

LGBT-friendly Thailand?

Introduction

According to universal human rights principles, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 26), every human being has the right to education.²

Bullying and harassment can violate this right by interrupting the attendance and participation in school of those affected, and the quality of learning and school life more broadly.³ As a recognized form of violence⁴, bullying also undermines other fundamental rights to health, safety, dignity and freedom from discrimination.⁵

While potentially any learner can be affected, those who are different from the majority are most likely to be singled out for abuse.⁶ In particular, students who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) tend to be disproportionately affected.⁷ In many Western and Asian contexts, over half of LGBT students report having been bullied because of their same-sex attraction or because of their transgender expressions.⁸

Studies on this kind of bullying have linked it to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem⁹, as well as increased risk of drug use, unprotected sex, HIV infection, self-harm and suicide.¹⁰ LGBT students often try to protect themselves from violence and intimidation by hiding their gender identity or sexuality from their friends and families.¹¹

Thailand is often perceived by both foreigners and some of its own population as very accepting of sexual and gender diversity. A Thai government agency makes use of this perception in a campaign aimed at increasing the number of foreign LGBT tourists in Thailand, *gothai.be.free*.¹² Yet some researchers have suggested that Thai society is “tolerant but unaccepting” toward same-sex attracted individuals and concluded that the perception of Thailand as a “gay heaven” is a myth.¹³ There has been research on school bullying in Thailand¹⁴, but only anecdotal evidence on bullying specifically targeting students who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT, or mechanisms to counter it in Thai schools.¹⁵

This study aimed to fill this gap in evidence, and to identify policy and programme implications. **It is the first systematic study on the issue in Thailand.**

The analysis presented here is from a study commissioned by UNESCO Bangkok and Plan International Thailand, and conducted by Mahidol University.¹

The study collected quantitative and qualitative data from students, administrators and teachers in five provinces in four regions (Bangkok, Central, North, Northeast and South) of Thailand.

2,070 students completed a computerized, self-administered survey. Qualitative data were collected from over 450 people including students, teachers and school administrators through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

All students were in levels 1-6 of secondary education (grades 7-12); their ages ranged from 13 to 20 years.



Thai understandings of bullying

Both students and teachers described a continuum of behaviours ranging from *kan yok-lo* (teasing), considered harmless, through *kan klaeng*, used for less serious kinds of bullying or rough teasing, to *kan rangkae*, which is the academic Thai term for “bullying,” and was used for the most severe cases.

Students’ differentiation depended often on perceived intent (hostile vs. friendly) and the relationship between those involved (friend, enemy, or neither). These were recognised to include physical, verbal, social, sexual and online behaviours. Teachers often associated bullying primarily with physical fights.

While “teasing” was not seen always as a problem by different parties, it appeared to contribute to the legitimisation of subsequent, more severe behaviours among same-sex attracted and transgender youth.

Anti-LGBT bullying

More than half (56%) of self-identified LGBT students in the study reported having been bullied within the past month because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Among students that *did not identify* as LGBT, 25% reported being bullied because they were *perceived* to be transgender or same-sex attracted. This confirms research suggesting that it is the mere *perception* of same-sex attraction or of transgender identity that puts people at risk.¹⁶

A range of behaviours were described by those who identified as LGBT (*see right*), including verbal abuse (e.g., face-to-face and online name-calling), physical abuse (e.g., slapping, kicking), social abuse (e.g., face-to-face and online social exclusion), and sexual harassment (e.g., unwanted touching).¹⁷

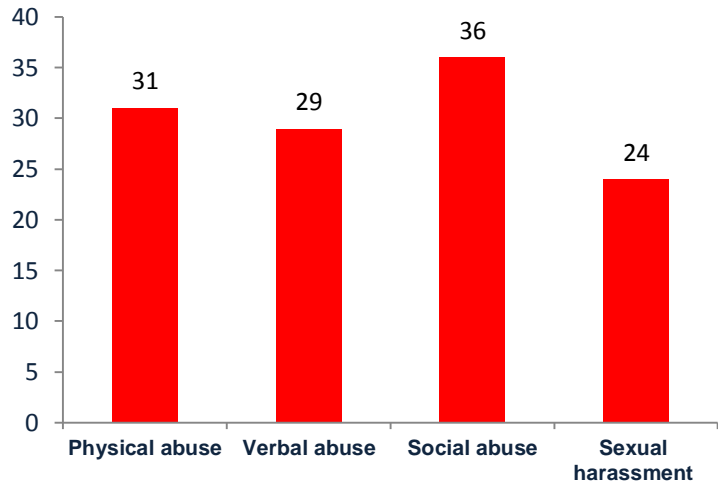
Among male gay and bisexual, and trans*women, students, placing victims into sexually humiliating positions and mimicking intercourse and/or rape also emerged as a form of bullying. *Toms*¹⁸, or female students with masculine gender identity/presentation, seemed to be the least liked group; some schools mentioned specifically anti-*tom* hate groups.

“Sometimes kids are just playing and adults think it’s bullying [*kan rangkae, kan klaeng*]. But really, we’re just having fun, playing.”

“I think bullying [*kan rangkae*] is different from teasing [*kan klaeng*], because the emotion you have when teasing is just wanting to have a laugh, to have fun...But bullying is like we’re angry, we hate, we don’t like them, and so we bully them. It’s a different emotion.”

“Teasing is like we’re playing [*yok lo len*]; even if it’s for real, we’re not pushing, pulling or rubbing them, we’re not doing violence to them. But bullying [*kan rangkae*] is hurting them outright... both physically and psychologically. Teasing [*kan klaeng*] is not so violent as bullying, but if you ask me if they’re similar...Whether you’re teasing [*kan klaeng*] or bullying [*rangkae*], neither of these are good things.”

Prevalence (%) of bullying in the past month, by type, among LGBT youth



When compared, lesbian, female bisexual and *tom* students had a higher prevalence of victimization due to their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity than gay or bisexual males or trans*women students. This was true overall, as well as for each type of bullying.

The proportion of participants who were victimised due to perceived or actual LGBT status was higher in Bangkok, the South and the Northeast than in Central or Northern regions.

There were no significant differences between overall levels of victimisation between lower- and upper-secondary students; however physical and verbal bullying was more common among lower-secondary students (*see right*).

In terms of the location of bullying, gay, bisexual and trans*women reported often being teased or bullied by other boys near the male toilets. Some did not use any toilets at all during the day, or used them when no one else was present. Some suggested the need for third gender toilets.

Some students described school policies that seemed to constitute a form of structural or social violence. For example, strict adherence to student hairstyle and uniform regulations based on sex at birth was noted by transgender students as making them feel uncomfortable, and coerced to follow the norms of the opposite sex. Many schools find these aspects as trivial issues, but these practices were directly linked to bullying behaviours. For example, forcing *trans*women* students to wear cropped hair makes them seem ridiculous in the eyes of other students, who duly choose them as targets for bullying.

What bystanders do

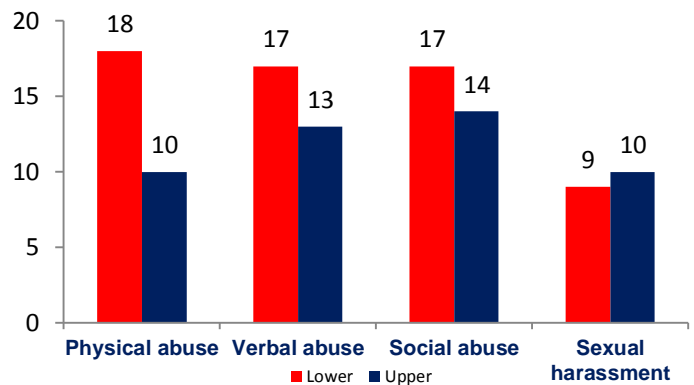
Bystanders who witness teasing and bullying incidents in which the victim is perceived to be LGBT react in various ways, depending on the situation, harshness of the behaviours and their relationship with the victim.

These reactions include:

- doing nothing (because they think it is just playing among friends),
- joining the bullying,
- trying to get the bully to stop, and
- informing other school staff, if the incident is particularly severe.

Different reactions can be seen in a single incident.

Prevalence (%) of bullying, by type, among LGBT youth in lower/upper secondary



The qualitative research findings suggest that students' conformity to gender norms based on their sex at birth is more important than whether they are attracted to the same sex, another sex, or more than one sex. The clearest indication of this in the quantitative findings can be seen with male students who considered themselves as less masculine than other boys; 70 per cent of them had been teased or bullied due to their perceived LGBT characteristics. This is the highest prevalence of such teasing or bullying seen among any group in this study.

"Some don't care, some try to stop it if it's their close friend. If they're not close friends, they would not get involved."

"Sometimes they even take pictures...they post the pictures on Facebook...they'll tag the pictures, on and on, within the class."

"If they didn't join in the teasing, they would just stand there, watching...and laugh."

"...if it gets unbearable, then they intervene."

What victims do

Around two-thirds (68%) of victims of anti-LGBT bullying said they did not report these incidents or even talk about them with anyone. Nearly a quarter (23%) of those that did nothing said that this was because “nothing would happen even if someone were told”.

The majority of those that *did* react to bullying said that they fought back (63%) or consulted a friend (51%). Very few students informed school staff such as teachers (8%), guidance counsellors (6%), school disciplinarians (3%), other school personnel (2%) or school directors (0.5%).

How it impacts them

When compared to those who had not been bullied at all, a significantly higher proportion of those who had been bullied on the basis of perceived transgender identity or same-sex attraction had missed classes in the past month, drank alcoholic beverages, were depressed, had unprotected sex in the past 3 months, and had attempted suicide in the past year. They were also significantly more likely to be depressed or have attempted suicide when compared to those who had been bullied for other reasons.

For example:

- Nearly one-quarter (23%) 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.
- Nearly one-third (31%) of those bullied (either due to their perceived sexual orientation/gender identity or for other reasons) reported unauthorized absences in the past month, as compared to only 15% among those who hadn't been bullied.
- Nearly 7% percent of those bullied because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression reported having attempted suicide in the past year, compared to only 1.2% among those that had not been bullied for any reason, and 3.6% among those that had been bullied for other reasons.

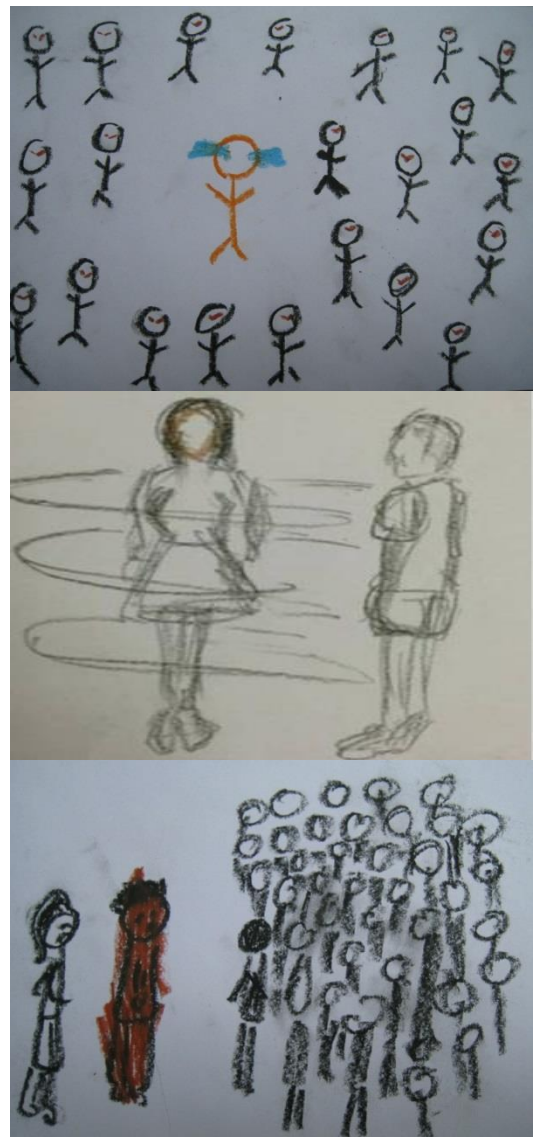
How do you respond?

“Give them annoying or mean looks.”

“Slap them and chase them away. If you don't fight back they'll keep on teasing you all the time.”

“[I] wanted to take revenge...[but] normally we can't fight against their strength because they're stronger

Bullying: What it looks like, how it feels



What schools are doing to prevent and respond to bullying

Most schools offer standard measures to manage bullying among students in general. These can include: relationship-building activities, morality promotion, fraternity systems, assigning teachers to oversee specific students, or mediation attempts. In cases considered serious by the school, the perpetrator may have points deducted or even be suspended or dismissed from school. Remedial measures for the victims are rarely provided, and only in cases involving a fight or a theft. While teachers and directors seemed to have confidence in the effectiveness of these measures, the prevalence of bullying due to perceived LGBT status or other motivations suggests these are inadequate.

Most participating schools did not have general anti-bullying policies, and none had anti-LGBT bullying policies. School directors and teachers likely did not believe this was required as:

1. They understood bullying to refer primarily to physical acts of violence.
2. Most bullying incidents targetting students who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT are not reported to teachers or directors.
3. Most teachers do not see LGBT students as perpetrators or victims of bullying.
4. They believe the number of LGBT students is small¹⁹; hence there is no need for specific bullying prevention programmes.

In some schools ad hoc preventive measures had been put in place (e.g., granting permission for feminine male students to sleep separately from other male students in a school camp). But these were few and far between.

Many schools reported encouraging LGBT students to express themselves through school activities, such as cheerleading, doing flower arrangements, or as a master of ceremonies in school events. This was seen by schools as demonstrating their skills, and promoting acceptance. However, some students complained that these were done in such insensitive ways that they may have fostered further prejudice against LGBT students. Others noted that these typically involved trans*women, and again *toms* were left out.

Where examples of responses to anti-LGBT bullying were provided, the schools' responses mostly consisted in punishing perpetrators when bullying was brought to their attention. Even in these cases, some trans*women students protested that the punishment other boys got for bullying them was milder than if they had bullied girls. *Tom* students were reported to not receive such support as they do not to inform teachers when they are teased or bullied.

Many schools had guidance counsellors that could provide individual support to victims of bullying, yet they were seldom being used. Some students complained that when they complained to teachers about being bullied, they were told that it was their own fault.

The study found that teachers need significantly more support to understand sexual/gender diversity issues. Teachers' language about LGBT students was stigmatizing. "Sexually deviant" was a common term used by teachers, even when describing LGBT students positively, suggesting that they did not intentionally condemn such students. The term "mentally disordered" was also used, often to express "sympathy" for LGBT learners.

In some schools, sex education was provided as part of health studies by subdistrict health promotion hospital officials from the Ministry of Public Health. However, the sex education that was given was reportedly did not widely cover sexual/gender diversity topics, and emphasized delayed sexual debut beyond graduation. Teachers mentioned the need for teaching materials, external speakers, and training on sexual/gender diversity.

In most schools, the necessary first step is to build awareness of the high prevalence of bullying and its negative impact on students who self-identify as, or who are perceived to be, LGBT. If teachers understand the role that myths about being LGBT play in bullying, they will also become aware of the necessity to teach about sexual/gender diversity in order to counter such myths and thereby reduce bullying that stems from such myths.

Conclusions and recommendations

This in-depth study, which is the first of its kind in Thailand, provides an unprecedented look into bullying against those who identify as, or are perceived to be, LGBT in Thai schools. It demonstrates the toxic effects on victims, from absenteeism to depression and even attempted suicide. The study concludes with the following recommendations:

For schools

- Develop and enforce clear anti-bullying policies (covering students of all genders) that establish clear mechanisms for addressing perpetrators, and do not discriminate on the sex, sexual orientation or gender expression of either perpetrators or victims.
- Integrate content and participatory activities increasing understanding of the extent and consequences of bullying into existing school subjects, and promote comprehensive sexuality education that emphasises acceptance of diversity and mutual respect regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.
- Build acceptance of sexual/gender diversity through activities that enable LGBT students to fully express their identities and abilities, and ensure that students of all genders can participate in all activities and become student leaders.
- Create safe spaces for LGBT students in schools, and challenge prevailing myths among students, teachers, and parents about LGBT youth such as those suggesting that they are deviant, mentally abnormal, over-emotional, or prone to violate school regulations.

For society at-large

- Promote acceptance of sexual/gender diversity within society at large through public campaigns, popular media, or activities of civil society organisations.
- Create collaboration networks between schools and civil society organisations working on sexual/gender diversity and gender-based violence.

For policy makers

- Establish policies and enforcement mechanisms to address school-related gender-based violence, including bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as policies enabling school regulations with greater flexibility on school uniforms and obligatory hairstyles. Monitor the implementation of these policies, and reward schools that show progress in reducing bullying and discrimination.
- Remove biased terminology and explanations related to sexual/gender diversity in existing school curricula, and develop additional materials to support the prevention of bullying.
- Build understanding of sexual/gender diversity in teacher training programmes so that future teachers will understand and have increased capacity to teach about them.
- Provide channels of assistance to bullied students, e.g. hotlines, web boards, or mobile applications.

For further research

- Continued research on these topics is needed for up-to-date information about the situation, and further research required on bullying in specific settings such as boarding schools, religious schools, juvenile observation schools and protection centres, vocational colleges and non-formal education centres.

Endnotes

¹ For the full research report, see Mahidol University, Plan International Thailand, UNESCO. 2014. *Bullying targeting secondary 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*. Bangkok: UNESCO. This includes detailed results of the review, along with extensive information on the research process including the ethical guidelines, sampling frames, qualitative and quantitative research tools, data collection, and data analysis. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002275/227518e.pdf>

² UN. 1948. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. General Assembly Res. 217A (III), UN Doc A/810. These rights have been further enshrined in the *Millennium Development Goals*, the *Dakar Framework for Action* and the *Yogyakarta Principles*. See in particular, Principle 16 of the Yogyakarta Principle which states: "Everyone has the right to education, without discrimination on the basis of, and taking into account, their sexual orientation and gender identity". Clause E under Principle 16 specifies that States shall "ensure that laws and policies provide adequate protection for students, staff and teachers of different sexual orientations and gender identities against all forms of social exclusion and violence within the school environment, including bullying and harassment". International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). 2007. *The Yogyakarta Principles. Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. Geneva: ICJ.

³ Pinheiro, P.S. 2006. *World Report on Violence against Children*. United Nations Secretary-General's study on violence against children. Geneva, Switzerland.

⁴ Ibid. See also: Leach, F. and Dunne, M. with Salvi, F. 2013. *School-related Gender-based Violence: A global review of current issues and approaches in policy, programming and implementation responses to School-related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV) for the Education Sector*. Background research paper prepared for UNESCO. University of Sussex.

⁵ UN, *Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4* (2003) on Adolescent Health and Development, para.2.

⁶ The *World Report on Violence against Children* (2006) quotes studies from several low- and middle income countries that reveal extensive school bullying directed particularly at members of lower socio-economic groups or ethnic minorities. The report finds that most bullying is sexual- or gender-based: both in terms of the *selection* of victims (i.e. those perceived as not conforming to prevailing sexual and gender norms) as well as in the *nature of the abuse*, with verbal bullying consisting predominantly of sexual and gender derogatory language.

⁷ UNESCO. 2012. *Education Sector Responses to Homophobic Bullying*. Good policy and practice in HIV and health education: Booklet 8. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002164/216493e.pdf>

⁸ For studies on this issue in a range of settings see: Khan, S., et al. 2005. *From the Front Line: The impact of social, legal and judicial impediments to sexual health promotion, and HIV and AIDS related care and support for males who have sex with males in Bangladesh and India*. Kathmandu: Naz Foundation International. Kosciw, J.G., Greytak, E.A., Diaz, E.M. and Bartkiewicz, M.J. 2010. *The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN. Berlan, E.D., Corliss, H.L., Field, A.E., Goodman, E., and Austin, S.B. Sexual orientation and bullying among adolescents in the growing up today study. *J. Adolesc Health* 2010; 46(4): 366-371. Birkett, M., Espelage, D.L. and Koenig, B. LGB and Questioning Students in Schools: The Moderating Effects of Homophobic Bullying and School Climate on Negative Outcomes. *J Youth Adolesc* 2009; 38(7): 989-1000. Hillier et al. 2010. *Writing themselves in 3*. The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health

and Society, La Trobe University. Mian, L. (prepared). 2013. Report of the Online Survey on Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying at Educational Institutions. Beijing: Aibai Culture & Education Center; also cited on www.timeoutshanghai.com

⁹ Russell, S.T. et al. 2010. Safe Schools Policy for LGBTQ students. *Social Policy Report*, 2010; 24(4): 1-17.

¹⁰ Lancet Editorial Board. Health concerns of adolescents who are in a sexual minority. *The Lancet*, 2011;377(9783):2056.

¹¹ Takács, J. 2006. *Social exclusion of young lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Europe*. Brussels, & Amsterdam: IGLYO and ILGA Europe.

¹² The Tourism Authority of Thailand has developed a website (<http://gothaibefree.com/>) to convince foreign LGBT people that Thailand accepts sexual/gender diversity, and that they should patronize the tourism industry in Thailand.

¹³ Jackson (1999) described Thai society as "tolerant but unaccepting" toward same-sex attracted individuals and concluded that the perception of Thailand as a "gay heaven" is a mere myth. A review of recent research on the problems faced by LGBT individuals in Thailand (Ojanen, 2009) suggested that many of the problems noted by Jackson (1999) were still common. Heterosexism and transprejudice dominate Thai society, which therefore does not genuinely accept transgender and same-sex attracted people (Ojanen, 2009). Jackson, P.A. 1999. Tolerant but unaccepting: The myth of a Thai "gay paradise." In P.A. Jackson & N.M. Cook (Eds.) *Genders and sexualities in modern Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, pp. 226-242. Ojanen, T.T. Sexual/gender minorities in Thailand: Identities, challenges and voluntary-sector counseling. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*; 2009; 6(2): 4-34.

¹⁴ Sombat Tapanya [สมบัติ ตาปัญญา]. 2006. รายงานการสำรวจปัญหาการรังแกกันของนักเรียน [Report on a survey on bullying between students]. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Faculty of Medicine, Chiang Mai University. Wisdom Society for Public Opinion Research of Thailand. 2009. พฤติกรรมก้าวร้าวรุนแรงผ่านโลกไซเบอร์ของเยาวชนไทยเขตกรุงเทพมหานคร [Cyberbullying behaviours among Thai youth in Bangkok]. Bangkok, Thailand: Wisdom Society for Public Opinion Research of Thailand. These studies did not indicate whether LGBT students were being bullied more than other groups of students, and whether the motivations behind bullying against these students were the same as motivations behind bullying targeting other students.

¹⁵ Ibid; See also: De Lind van Wijngaarden, J.W. 2012. Reducing hetero-normativity by promoting respect for sexual & gender diversity in Thai schools: A review of evidence for homo/transphobic bullying in Thai educational institutions & recommendations for UNESCO Bangkok's response. Unpublished consultant report for UNESCO Bangkok. UNESCO has also produced a film showcasing good practices in certain schools in Thailand, where the health and well-being of LGBT students are promoted. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/resources/multimedia/video/addressing-homophobia-in-and-through-schools-promising-examples-from-thailand/>

¹⁶ Office of the High Commission on Human Rights (OHCHR). 2013. *Fact Sheet: Homophobic and Transphobic Violence*. New York: OHCHR.

¹⁷ For a detailed breakdown of types of behaviours included in these different categories, see the full research report (ref. 1).

¹⁸ Thai terminology for sexuality and gender identity is complex. For a detailed explanation of the categories used for participants to self-identify as "being LGBT" see full research report (ref. 1).

¹⁹ This misunderstanding is significant in two important respects. First, the proportion of LGBT-identified students (12% in this review) is much higher than teachers think. Most teachers thought that of the thousands of students in their school, only a handful were LGBT. Second, based on the affected students' self-identification, most were not in fact LGBT, but they were nevertheless affected by this type of bullying.

Acknowledgments

The analysis presented here draws from the research report, *Bullying targeting secondary 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*, produced by Mahidol University, Plan International Thailand and UNESCO Bangkok (2014). The full report can be accessed at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002275/227518e.pdf>.

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