LEARNING to be TOLERANT

Thai schools are failing to provide a safe environment for LGBT students

A growing body of evidence shows that many lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people are threatened with violence because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or the way they express their sexuality. Unfortunately, this can begin at a young age — in the form of bullying and harassment.

Not only are LGBT students disproportionately targeted for bullying at Thai schools, but merely being perceived as being different can also lead to harassment.

To tackle this issue, Plan International in collaboration with Unesco and Mahidol University conducted a year-long study involving 30 secondary schools in five provinces, with over 2,000 students sharing their experiences. As part of the study, findings from the report entitled “Bullying targeting high school students who are or are perceived to be transgender or same-sex attracted: Types, prevalence, impact, motivation and preventive measures in 5 provinces of Thailand” were recently released.
The in-depth report provides an unprecedented look into homophobic and transphobic bullying in Thailand’s schools and its effects on victims — from absenteeism to depression and even attempted suicide. The schools’ failure to tackle this threat to students’ rights to a safe learning environment is also noted.

“Thailand is widely known as a place of tolerance and respect for people from all walks of life including the LGBT community,” said Majaa Cubarrubia, Plan International (Thailand) country director. “Despite that, LGBT youth and those that are believed to be LGBT here are suffering from bullying at schools, just like everywhere else in the world.

“This study aims to build understanding about the nature, scope and impact of bullying against youth who are LGBT or who are believed to be LGBT, and measures that can — and must — be taken to prevent or respond to bullying.” She added that focus group discussions and interviews with students, teachers and administrators, as well as surveys among students in five provinces, formed the basis of the study.

The findings are alarming. According to the study, around 30% of self-identified LGBT students reported having experienced physical abuse, nearly 30% reported verbal abuse, and around 25% reported being victims of sexual harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Around two-thirds of victims said they did not report these incidents or even talk about them with anyone.

The report paints a troubling picture of the impact this bullying has on teens. Nearly 25% of those bullied because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression were depressed, as compared to only 6% of those that had not been bullied at all. This depression can lead to self-harm. Most alarmingly, 7% of those bullied because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression reported having attempted suicide in the past year.

“The effects of bullying clearly can be traumatic and long-lasting,” said Justine Sass, the chief of Unesco Bangkok’s HIV Prevention and Health Promotion Unit. “We have seen evidence that bullying based on perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression can have significant negative educational outcomes. This is not even to mention the links between school-based bullying and depression, anxiety, loss of esteem and confidence, withdrawal and social isolation.

“We are simply failing to support these young people’s right to education for all in a healthy, safe learning environment.”

A lack of measures to address bullying in general, let alone harassment targeting LGBT students, worsens this situation, the report found. It also outlined measures schools can take to address this situation, including a rethink on what constitutes bullying and measures to promote acceptance of sexual diversity.

“Schools must have policies on school-related gender-based violence, and especially on bullying targeting students who are or are thought to be LGBT,” recommended Dr Pimphawon Boonmongkon, principal investigator of the study at Mahidol University. “School curricula need to be revised and any terms and explanations that have bias against sexual and gender diversity need to be removed.

“Channels of assistance are also needed for students who are bullied — hotlines, web boards or mobile applications, for example. Teacher training programmes at universities should have sexual and gender diversity content so that future teachers can have a better understanding of these issues.”