PRESS RELEASE

International partners shine light on realities and risks of bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in Thai schools

Launch of groundbreaking study on school harassment, citywide 'rainbow chalking' campaign raise awareness in lead-up to International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia 2014

Bangkok, 14 May 2014—In advance of the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia on May 17, UNESCO, UNAIDS and partners, including the Embassies of the United States and the Netherlands in Bangkok, are calling for action to address violence and discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) young people in Thailand.

As millions of Thai public school students head back to class this week, the international partners and local and regional non-governmental organizations and civil society networks, are joining to highlight how bullying of LGBTI young people in national school settings is an all too common reality and one which can overwhelm their ability to learn, leaving them vulnerable to long-term social effects and health risks.

“For too many young people from LGBTI communities, returning to school means re-entering a world where there is the very real threat of being bullied, including verbal, physical and even sexual abuse,” said US Ambassador to Thailand, Kristie Anne Kenney, opening a film and panel discussion event to highlight the issue on Wednesday.

A study conducted by Plan International, UNESCO, and Mahidol University and released at Wednesday’s event contains disconcerting findings on this issue. Nearly one-third (31%) of students who identified themselves as LGBT reported having experienced physical abuse, 29% were targets of verbal abuse and 24% said they faced sexual harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

“This study is the first of its kind in Thailand,” said Gwang-Jo Kim, the Director of UNESCO Bangkok (UNESCO’s Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education). “Conducted in five provinces across four regions of Thailand with over 2,500 students, teachers and school administrators, it gives an unprecedented look into the situation in schools here.”

Those surveyed spoke of being exposed to a range of bullying-type behaviors at school, including abuse that was verbal, physical, social and sexual in nature. “The report confirms what many of us know and have lived through,” said Anjana Suvarnananda, founder of the Anjaree Foundation. “Even going to school toilets makes us vulnerable to abuse and harassment as we are not accepted at washrooms designated for either sex.” The report outlined how those who didn’t identify with their biological sex expressed frustration at being prevented from wearing the uniforms and hairstyles that matched their gender identities.

According to the study, 7% of those bullied said they had attempted suicide in the past year, while an even greater number (23%) suffered from depression. “The effect of these behaviors is serious. Anxiety, low self-esteem as well as withdrawal and social isolation are some of the other toxic effects of bullying on these youth,” said Maja Cubarrubia, the Director of the Plan International Thailand country office.

These psychological effects pose further threats to their physical well-being. “Victims of bullying are more susceptible to engaging in illegal drug use and unprotected sex, increasing their risk to HIV,” said Steven Kraus, Director of UNAIDS Asia and the Pacific. “Fear of further discrimination, identification and abuse means they are often less likely to access potentially life-saving HIV and sexual and reproductive health services and information.”

The international partners joining in the call for action on the issue of LGBTI bullying in schools emphasized that safeguards to prevent and respond to this complex issue need to be
established and taken to scale. The report highlights how most schools in Thailand do not have anti-bullying policies, let alone policies that focus on LGBT students. In some cases, victims said they were accused of inviting the bullying behavior upon themselves.

At the same time, partners heralded signs of change for the better. Teachers and school administrators expressed a wish to have access to learning materials that can help them respond more effectively to the needs of the LGBTI community and improve their learning environment. To that end, UNESCO and partners are this week launching lesson plans to help bring discussions on sexual and gender diversity into the classroom.

Further efforts to strengthen the ability of teachers to address these issues are also underway through a strengthened partnership between UNESCO and Plan Thailand, with support from the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Swedish International Development Agency. “This is part of a ‘whole school approach’ that aims to make all schools safe havens for learning. This includes policies that respect all children’s right to learn in a safe environment, support to teachers to understand their role in promoting acceptance and respect, curriculum that enables and empowers, and links to services for affected learners,” said Doris Voorbraak, Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands at Wednesday’s IDAHOT event.

**Chalking up rainbows for LGBTI student rights!**
Towards the joint goal of making all schools safe havens for learning, the partners highlighted the critical need to raise awareness around this often ignored or discounted issue.

To that end, UNESCO Bangkok, UNAIDS Asia and the Pacific, and regional youth networks Youth LEAD and Youth Voices Count are partnering for the first-ever “School Rainbow” initiative. Inspired by the Rainbow campaign which has had people all over the world drawing chalk rainbows on the ground to show support to end stigma, discrimination and violence against people from LGBTI communities, chalk rainbows will be drawn in front of schools throughout Bangkok by students, teachers and school staff, as well as members of the LGBTI community to show support to end LGBTI discrimination and bullying.

The School Rainbow activities will be planned and carried out by students, teachers, school staff and community partners throughout this week. Discussions on the issue of bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity will also be carried out at the sites with students and young people. All chalk rainbows will link to a URL for a website (www.schoolrainbow.org), which will include more information on the topic of bullying, lesson plans for Thailand developed by UNESCO, and other resources.

“It is hoped that the rainbows appearing throughout the city will serve as a symbol of respect for diversity, a sign of solidarity, and a promise of the education system’s support for all young people regardless of their differences,” said Mehrdad Pourzaki, Youth LEAD Monitoring and Evaluation Officer.

*Held every year on May 17, the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia has, since 2004, brought the violence and discrimination experienced by the community LGBT into the international spotlight.*

For more on the chalking initiative visit: [www.schoolrainbow.org](http://www.schoolrainbow.org).

To access materials from the Mahidol University-Plan International-UNESCO research on bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity:

- Issues brief ([English](http://example.com) and [Thai](http://example.com))
- Infographic ([English](http://example.com) and [Thai](http://example.com))
- Full research report ([English](http://example.com) and [Thai](http://example.com))

To access the 2014 IDAHOT Lesson Plan on sexual and gender diversity in Thailand, see: [English](http://example.com) and [Thai](http://example.com).
CONTACT
Noel Boivin | UNESCO | +66 2 391 0577 ext 347 | n.boivin@unesco.org
Beth Magne-Watts | UNAIDS | +66 81 835 3476 | magnewattsb@unaid.org
Mike Bruce | Plan International | +66 81 821 9770 | mike.bruce@plan-international.org
Dave Whitted | US Embassy | WhittedDW@state.gov

SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Partners in the Study on bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in Thai schools

Partners in the IDAHOT events in Bangkok