

## 'Nobody helped me': Schools remain dangerous for LGBT youth in Vietnam



Students pose in LGBT T-shirts at Nguyen Viet Hong High School, Can Tho City. Photo: Lam Ngoc

Le Minh Triet attempted suicide when he was a seventh-grader, right after coming home from school.

For days, he had been bullied by other students. Sometimes it was name calling. Sometimes he was beaten, had soft drinks thrown at him, and locked inside a room for hours.

"When they beat me, they insulted my parents names for having a gay son," he said. "Nobody helped me."

"That day I felt my life didn't matter anymore. So I ran around searching for all the drugs I could find. I took a handful. I knew I was going to die."

His parents came home and rushed him to hospital. The young boy quit school after that. He stayed at home for more than a year, before being moved to a new school, also in Ho Chi Minh City.

Now 15, Triet said it has become a little bit better. But he still does not have many friends and often feels isolated.

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Le Tan Tai is a gay teen in the Mekong Delta province of Ben Tre. A day in his high school is a day in hell for him.

"The other boys often tie me up and beat me. Some even grope me and say that's a favor.

"They stop when I shout 'I'm not a faggot' for 80 times," Tai said. "I often feel disgusted and desperate."

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Tran Quyen Anh, a trans boy at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, said his teacher once ordered him to stand in front of class for hours as a punishment. He refused to wear female student uniforms and cut his hair too short. The teacher and classmates would then call him "a pervert."

Anh convinced his mother to send him to another school. A teacher there told his family to have him "treated" so that she could behave like a decent girl.

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Huynh Ngoc Sao, who identifies as lesbian, said a teacher once insulted her in public. She was banned from going near other girls in her school.

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Similar stories of abuse and discrimination can be found among Vietnamese LGBT youth. The country has surprised many for its recent progressive stance and new policies that recognize more rights for LGBT people.

Still homophobia and transphobia are palpable.

In a November report, UNESCO cited a Vietnamese study as saying that 44 percent of local LGBT students experienced stigma, discrimination and violence as a result of divergence from established gender norms. The study, which was released in 2012, was conducted among 581 participants who were 14-22 years old.

Transgender, lesbian and gay students reported higher rates of victimization, 55 and 47 percent respectively, it said.

A more recent survey in 2014 found nearly half of LGBT people in Vietnam rated stigma at school as serious.

In both the 2012 and 2014 studies, respondents said they were also discriminated by teachers and school staff who insulted and unfairly rated their school papers and exams.

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In their joint survey on gender-based violence at school in six provinces and cities around Vietnam, the education ministry and UNESCO found that 19 percent of polled students considered it was "harmless" to tease and bully their LGBT classmates.

Nearly 70 percent of parents surveyed by the Hanoi-based LGBT group iSEE said they would prohibit their children from being friends with their LGBT classmates.

They said they would ground or even beat their kids to enforce the prohibition.

For many young members of the community, discrimination comes from their own parents.

Bui Ky Nhan, an eleventh-grader, said after she came out as a trans girl five years ago, her parents took her to many psychiatrists to "cure the disease."

When all therapies ended in vain, they isolated her from her brother for fear that he would be infected.

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Speaking to Thanh Nien, many activists and educators said Vietnamese schools need to introduce into their curriculum programs which raise awareness about sexuality and gender identity to fight discrimination.

Le Thanh Mai, a researcher at the Hanoi-based Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences, said Vietnamese students lack knowledge about sex and reproductive health, let alone subjects such as homosexuality and transgender.

Schools can start with introducing LGBT-related contents into their lessons instead of waiting for the education ministry to do something, she said.

Nguyen Hiep Thong, vice director of Hanoi's education department, said the presence of counseling services at school can help eliminate stigma.

Deputy education minister Nguyen Vinh Hien also promised that sex education and counseling services will be introduced in new K-12 education program, when asked about how the government plans to address the issue.

However, with homophobia and transphobia still common among many teachers and school staff, the recommended solutions are still easier said than done.

In fact, Le Vu Hoang Minh, a member of iSEE, told *Thanh Nien* that his group has been approaching many local high schools, offering to organize seminars on LGBT.

Most of them turned that offer down.