

The Extent of School Bullying Experienced by Underage Sexual Minorities in China: How It Affects Their Well-being and How They Can Fight Back

Enqi Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Capital Normal University High School, Beijing, 100048, China*
a. 20150435308@mail.sdufe.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In recent years, with the increasing yearning of the Chinese people for a better life, people gradually began to have a diversified understanding and awakening of their sexual orientation. The world no longer sees only heterosexuality, to which most people belong, but also gays, bisexuals, and even pansexuals, who are collectively referred to as sexual minorities. However, at the same time, because the existence of sexual minorities subverts the mission of “procreation”, which has been given to men and women for thousands of years in China, sexual minorities are stigmatized, stereotyped, and discriminated against by society. Among them, for underage sexual minorities, school bullying is one of the most serious minority pressure they are facing at present. Therefore, based on the research of scholars in the fields of mental health and public health on the relationship between school abuse in high school and sexual orientation, this paper finds that school bullying has a serious negative impact on the physical and mental health of underage sexual minorities, such as depression and suicidal tendencies. In addition, underage sexual minorities can pass first the school perpetration of school violence punishment measures into the school rules; Second, talk about stress to the family, friends, or other sexual minorities; Thirdly, conduct sex education for the whole society in a way to reduce the negative impact of school bullying on them.

Keywords: adolescent, sexual minorities, school bullying, violence

1. Introduction

Sexual minorities are an umbrella term for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, transgender, and other non-mainstream sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions not mentioned above [1]. Around the world, laws and regulations in some countries have recognized the legality of marriage of sexual minorities, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States. At the same time, LGBTQ people are speaking up for themselves by building communities to promote LGB culture. As a result of their joint efforts, several films and TV shows have begun to use sexual minorities as actors and even entire films with sexual minorities as the main characters.

From China’s perspective, according to the White Paper on China’s Gay Data 2021, which was released based on gay social media and other third-party organizations, gay people account for 5% of China’s population, which means that one out of every 20 people is gay, which is not a small number.

Overall, however, the attention to, and recognition of, sexual minorities in China is relatively much lower. To illustrate, the visibility of sexual minorities, including homosexuals, in everyday life is very low. The 2016 Survey Report on the Survival of Sexual Minorities in China, jointly released by the United Nations Development Program, the Department of Sociology at Peking University, and the Beijing LGBT Center, shows that only 5% of sexual minorities are open about their sexual identity. In terms of laws and regulations, for example, among China's 34 provincial-level administrative regions, only one province, Taiwan, has legalized homosexuality. In China, homosexuality is not explicitly criminalized under the principle of "what is not expressly prohibited by law is permitted by law", which means that the law does not specifically forbid or criminalize sexual minorities, and individuals are free to engage in consensual sexual activities that are not explicitly prohibited by law. Following Article 1,049 of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, which upholds the principle of monogamy, legal protection for the marriage of sexual minorities in China is absent. Therefore, if individuals of sexual minorities choose to enter into marriage, they do so without the protection of the law.

However, in recent years, the relationship between sexual orientation and the degree of bullying at school, as well as the relationship between sexual orientation and the degree of bullying at school, the relationship between the mental health of sexual minority students and their exposure to bullying at school, has drawn increasing attention from scholars in the fields of emotional and mental health, public health, and clinical psychology in China. For example, "Homophobia bullying was more prevalent among LGBT students than it was among heterosexuals," and "LGBT students who experienced more bullying at school were also more likely to engage in hazardous sexual activity and use drugs. Not only was being bullied influenced LGBT students' suicidal intentions but simply witnessing bullying in school was also significantly associated with students' suicidal intentions" [2].

It follows that, as more and more research on the topic of school violence suffered by sexual minorities in China, the depth and breadth of the research are becoming higher and higher. Despite this, the problem of school bullying faced by underage sexual minorities has not been effectively solved and stopped, and there are still some victims of school bullying who choose to remain silent rather than voluntarily seek help. Therefore, the theme of this study is to explore the extent of school bullying suffered by underage sexual minorities in China and its impact on them physically and psychologically as well as on the whole campus and society, in addition, to trying to find ways to mitigate the negative impact of school bullying on them, so that they can hold "weapons to fight back". Accordingly, the purposes of this study are, first of all, to further explore the potential victims of bullying among underage sexual minorities; secondly, to explore the impact of bullying on their mental health and well-being; thirdly, to explore the reasons why they are subjected to school violence; Finally, try to find ways to help them reduce the damage and stress and the challenges involved.

2. Current Situation of School Experienced by Bullying Underage Sexual Minorities in China

Violence in and around schools, between students, instructors, and students, as well as by others who are not affiliated with the school, is referred to as "school bullying." [3]. In school bullying, the more powerful person, usually without being provoked or attacked, repeatedly attacks and hurts the relatively vulnerable person, and it affects the physical and mental health of children and adolescents. The directionality of a person's pursuit of sexual objects and objectives, primarily the object of sexual desire, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, is known as sexual orientation [4]. According to research conducted abroad, bullies are more likely to target students who identify as gay, bisexual, or undecided. To be specific, in the United States, a nationwide poll indicated that 55% of LGBT students felt uncomfortable at school due to their sexual orientation, and that over 74% of

LGBT students had experienced verbal abuse. Of these, 36% had also been physically assaulted. According to studies, persistent and frequent bullying at school is also strongly linked to other mental health issues such as despair, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-hatred, loneliness, guilt, and sleeplessness. In addition to being more prone to participate in health-threatening behaviors including drug use, suicide, and hazardous sexual conduct, LGBT adolescents who suffer greater bullying at school also have higher rates of these behaviors [5].

With the large population base in China, the physical and mental health of LGBT students cannot be disregarded because they are frequently bullied in schools. However, studies in China have largely ignored campus bullying and its negative effects on the mental health of the entire LGBT student population, focusing instead on the high-risk sexual behaviors of gay and bisexual people, the mental health of the gay community, and heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality [6].

In addition, little literature has focused on the link between the construction of LGBT communities and helping sexual minorities to alleviate minority stress. Therefore, to ensure the healthy growth of underage sexual minorities in China, it is important to understand the current status of school bullying experienced by underage sexual minorities in China and the impact on their mental health status.

3. Analysis of the Impact of School Bullying on Underage Minority Groups in China

School bullying can cause mental health problems, behavioral problems, adaptive development problems in school, and academic problems for LGBT students. To be clear, studies have shown that sexual orientation itself does not lead to psychological abnormalities. However, students with non-heterosexual sexual orientation bear a relatively heavy psychological burden of hostility and isolation from the surrounding groups. The mental health status of non-heterosexual students is worse than that of heterosexual students, and they tend to experience multiple levels and multiple aspects of sexual and gender-related mental health problems [7-8].

Relevant studies have shown that the mental health status of non-heterosexual students in colleges and universities should be paid special attention to because the mental health status of students with diverse cultures has an important impact on their academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, negative emotions, and suicidal behavior. Combined with the ecosystem theory, the social, school, and family environment system is far more accepting of heterosexuals than that non-heterosexuals. Non-heterosexuals' fear of the system and heterosexual culture leads to non-heterosexuals often facing a hostile environment, which brings them panic and anxiety. Growing anxiety in the community about sexual orientation exposure, bullying and discrimination, infection, and the tendency of many non-heterosexual adolescents to hide their non-heterosexual identity can lead to a greater sense of fear as the fear of discovery becomes an integral part of life. Students who conceal their sexual orientation lead a life of ongoing deception. As they have no one to talk to and no emotional support, they either repress their emotions or feel inadequate. This group is already paying a disproportionately high price because to its relatively high absenteeism, dropout, depression, and suicide rates. At the same time, the experience of fear and oppression brought by social categories (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race) and interpersonal interaction processes (e.g., interpersonal discrimination) has caused many problems for non-heterosexual groups [9].

3.1. Physical Impact

LGBT people face a culture of heterosexual hegemony, gender stereotypes, stigma and prejudice against sexual orientation, and pressure for gender expression in addition to various forms of school violence and bullying that heterosexual people experience, such as physical violence like kicking, verbal/emotional violence like intimidation and shaming, sexual violence like sexual harassment, indirect bullying like isolation, and cyberbullying. Homophobia is an important cause of school

violence and bullying for LGBT people. Homophobia is defined as beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes and negative behaviours with respect to LGBT people [10].

In a research of 751 LGBT students in China, Wei Chongzheng and other professionals discovered that 40.9% had experienced verbal harassment at school, 34.6% had experienced verbal abuse, 21.9% had experienced isolation, and 6.0% had been threatened with physical violence. Not only do LGBT students experience homophobic bullying, but some heterosexual students can also experience homophobic forms of violence and bullying based on gender expression. LGBT adolescents suffered school violence and bullying at all academic levels, with verbal abuse reported at all levels at a rate of more than 30%. LGBT students from all areas reported suffering various types of bullying and violence in schools at some point, despite geographical variances in how often such incidents occur [2].

3.2. Psychological Impact

LGBT adolescents typically experience the negative effects of school violence and bullying more severely than heterosexual students do, including suicidal thoughts and depressive symptoms.

The mental health of LGBT students is concerning, as seen by their levels of anxiety and sadness, their suicide thoughts, and their self-esteem. LGBT adolescents who were subjected to homophobic bullying at school reported having more frequent suicide thoughts, less overall happiness, and more depressive symptoms. LGBT students who experience campus violence experience more severe depression and frequent thoughts than heterosexual students, and even if gay students do not directly experience homophobic violence and bullying on campus, they may still worry about being isolated as a result, which can lead to more severe anxiety and depression.

Bullying and violence in schools also affect young people over the long run. In other words, exposure to school violence as a student is strongly predictive of mental health outcomes in early adulthood (depression, self-esteem levels, and suicidal thoughts). In particular, the high-frequency group was 2.6 times more likely to report depressive symptoms in early adulthood than the low-frequency group. Stigma and marginalization of gay men as they grow up, can also predict later smoking and alcohol use [11].

LGBT adolescents who are subjected to bullying and violence at school run the risk of engaging in a number of risky behaviors, including suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, and unsafe sex. Teenagers who suffer bullying based on bias had higher rates of drug misuse and suicide attempts; the more often bullying and violence occur in schools, the more detrimental the effects. When compared to adolescents in the low-frequency group, students in the high-frequency group had 5.6 times the likelihood of attempting suicide and were more likely to engage in hazardous sex [11]. LGBT students report higher levels of alcohol and substance abuse as a result of school violence and bullying than heterosexual students.

3.3. Impacts on Campus Environment and the Society

The occurrence of school bullying can make schools realize the inadequacy of their safety precautions on the one hand and the inadequacy of sex education and proper behavior training for students on the other hand.

For society, the bullying of sexual minorities in school helps to draw more attention to the harsh living conditions that underage sexual minorities face in their daily lives. It also serves as an opportunity to let more people know what underage sexual minorities are “really like” and reduce their prejudices and stereotypes about sexual minorities.

At the same time, the school bullying cases of underage sexual minorities that attract the attention of the public can make the educational and administrative departments of the government realize the

severity of the challenges faced by underage sexual minorities and spontaneously increase their intervention and help.

4. Discussion on Ways to Reduce the Negative Impacts of School Bullying on Underage Minorities in China

4.1. Measures Schools Can Take

Increasing gender literacy training for school workers is the first thing the institution can do. According to Rankin's research, the majority of college staff and students believed that the environment on campus was homophobic, with LGBT students' impressions being worse than those of non-LGBT students' and those of students with less overt sexual orientation being the worst [12].

This phenomenon occurs because most schools lack the resources to deal with school violence and bullying. Teachers' and staff's ability to recognize, identify and deal with the problem of school violence and bullying has an important impact on the generation and solution of the problem. Therefore, the focus on this problem can be more narrowly focused on the training of teachers and other personnel, and it has a significant impact on the prevention and intervention of bullying and violence in schools.

Additionally, actions schools should take care to strengthen psychological counselling services in schools: Data from a questionnaire survey showed that nearly 90% of respondents' current schools provided psychological counselling services, but less than 10% of respondents had sought relevant help from a psychological counselling teacher. At the same time, more than 47% of respondents think that the consultation process is friendly and has produced substantial help to them, while 50% of respondents think that although the consultation process is friendly, it has not produced substantial help to them [13]. To increase the role of school psychological counselling services in the phenomenon of bullying, the developers should therefore begin by focusing on improving the professional quality of psychological counsellors, safeguarding the privacy of students receiving psychological counselling services, and increasing public awareness of these services.

Last but not least, by establishing and improving the campus management system of gender diversity and inclusiveness, the school can create a gender-friendly atmosphere. To be specific, in every stage of education, the teaching management should abandon gender bias and integrate the concept of multi-gender equality. Respect the human dignity and gender differences of gender minorities, and strive to create a friendly atmosphere of gender equality; In the process of admission or promotion, it shall not make unreasonable discrimination against gender minority students based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, such as denying them the opportunity to take part in the admission examination, raising the admission standards for gender minority groups or making unfair evaluations.

In daily campus management, the shackles of binary gender opposition and isolation should also be broken. For example, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes should be avoided in school uniform design and hairstyle dress code, and the strict distinction between genders should be avoided in the seating arrangement, campus dining, or other campus management activities. Sexual minorities should be treated equally in development opportunities.

In terms of school suspensions and dropouts, gender minorities should be ensured to be treated fairly and should not be deprived of equal access to education and educational resources by making decisions based solely on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression [13].

4.2. What Families Can Do to Help

When homophobic values are present in the family, it is very easy to alienate, reject or even expel non-heterosexuals. Adolescent students not only develop early trust, acceptance, and identity in their

families; Also, they must rely on their family for financial, social, and emotional support, particularly their parents. Yet, when adolescent students worry that being non-heterosexual may embarrass their family, it not only causes shame within the group but also causes cognitive dissonance over failing to live up to their parents' expectations. As most non-heterosexual individuals do not share their parents' sexual preferences, they are more likely to face discrimination from their families. This group also struggles to get assistance from family members during interpersonal interactions, which leads to frequent isolation from other family members and frequent feelings of extreme loneliness. Research shows that nearly a third of non-heterosexual students have no family support and have experienced homelessness during a psychological crisis. Homelessness rates were higher for those who revealed their sexuality to their parents and were rejected [14].

Therefore, it is particularly important to mobilize family participation in sex and gender equality education to form good public opinion and attitudes in the whole society. Part of the gender equality education puzzle lies not in schools but in the families of those educated and in society at large. At present, the subject of sex and gender equality education is public actors such as schools and the government, and the family does not play a real role in education. For many families, sex and gender equality education is often "mating education", and "talk about sex change" is the norm in the family environment; it is very important to awaken the family's auxiliary role in sex and gender equality education or make the family no longer become a hindrance factor in sex and gender equality education [13]. Therefore, it is suggested that parents should actively pay attention to the loneliness of students in the family, create a more supportive intimate relationship for children, cope with the problems of the family together, and reduce the loneliness of students; At the same time, it is necessary to attach importance to students' sexual orientation and keep an open attitude towards non-heterosexuals to avoid the isolation and marginalization of students.

4.3. Actions the Society Can Take

To begin with, what society can do as an external force is to help schools construct a gender perspective on bullying governance. That is, education legislation should incorporate a gender perspective and explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression at the education stage. More specifically, studies have identified sexual minority students as vulnerable to various forms of gender-based school violence. However, in the current school bullying governance system, gender factors are completely lacking. There has not been a direct confrontation with or focus on the issue of school bullying based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as well [13]. Therefore, the current measures to deal with this phenomenon are difficult to achieve real results. Therefore, relevant social departments should clarify the concept of gender violence on campus in the process of relevant legislation and policy formulation and formulate corresponding rules, regulations, and measures according to the manifestations and typical characteristics of gender violence on campus.

Secondly, society should comprehensively promote legislation on school bullying. At present, there is no specific law on the governance of school violence and bullying. There are only two normative documents, the Guidance on Preventing and Treating Bullying and Violence among Primary and Middle School Students and the Plan to Strengthen Comprehensive Governance of Bullying among Primary and Middle School Students, issued together by the Minister of Education and other departments exist. At local level, only the Tianjin Municipal People's Congress Standing Committee passed the Regulations on Preventing and Controlling School Bullying in 2018. In general, there is a lack of legal guidelines and procedural norms for the management of school bullying. Therefore, special laws should be formulated in this regard to provide an effective basis and basic guidance for the establishment of the legal policy system of school bullying governance.

5. Conclusions

The bullying suffered by underage sexual minorities has a short and long-term negative impact on the physical and mental health of minors. In addition, school bullying also provides a wake-up call and an opportunity for improvement in school and social development.

As for how to reduce the negative impact of bullying on underage sexual minorities, we should strengthen safety precautions, strengthen gender knowledge training for faculty and staff, and strengthen psychological counselling services in schools. Families should participate in gender equality education so that children form a correct concept of sex; society should comprehensively promote the relevant legislation of school bullying and make clear the accusations of various factors in society.

By focusing on the current situation of underage sexual minorities suffering from bullying and how to reduce the negative impact of bullying on them, firstly, it is advantageous to take action to stop bullying and violence in schools, to support LGBT students' mental health and adaptive development, and to foster the principles of equality and respect for heterosexual students. Because they may engage in violence, bullying, be complicit in it, or support LGBT students, heterosexual students will gain when the campus climate is changed and enriched as a whole; Second, because school climate plays an important role in moderating the relationship between school violence and bullying and student development, the issue is also conducive to improving school climate. In addition, by drawing the public's attention to the impact of bullying on underage sexual minorities in schools and their relationships, more people can help them and pay attention to the harsh social situation they are facing. Last but not least, this paper also aims to inform policymaking and make more specific measures to protect sexual minorities against school bullying. Due to the limitation of time and space, this paper does not use first-hand data, such as questionnaire writing and one-to-one interview, as result-oriented data support. Therefore, the results obtained in this paper are insufficient in terms of effectiveness and accuracy.

Concerning the prospects for the future development of research on underage sexual minorities, it is better to use first-hand data when time is sufficient and conditions permit. On the one hand, this promotes the accuracy of the research results; on the other hand, when the subjects fill in the questionnaire or are interviewed, they can realize that as a minority group, they are being paid more attention by more people. In addition, it is hoped that more scholars will not only analyze the severe living conditions and challenges faced by minority groups but pay more attention to how to help minority groups relieve the minority pressure they face from a practical perspective. Thus, more people should realize that the protection of minority rights and interests is as important as the rights of the majority group of people, and their existence should not be ignored or even belittled.

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