

Research Brief

Experiences of bullying in schools: A survey among sexual/gender minority youth in Tamil Nadu

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SUMMARY

1. In India, there is paucity of research on bullying faced by students based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Research evidence on bullying is crucial to make schools safe and inclusive for all students.
2. This research brief presents the findings from a mixed methods study conducted among sexual/gender minority youth to document the various forms and extent of SOGI-related bullying, and responses to bullying by school authorities.
3. Forms of bullying varied according to grade levels – primary, middle/high school or higher secondary. Physical harassment was reported high among middle/high school (60%) and higher secondary (50%) students while sexual harassment was reported high when the participants were primary school students (43%).
4. Only 18% said that they had reported incidents of bullying to school authorities, to which authorities responded as follows: 29% were asked to change their perceived feminine mannerism/behaviour to avoid being bullied and 49% were asked to ignore the incidents. Only 53%¹ of those who had complained reported that authorities took action against the persons who bullied them.
5. About one-third (33.2%) reported that bullying played a key role in discontinuing school. More than three-fifths (63%) reported lowered academic performance while 53% reported having skipped classes.
6. Given the high prevalence and severity of SOGI-related bullying in schools, measures to prevent and mitigate bullying include: implementing anti-bullying policies and establishing monitoring mechanisms, creation of awareness among students and training of teachers on diversity in gender and sexuality, development of confidential and supportive channels for reporting bullying, and providing supportive counselling services for victims of bullying.

¹The percentages will not add to 100% because of multiple responses to this question on how school authorities responded.



INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions need to be safe for all students. Schools that are not safe or inclusive violate the right to education as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and contravene the Convention against Discrimination in Education. Both in developed² and developing countries (e.g., Thailand³), students who are perceived to be sexual/gender minorities face disproportionately higher levels of bullying. In India, there is near lack of research on bullying faced by students who are targeted based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation⁴ or gender identity (SOGI). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence show that sexual/gender minority youth in India are bullied in schools.

Violence and bullying in schools act as major barriers to learning and deny a child's fundamental right to education in a safe environment. Furthermore, bullying leads to several negative consequences for victims, which include psychological consequences such as depression and anxiety, academic consequences in terms of lowered academic performance and school drop-out rates, and social consequences in terms of loneliness and lack of support⁵. These highlight the importance of why policymakers and officials of education and public health departments should provide adequate attention to SOGI-related bullying at schools.

Ensuring all children and young people have access to safe, inclusive, health-promoting learning environments is a strategic priority for UNESCO and it works towards eliminating school violence and bullying, including SOGI-related bullying. In this context, UNESCO New Delhi office supported 'Sahodaran', a community-based organisation in Chennai, to conduct a study on bullying, harassment, stigma and discrimination faced by students based on their sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. The objectives of this study were: 1) to broaden awareness and understanding of SOGI-related bullying in educational institutions and document the support mechanisms available; 2) to facilitate advocacy efforts for evidence-informed policies, programmes and resource allocations to prevent and address SOGI-related bullying at schools.

² Earnshaw et al (2016). Bullying Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth. *Pediatr Clin North Am*, 63(6), 999-1010.

³ Mahidol University, Plan International Thailand, UNESCO Bangkok Office. (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.

⁴ Refers to sexual attraction (whether sexually attracted towards persons of opposite sex, same sex or both sexes)

⁵ Moore et al. (2017). Consequences of bullying victimisation in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *World Journal of Psychiatry*, 7(1), 60-76.

METHODS

Findings presented in this policy brief are drawn from a multi-site mixed methods research study commissioned by UNESCO New Delhi office (see 'Acknowledgments') and conducted in Tamil Nadu. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of C-SHaRP.

Qualitative component (n=89)

Eight focus groups (n=61) and eight in-depth interviews were conducted among sexual/gender minority youth recruited from 8 study sites⁶ in Tamil Nadu. In addition, 20 key informant interviews were conducted among school teachers and headteachers as well as officials of Tamil Nadu School Education Department. Themes were identified, and illustrative quotes were extracted.

Quantitative survey component (n=371)

A structured questionnaire was administered to 371 sexual/gender minority youth⁷ who were identified through community-based organisations (*Sahodaran* and *Thozhi*) in Chennai. It assessed prevalence and forms of SOGI-related bullying in schools, effects of bullying, responses to bullying by victims and school management and strategies to overcome SOGI-related bullying in schools. Data were analysed using a statistical software – SPSS-21.

KEY FINDINGS

Sociodemographic characteristics

Sexual/gender minority participants were purposefully selected to be younger (mean age of 20 and 22 years, respectively) so that the prevalence of SOGI-related bullying in recent years is documented. In survey (n=371), about half had completed high school or higher secondary, and one-third were college graduates. About one-fifth (22%) engaged in sex work. Three-fourths were living with parents or peers. For more details see Box 1.

BOX 1: Sociodemographic characteristics

Focus group participants (n=61)

Participants' mean age was 20.9 years (SD 1.8). A little over one-fourth (26%) had a college degree while an equal proportion (23%) reported having completed either high school or higher secondary. Nearly two-fifths (39%) reported begging as their main occupation, 26% engaged in sex work, and 15% were unemployed. Half (50%) of the participants were living with parents and 39% were living with their friends.

Survey participants (n=371)

Participants' mean age was 22.4 (SD 1.9). Fifty percent had completed high school or higher secondary and one-third (32%) had completed a bachelor degree or higher. About three-fourths (77%) had studied in government schools and 22% in private schools. About one-third (32.6%) identified as thirunangai⁸ or transgender, and the rest as same-sex attracted males (kothi, gay, bisexual or double-decker⁹). Twenty-eight percent reported working in private companies, 22% engaged in sex work and 19.7% reported being in '*mangti*' (asking money from shops). The median monthly income of the participants was INR 10000 (range: 3000 to 40000). Forty-five percent were living with their parents, 32% with friends and 16% were living alone.

In-depth interviews (n=8)

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted among sexual/gender minority youth from 8 sites in Tamil Nadu.

Stakeholder interviews (n=20)

Twenty key informant in-depth interviews were conducted among 16 government and private school teachers, 2 school principals and 2 officials of Tamil Nadu School Education Department.

⁶ Chennai, Vellore, Salem, Tanjavur, Tirunelveli, Coimbatore, Trichy and Madurai.

⁷ Even though the survey was not conducted among students who are currently studying, the method of using recollections of bullying at schools by LGBT youth has been used in other countries as well. Example: Rivers, I. (2004). Recollections of bullying at school and their long-term implications for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *Crisis*, 25(4), 169-175.

⁸ In Tamil Nadu, 'thirunangai' is the preferred indigenous term for transgender woman (a person born as a male but who identify as a woman or third gender).

⁹ Kothi = same-sex attracted feminine males; Panthi = masculine males who are partners of kothis/thirunangai; double-decker = those same-sex attracted males who play both insertive and receptive roles; gay = identity used by certain same-sex attracted males who are usually from middle and upper socioeconomic class.

Prevalence and forms of bullying

Almost all survey participants reported having experienced harassment in school because of their gender expression or perceived sexual orientation. Forms of bullying varied according to grade levels – *primary, middle/high school or higher secondary* (See Diagram 1). More than two-fifths (43%) of participants reported having experienced sexual harassment in primary school when compared with higher secondary (24%) or middle/high school (14%). Similarly, when compared with primary school (27%), physical

harassment was relatively high when participants were in middle/high school (60%) or higher secondary (50%). Almost an equal proportion of participants reported having experienced verbal harassment in primary (31%), middle/high school (26%) or higher secondary (26%).

Further details of the various forms and frequency of bullying (verbal/non-verbal, physical, sexual and cyber/social bullying) are summarized in Diagram 2. Low/medium frequency bullying refers to having experienced bullying less than once a month and high frequency bullying refers to at least once a week to once a month.

FIGURE 1: Various Forms of Harassment Experienced in Schools by Survey Participants

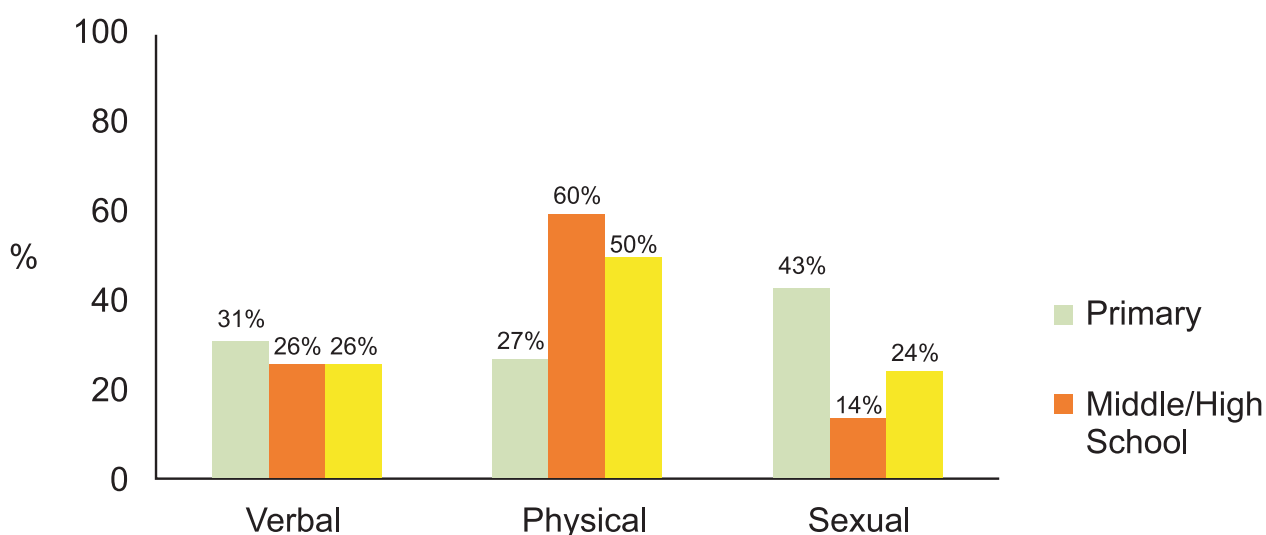
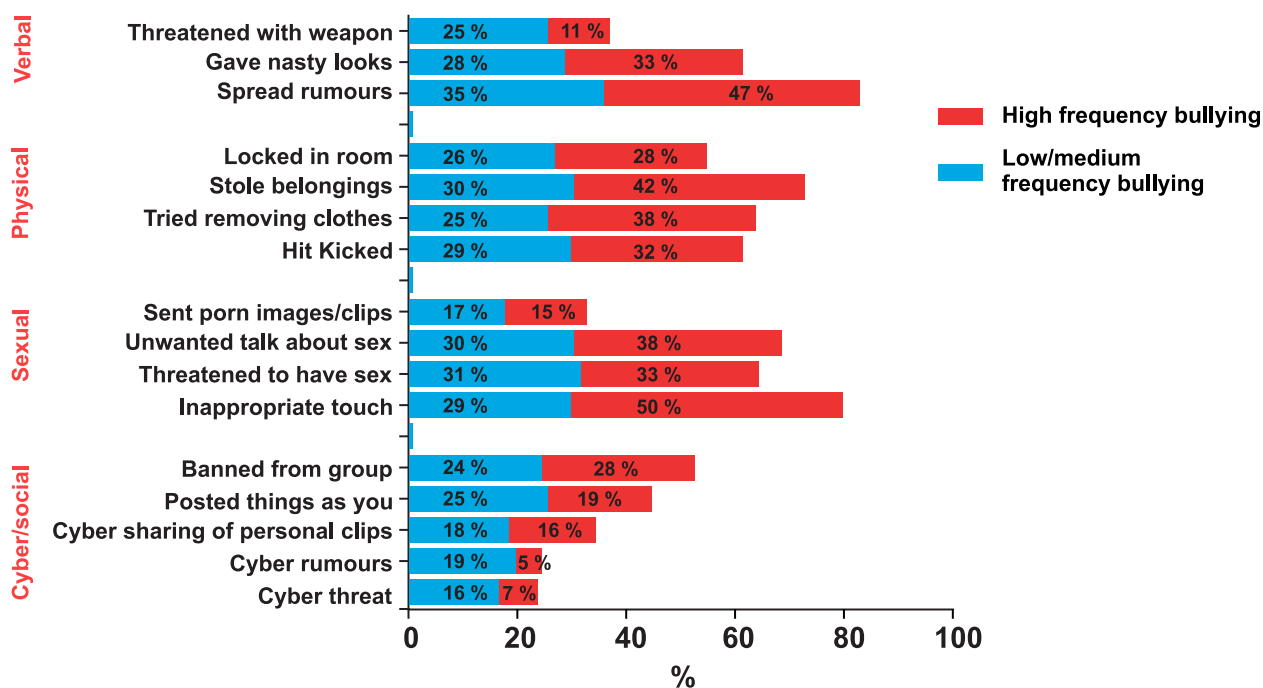


FIGURE 2: Forms and Frequency of Bullying Experienced in Schools by Survey Participants



“Teasing and harassment of feminine-appearing boys are the norms in schools and colleges. Transgender people are seen only as sexual objects and not as ‘people’ who have feelings”. (FG, Madurai)

“We are subjected to lots of trouble for not following how a person born as a boy should behave. No one understand us. They simply blame us”. (A trans person, FG, Tirunelveli)

“I could not even complete 7th standard. When teacher taught lesson in class, boys sitting behind me used to prick me with compass and needles”. (FG, Tirunelveli).

“I used to feel really very bad when others teased me with derogatory terms such as ‘ussu’ or ‘ombodhu’. I did not feel like going to school. I discontinued going to school and went to work along with my mother”. (FG, Madurai).

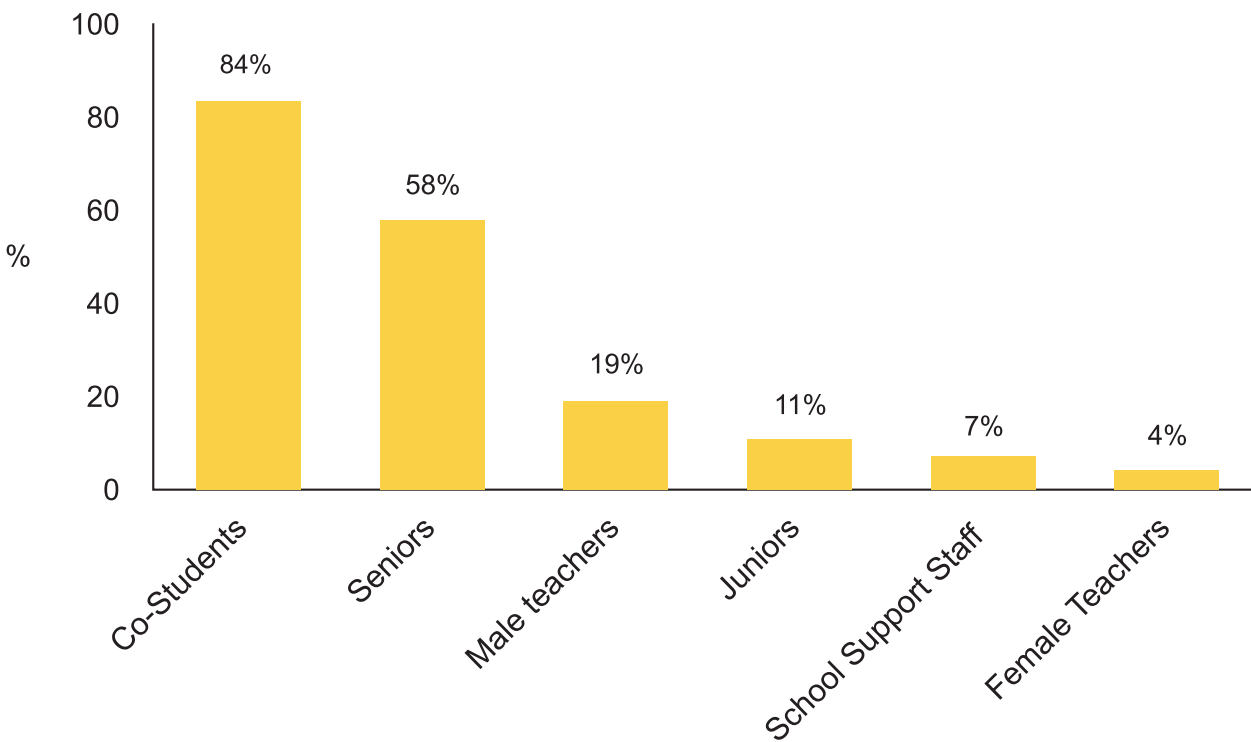
Perpetrators of bullying

More than three-fourths (84%) of participants reported being bullied by their co-students; 58% were bullied by their school seniors; 19% by male school teachers; and 11% by their school juniors (See Diagram 3).

A majority of focus group participants who reported having experienced bullying or victimisation were more frequently harassed by male co-students as compared to female co-students or teachers.

“It was very hard to study in schools, because of other boys. They kept teasing us always. They teased us when we talked, they teased about our feminine behaviour...we could not concentrate on our studies”. (FG, Chennai)

FIGURE 3: Participants’ responses to who bullied them



Common settings of bullying in schools

Bullying of sexual/gender-minority youth occurred in a variety of settings such as classroom, school toilets, school terrace and school playground. More than two-third (67%) of gender non-confirming youth are bullied in classroom, three-fifths (60%) are bullied in school toilets and one-third in school terrace (35%) or school playground (32%) (See Diagram 4).

“We cannot go to the bathroom during recess. We have to either go to bathroom before everyone or after everyone. Since I used to walk curling my hips a gang of boys [in higher secondary school] forcefully took me to the bathroom and forced me to have sex”. (FG, Tirunelveli)

“I avoided using toilets in my school because of fear or being tortured by other boys. I had a friend who stayed near my school. I used to go to his home and use their toilet. We need separate toilets in school”. (FG, a trans woman, Vellore)

FIGURE 4: Bullying Hotspots in Schools

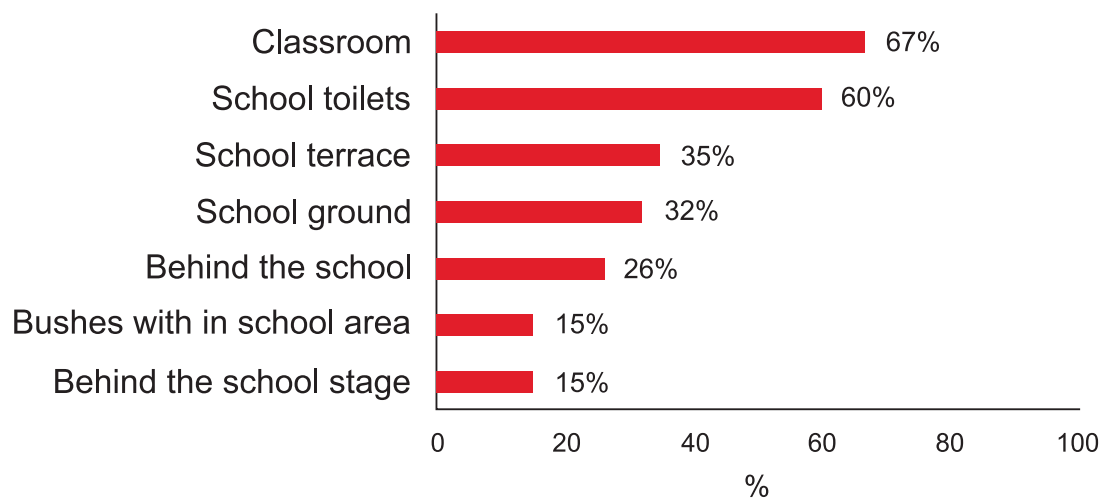
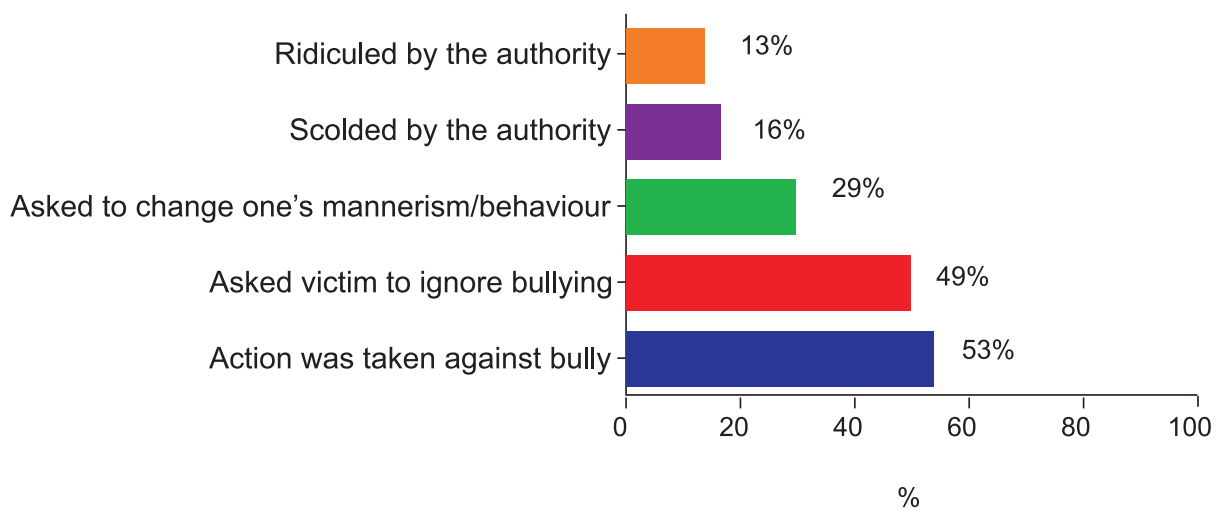


FIGURE 5: Actions Taken by School Authorities after Students Reported Bullying



¹⁰ The percentage will not add to 100% because of multiple responses for this item.

¹¹ Same as the previous footnote.

Co-students' responses to bullying in schools

Both quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that students who witnessed incidents of bullying acted as bystanders and did not want to intervene. More than half (53%) of the survey participants reported that co-students acted as bystanders and watched them being bullied, and only one-fourth (25%) reported that others intervened and helped them.

Many focus group participants acknowledged that only a handful of male co-students were involved in bullying while other students remained as bystanders. If other students tried to intervene they were also stigmatized or cornered by the perpetrators. For example, a focus group participant mentioned:

“If anyone try to support us, they will be cornered. They will stigmatize them by asking whether they are our husbands. So, no one will come forward to support us. Even if someone really wanted to help us, those who bully would tease and harass them”. (FG, Vellore)

Victims' responses to bullying

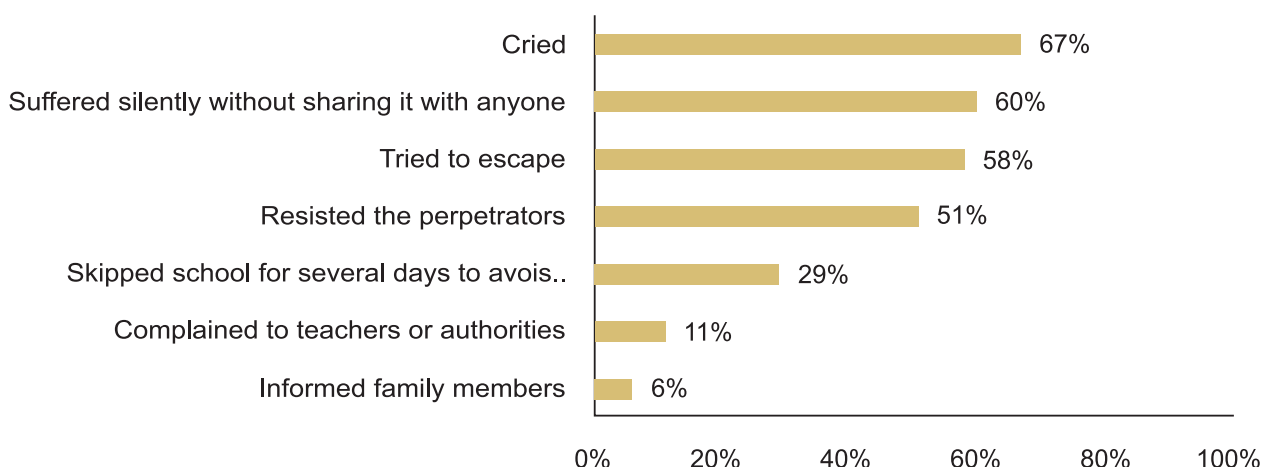
Of total sample, 18% reported bullying incidents to school authorities, 27% reported bullying to their friends, and 8% reported to their parents. Among those who reported about the incident to school authorities (n=65/371), 69% said that the school authorities acted on their complaints. The actions taken by authorities included: 1) asked participants to change their feminine mannerisms to avoid being bullied (29%); 2) asked participants to ignore the incident (49%); and 3) took action against the person who bullied them (53%¹⁰) (See Diagram 5). Parents responded to the complaints by asking their children to change their mannerisms/behaviour (61%) or ignore the incident (44%¹¹).

Many participants said that when they were subjected to bullying they either cried (67%) or suffered silently without sharing it with anyone (60%). However, a little over half (51%) resisted perpetrators' actions. About one-fourth (29%) of participants simply skipped school for several days to avoid further problems (See Diagram 6).

Focus group findings revealed that fear of negative repercussions prevented many gender-variant youth from reporting the instances of bullying to school authorities (teachers/school management) or parents.

Participants reported that lack of awareness about sexuality or gender issues among teachers and school management staff was a major barrier in effectively addressing SOGI-related bullying in

FIGURE 6: Victims' Responses to Bullying



schools. Some school teachers did not perceive gender-variant students as victims of bullying, but were abusive towards them.

When incidents of bullying were reported to teachers or school management their actions were mostly corrective in nature: teachers either punished the perpetrators for doing so or simply blamed the students being bullied for exhibiting behaviour that put them into trouble.

“All teachers liked me except Maths teacher. He used to beat [with a stick] other students on their hands but when it comes to me he would beat me on my back. I got angry and asked him why he was doing like that. He simply said that he hated seeing creatures like me as I was feminine-looking and cursed the person who gave admission for me”. (FG, Tanjavur)

“Four or five students in my class used to bully and tease me. I made a complaint to my sir [class teacher]. He took it seriously and informed the boys (perpetrators) that they will not get hall tickets if they did not stop bullying me”. (FG, Tirunelveli)

Consequences of bullying

Given the severity of victimisation, nearly three-fourth of participants reported that they had reduced social interactions with co-students (73%); suffered from anxiety and depression (70%); and lost concentration in studies (70%). Similarly, more than three-fifths (63%) of participants reported lowered academic performance while a little over half (53%) reported having skipped classes (See

Diagram 7). About one-third (33.2%) reported that bullying played a key role in discontinuing school.

In focus groups too, participants’ narratives indicated that many gender-variant youth who experienced bullying or victimisation in school lost interest and/or performed poorly in studies, skipped classes, and were physically, emotionally or socially distressed.

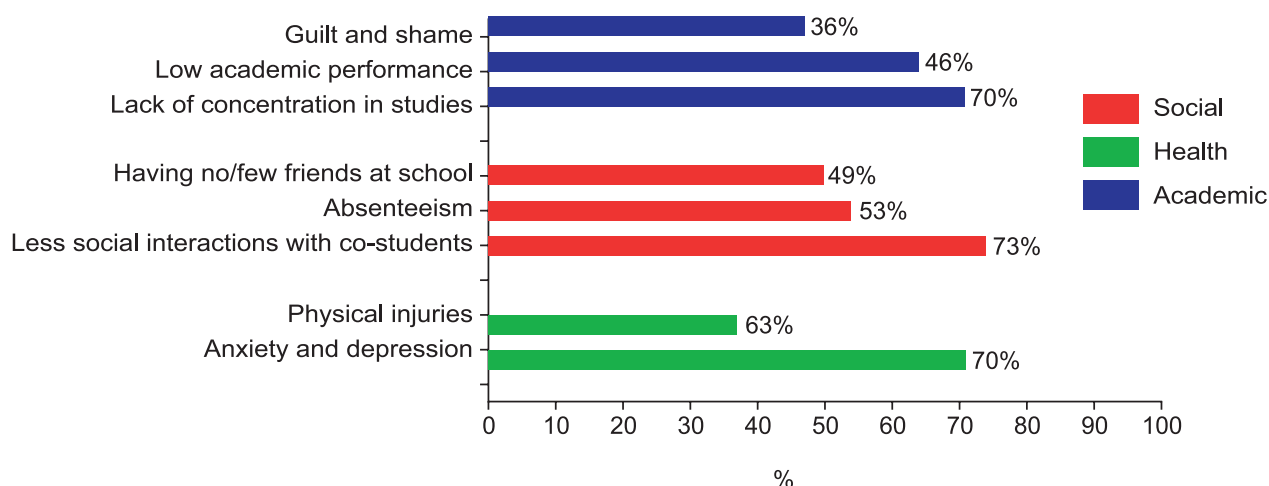
Participants reported that negative school life experiences forced them to discontinue their education.

For example, a focus group trans participant explained her reason for not going to college:

“They kept teasing me, called me using derogatory term like ‘ombodhu’ [literally means ‘nine’]. They also prevented my friends from talking to me. They threatened others saying that if they spoke to me they would also become like me. I was left alone. I decided not to go to college because I thought teasing will be more in colleges...I was afraid of harassment and loneliness”. (FG, Tanjavur).

Constant worry about when they will be victimised again and feeling bad after victimisation affected concentration in studies and consequently negatively affected academic performance. Gender-variant youth not only encountered problems in schools but also from their families. Fear of bringing shame to their family prevented many gender-variant youth to downplay their gender expression or avoid reporting incidents of bullying to parents.

FIGURE 7: Consequences of Bullying



School authorities' responses to bullying

As we purposefully selected those teachers and management staff who were willing to be interviewed for this study, they proactively suggested several measures to effectively address SOGI-related bullying in schools. For example, a teacher emphasized the importance of including a section on transgender issues in B.Ed. syllabus:

"I personally feel that many school teachers may not be aware of transgender. We need to include a section about transgender in B.Ed. syllabus so that teachers will be aware and if they come to meet any such students in their career they would be knowledgeable enough to handle them". (Female private school teacher-1, Chennai).

Another teacher narrated how she acted as a protective agent when she witnessed the incident of bullying:

"I called the students who were making fun [of a gender-variant male student] and told them that they [feminine male students] are also creatures of God. I asked the bullies to treat them well....like how they behave with other friends". (Female private school teacher-2, Chennai).

Although the authorities at the education department seemed to be interested in bringing supportive policies or programmes, they cited lack of documented evidence on SOGI-related bullying to act on this issue. This was evident from the discussion with an official of School Education Department in Tamil Nadu, who said:

"I haven't heard about any incidents of bullying in schools. None of the schools have reported about any such activities. I assume that teachers will not be indulging in any such activities. If we happen to get information regarding any such issues, we will take necessary action".

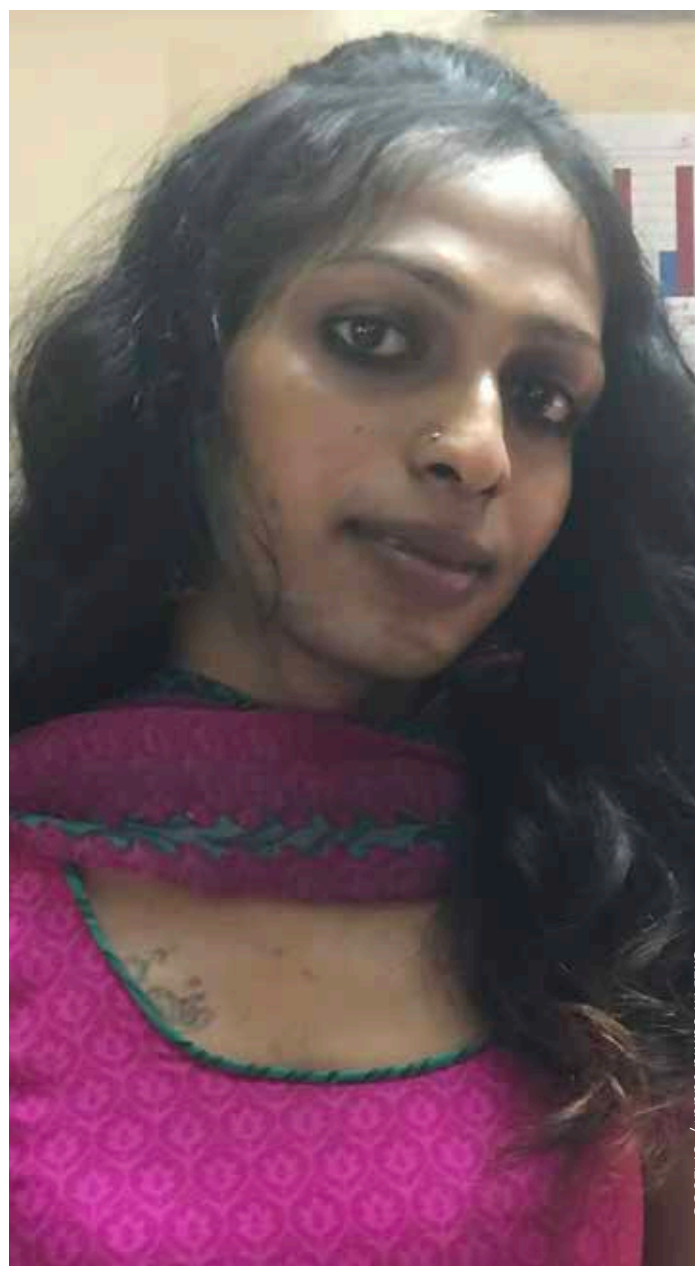
Suggestions to address bullying

Participants suggested a variety of measures to effectively prevent SOGI-related bullying in schools. More than three-fourths (83%) suggested organizing awareness and capacity building workshops on gender and sexuality for school authorities (90%), students (89%), and parents (88%). Similarly, majority stressed the importance of providing sex education in schools (86%) and favoured punitive measures against bullying in schools (90%).

Participants provided recommendations that can be implemented at several levels. For example, at the policy-level, both focus group participants and school teachers suggested that the school education department should develop strategies to introduce the concept of diversity in gender and sexuality in the training curriculum of teachers as well as organising periodic trainings/workshops on gender/sexuality diversity. Teachers and school management staff opined that such trainings would not only help them to understand gender diversity but also will clarify any myths about sexuality and gender diversity.

"I personally feel that teachers should first understand them [understand about gender-variant youth]. We need to organize sensitization meetings and workshops for teachers. Children learn a lot from their teachers". (A govt. school teacher, Chennai).

"As a principal of a school, I would take steps to organize workshops for my staff and students about transgender". (Principal, Private School, Chennai).



To create a safe and inclusive school environment for all students, the following administrative and policy measures need to be taken by the school management, teachers, parents and policymakers. Creation of a safe school environment will enable all students to learn, develop and achieve their full potential.

For Policymakers and Education Department Officials

1. Ensure that school curricula include age-appropriate sexual health information including sexual and gender diversities, and educate students to accept and respect all students regardless of perceived gender identity or sexuality.
2. Ensure that policies and programs on prevention of school-based violence explicitly includes prevention of SOGI-related bullying against students.
3. Initiate periodic school-based research studies at district/state levels to better understand the prevalence and forms of bullying, including SOGI-related bullying. Findings from these studies will help in designing programs that explicitly address SOGI-related bullying in schools and to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions.
4. Initiate a helpline to address any kind of bullying, including SOGI-related bullying, in educational institutions.
5. Include a curriculum on sexuality and gender diversity in pre-service and in-service teacher training courses/programmes to enable them to be more sensitive towards sexual/gender minority youth and to competently address SOGI-related bullying.

For School Management

1. Develop anti-bullying policies that includes language that explicitly condemn all forms of bullying (including cyberbullying) based on a student's perceived gender expression, gender identity or sexual orientation. The policy can also include what measures will be taken against perpetrators of bullying.
2. Ensure that teachers and school management are aware of SOGI-related bullying and its negative consequences to students (awareness), know how to identify students who are being bullied (identification), and provide explicit guidelines on how they can intervene situations when they witness bullying or when others report bullying (intervention).
3. Conduct gender/sexuality diversity workshops for teachers, school management and senior level students to promote acceptance of students of all genders and sexualities.
4. Ensure adequate monitoring mechanisms are in place, including surveillance of places where bullying is commonly reported to occur (such as student toilets, playgrounds, and hostels).
5. Educate students about anti-bullying policies and to whom (e.g., a designated supportive teacher or school counsellor) one should report if they are victims of bullying or have witnessed bullying. Ensure confidentiality of people who report bullying.
6. Ensure that within the school campus, adequate counselling and health services are available to victims and perpetrators of bullying, and supportive counselling services are available to parents of gender-variant children.
7. Involve parents of school students (e.g., through Parents-Teachers Associations) through workshops or school functions in which they understand about diversity in human sexuality and gender identity, how they can monitor and respond if their child is a bullying victim or perpetrator, and how they can support their gender-variant children.

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Informed consent was obtained from all individuals whose photos appear in this publication. Unless otherwise stated, the appearance of individuals in this publication gives no indication of their HIV or key population status.



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