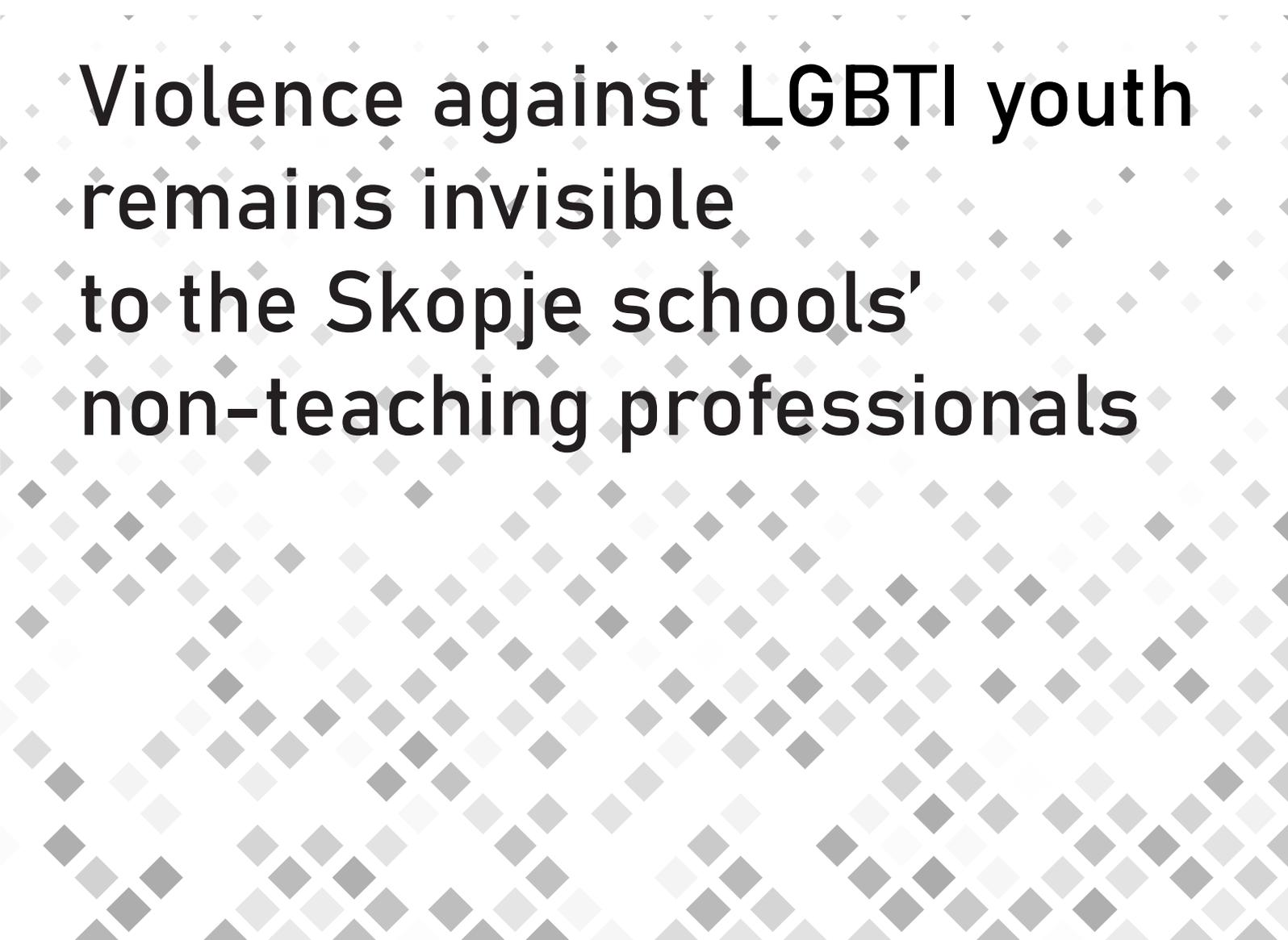


POLICY BRIEF



**Violence against LGBTI youth
remains invisible
to the Skopje schools'
non-teaching professionals**



This brief provides an overview of how the schools in the country deal with peer violence among the youth, including based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The document includes the findings from the 2020 research conducted by HERA in the City of Skopje into the Macedonian high-school students' perception of the role of the non-teaching professionals in addressing peer violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Peer violence is one of the most widespread forms of violence and victimisation in school environments. Although there is a global decrease in the peer violence prevalence, 32%, or every third student, have reported to have been the victims of peer violence by their fellow students.

Peer violence has been declining in North Macedonia, too, however, the risk from various forms of violence against LGBTI youth, both inside and outside of their homes, is much higher. Many a research have shown that, compared to the heterosexual persons, they are more exposed to peer violence, especially at their childhood and adolescent age. LGBTI youth have been four times more abused than their heterosexual peers, with greater violence observed against boys, and this trend, in general, has the tendency to grow and become mainstreamed. Moreover, these young persons enjoy smaller peer support and they tend to socialise less outside of schools, unlike their heterosexual fellow students.

Compared to them, LGBTI youth suffer more from anxiety and depression, they are more inclined to isolation and exclusion, and they contemplate suicide more often, too.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST IN PREVENTING THE PEER VIOLENCE

The non-teaching professionals in North Macedonia have been legally recognised as pedagogical & psychological service providers. The work of this service has been regulated with the 2011 Law on the Pedagogical Service (LPS), last amended in 2018, while the counselling of high school students has been regulated with the 2013 Programme for High School Student Counselling (PHSSC).

PHSSC recognises the different forms of peer violence (physical, verbal, sexual) and it provides more detailed and concise guidelines for student counselling, primarily by the school psychologists, who are obliged to provide the counselling in a quiet and discreet room, building an atmosphere of trust, peace, security, discretion and respect. To this end, PHSSC provides for two forms of student counselling – individual and group.

In the context of peer violence, Guidelines have been set out for primary schools on the reporting procedure and the protection of pupil victims of any form of violence, abuse and neglect. The Guidelines provide instructions as to what needs to be done in case of violence against a pupil, what measures need to be taken to protect the victims of violence, and what activities should be implemented towards preventing the occurrence of violence.

We have recently seen in our country positive examples of violence management in certain schools that have adopted Protocols & Policies on violence reduction, as in the Gimnazija Orce Nikolov (general education high school), which violence reduction policy recognises sexual violence underpinned with homophobic comments addressed by adults to students or among students.

In respect of the non-teaching professionals, the Macedonian Chamber of Psychologists has adopted their Code of Ethics (2006) that stipulates that, in performing their profes-

sional work, psychologists should not involve in addressing the unfair discrimination (affirmative action or positive discrimination) based on age, sex, gender identity, ethnic community, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental characteristics and socioeconomic status.

All the more, this Code obliges the psychologists to dignify these differences and it prohibits them from taking part in other people's activities that are based on prejudices and discriminatory relations, and it encourages them to take appropriate measures for their prevention.

ON LGBTI YOUTH AND PEER VIOLENCE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Even though LGBTI youth in North Macedonia like their schools more than their heterosexual fellow students, this is still one of their “points of impasse and great inequalities, with gloomy forecasts about the future of LGBTI youth”. Furthermore, homophobia and transphobia can be found in the instruction materials that abound in discriminatory qualifications or, to be precise, in incorrect and offensive information about LGBTI persons, and also erroneous perceptions of sexual orientation and gender identity, frequently juxtaposing the non-traditional sexualities and gender identities and phrasing the discourse in terms of disease, deviant behaviour, etc. Further still, in addition to being exposed to peer violence and domestic violence, it has been observed that LGBTI youth become the target of violence by their teachers and the non-teaching professionals.

There is little information available on how the schools deal with peer violence, especially when it comes to the work of the non-teaching professionals, that is, the school psychologists. Even less has been written on the situation of the LGBTI youth and high-school students, and on peer violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. For these cases of violence, what is particularly missing is an insight into the position of the non-teaching professionals.

Therefore, in the course of 2020, HERA carried out a research into the perception of Macedonian high-school students of the role of the non-teaching professionals, more specifically, the school psychologists, in addressing peer violence. The research focused on the high-school students in the City of Skopje, and it provided an overview of how the non-teaching professionals deal with peer violence based on sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity.

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The research applied a combined methodology – quantitative and qualitative. The survey (through a structures questionnaire) covered 1,039 students in the second, third and fourth year of high school going to three public high schools located on the territory of the City of Skopje (SUGS Orce Nikolov – provides general education; SUGS Georgi Dimitrov – provides mixed education; and SUGS Šaip Jusuf – provides vocational education). The completing of the survey questionnaires was organised through each class’s form teachers. Next, for the qualitative purposes of the research, two focus groups were organised with the interested respondents who had previously completed the electronic questionnaire.

The following major points of discussion were presented:

“What most often shapes the students’ perception of the role of the non-teaching professionals in preventing and addressing peer violence?”

“Which are the additional factors influencing the students (not) to refer the issue of peer violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity to the non-teaching professionals?”

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE RESEARCH

1. When it comes to the role of the non-teaching professionals in preventing and addressing peer violence, and also in the cases when this concerns sexual orientation and gender identity, the non-teaching professionals have been perceived through the perspective of school hierarchy, meaning, as ones who have the supervisory role, i.e. someone who is superior, whereas the security-related aspects almost play no role at all. Moreover, the perception of the non-teaching professionals has been conditioned with the primary school experiences, where the teaching staff and the school administration play a more significant role than the non-teaching professionals in dealing with peer violence, indicating to the conclusion that the non-teaching staff have been overshadowed.

2. The perception of the school environment has been conditioned also with the school friendship experiences. For many, schools constitute a safe and happy space, a “way out” of the everyday life, exactly because of the good and close friendships with fellow students. Still, one cannot escape the significance of school groups influencing the perception of acceptance and belonging to schools.

78% of the high-school students have never been referred to an interview with a psychologist or a pedagogue on account of showing signs of violence or being potential victims of violence. (survey)

Almost 37% of the high-school students have reported that it has transpired at least once in their schools that a fellow student has become the victim of violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity. (survey)

“I also want to say that I, too, have been harassed, also in the primary school, as (s)he said. With the only difference that, besides the verbal abuse, like when you do something wrong, we also got in trouble, at least the neighbourhood was like that, we frequently had physical violence, and I, too, was, not so often, but sometimes, involved, unlike the others, in this sort of violence... Now that you are in high school you expect this [cases of violence] to happen again, but I've noticed that many of the children going to the high school with me, not that they don't bother, but they just don't attack me as much as I used to be before...” (focus group with high-school students)

Almost 45% of the high-school students are not aware that their schools have rules that protect the students against peer violence. (survey)

“I was doing better [before the pandemic] because I spent every day of the week with the ones who make me happy, with my friends, and after every class, no matter how hard the class was, they were there for me, I would hug them, they would make me laugh, and it worked great for us...” (focus group with high-school students)

“We kind of have these subcultures that we all belong to, some of us more, some less. For example, those who play video games belong to one subculture, to one group, and others who play football, for example, or maybe something else, everybody has their own group... To enter this circle, it becomes harder the later you try, yes, definitely, because this circle has already been completed...” (focus group with high-school students)

3. According to the high-school students, the teachers have been very little aware and interested in the issue of peer violence, in the sense that they do not pay sufficient attention to it or deal with it merely superficially. Students perceive the non-teaching professionals as being “absent” from their school life. Their trust in the non-teaching professionals is small, owing to their suspicion of the expertise of the non-teaching staff, or the privacy of the interviews, as well as to their perception of the non-teaching professionals as a means of “sanctioning” the “disobedient” students.

As many as 57% of the high-school students have never attended any sort of lecture on the topic of peer violence. (survey)

9.8% of the high-school students have at least once been the victims of peer violence. (survey)

“[...] I want to say that teachers, in general, and the pedagogical and psychological service, have their hands tied, in my opinion [...] That’s why I think they could do something more, but they simply don’t, because we don’t talk too much about violence, be it verbal or any other kind [...] and they’re also not trained enough to know what to do, they don’t.” (focus group with high-school students)

“Honestly, I’ve never even considered it as an option to see the psychologist. That sort of problems, whenever I’ve had them, I’ve resolved them on my own, and the closest ones were there for me [...] It never struck me that I could refer the issue to the psychologist, because I think he has no way of helping me. He’ll probably use the same old excuse ‘let them be, they’re still teenagers, they’ll grow out of it, all’s gonna be fine’...” (focus group with high-school students)

4. When LGBTI high-school students are placed under the spotlight, the differences in the perception of peer violence become evident between them and heterosexuals. Even though LGBTI adolescents are running a greater risk of violence, peer violence based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity has been less recognised by students themselves, but also by the non-teaching professionals and the teachers.

71% of the high-school students have never attended any sort of lecture on the topic of peer violence based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. (survey)

53% of the high-school students are not aware that their schools have rules that protect the students against peer violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity. (survey)

“...when the children are referred to the psychologist for having been attacked or anything else that has to do with their psychological or mental health, he will tell them ‘just have some water, pull yourself together, stop crying and go back to class’. This is no way to solve a problem... Literally 90% of my friends are members of the LGBTQ community and they all kind of need psychological assistance... I honestly believe that school psychologists are not that good and they don’t have so much experience...” (focus group with high-school students)

“...Now that I think of it, there was a case of a fellow student who was of a different sexual orientation or gender identity, who was bullied by them, I'm 100% sure of it...” (focus group with high-school students)

“Yes, based on her gender identity [speaks about a friend from another school] and the way she dressed, I know she had a lot of problems... But personally, in my school, I have never seen anyone having such problems, probably because no one talks much about it. I know they are discriminated against, because they are not accepted, but I have never seen anyone here talking publicly about it.” (focus group with high-school students)

“For example, in my school, I think there are some fellow students who, I believe, are [LGBTI] [...] and I have been in situations where I've been talking to fellow students, and they were like, I don't know, kill them, they don't deserve to live...” (focus group with high-school students)

“...in the class where we hang around the most there are these two girls who are together... on every break, and the children from this class would come and tell me 'those lesbians were swapping spit again', or whatnot... They kind of used this phrase to attack them, like they 'swapped spit' before us, that was just an excuse, like I said, to discriminate them, to insult them, just because of their choice...” (focus group with high-school students)

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE SAFETY OF LGBTI YOUTH IN SCHOOLS



To adopt a new Law on Secondary Education that will clearly recognise the discrimination and peer violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity;



To adopt additional rules/protocols in schools to help identify the discrimination and peer violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity;



To develop a module for teachers in respect of peer violence, with a special focus on violence against LGBTI persons;



To adopt a special policy and protocol for the prevention of and the protection against all forms of violence, with particular focus on sexual orientation and gender identity;



To promote the non-teaching professionals as recognised members of the school community who play a crucial role in improving the school environment by encouraging empathetic relations between students, but also between the students and the other members of the school;



To detach physically the office of the non-teaching professionals from the rest of the school, so as to ensure the anonymity and discretion required for the individual student counselling;



To turn around the negative perception of the non-teaching professionals by emphasising the importance of their counselling and assisting role at the expense of them being used as a means of sanctioning;



To organise regular lectures/trainings on peer violence based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity for students, non-teaching professionals and other staff;



To revise all schoolbooks from the aspect of gender inequalities and discrimination, so as to eliminate the homophobic, transphobic and discriminatory content;



To introduce the comprehensive sexuality education at all levels of education;



To ensure an inclusive and a participatory process by involving the students, teachers, non-teaching professionals, and parents alike in the designing of policies to combat the violence against LGBTI persons in schools and online;



To coordinate the education facilities with the social work centres, health-care facilities, the police, the local self-government, associations and other stakeholders in preventing and protecting against peer violence in schools and online.

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