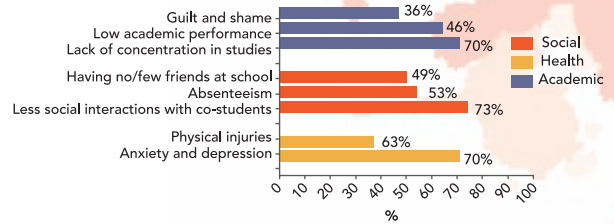| Response	%
Cried	67%
Suffered silently without sharing it with anyone	60%
Tried to escape	58%
Resisted the perpetrators	51%
Skipped school for several days to avoid	29%
Complained to teachers or authorities	11%
Informed family members	6%

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

Given the severity of experiences of bullying, nearly three-fourth of participants reported that they had reduced social interactions with co-students (73%); suffered from anxiety and depression (70%); and lost concentration in studies (70%). Similarly, more than three-fifths (63%) of participants reported lowered academic performance while a little over half (53%) reported having skipped classes (See Diagram 11). About one-third (33.2%) reported that bullying played a key role in discontinuing school.

SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS BULLYING

Participants suggested a variety of measures to effectively prevent SOGIE-related bullying in schools. More than three-fourths (83%) suggested organizing awareness and capacity building workshops on gender and sexuality for school authorities (90%), students (89%), and parents (88%). Similarly, majority stressed the importance of providing sex education in schools (86%) and favoured punitive measures against bullying in schools (90%).

Diagram 11. Consequences of Bullying

Consequence	%	Category
Guilt and shame	36%	Academic
Low academic performance	46%	Academic
Lack of concentration in studies	70%	Academic
Having no/few friends at school	49%	Social
Absenteeism	53%	Social
Less social interactions with co-students	73%	Social
Physical injuries	63%	Health
Anxiety and depression	70%	Health

Legend: Social, Health, Academic

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure learning environments are accessible, inclusive, safe, healthy, enabling and conducive for all learners, the following administrative and policy measures need to be implemented by the policymakers, school management, teachers. Creation of a safe school environment will enable all students to learn, develop and achieve their full potential.

For Policymakers and Officials of Education Department

1. Develop educational curriculum and delivery mechanisms on age appropriate sexual health information including on sexual and gender diversity, to educate students to accept and promote respect for gender equality.

2. Establish a clear anti-bullying policy and implement action plans on school-based violence that contain guidelines for schools, training for teachers, and redress mechanisms for those affected.

3. Generate knowledge through periodic research at district/state levels to better understand the prevalence and forms of bullying, including SOGIE-related bullying.

4. Operationalise a toll-free helpline to address and respond effectively to any kind of bullying, including SOGIE-related bullying, in educational institutions.

5. Include a curriculum on sexuality and gender diversity in pre-service and in-service teacher training courses/programmes to enable them to be more sensitive towards sexual and gender minority youth and to competently address SOGIE-related bullying.

For School Management

1. Develop and implement bullying prevention programmes that prohibit all forms of bullying (including cyberbullying) based on a student's perceived sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (SOGIE)

2. Ensure that teachers and school management are aware of SOGIE related bullying and its negative consequences on students (awareness), know how to identify students who are being bullied (identification), and provide guidelines on how students can intervene in situations when they witness bullying (intervention).

3. Conduct training programmes on gender; sexuality diversity for teachers, school management and senior level students to promote acceptance of students of all genders and sexualities.

4. Establish mechanisms to monitor anti-bullying measures at school level including surveillance of places where bullying commonly occur (student toilets, playgrounds, and hostels).

5. Empower and encourage students to report incidents of bullying to a supportive teacher or school counsellor. Ensure that adequate counselling and health services are available to those who experienced bullying as well as the perpetrators of bullying.

6. Engage with parents through Parents-Teachers Associations, School Management Committees to develop their understanding about diversity in human sexuality and gender identity and help them to respond effectively if their child is experiencing bullying.

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