

# **GENDER, SEXUALITY AND BULLYING IN SCHOOLS**

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## **GENDER, SEXUALITY AND BULLYING IN SCHOOLS**

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Among the main factors involved in practices commonly known as bullying are gender and sexuality. Over time, these categories of social differentiation have become more central to scholarship on bullying in schools. As with bullying in general, abusive behaviors based on a person's gender or sexuality encompass multiple forms of intentional and repeated negative actions perpetrated by and towards children with a range of gender and sexual identities. From overt forms of violence, such as beating, threatening, name-calling, malicious teasing or taunting, to indirect practices of rejection and humiliation, such as rumor-spreading, social isolation, group exclusion, and friendship manipulation, gender-based bullying, as general school bullying, happens on a continuum of severity in the context of "asymmetrical power relations" (Olweus, 1993).

As the Internet and digital technologies entered the daily lives of children and youth, the features or affordances of new tools and platforms for communication gave way to emergent modalities of technology-based bullying. Technology-facilitated harmful behaviors coexist with traditional, face-to-face violence and are usually described as cyberbullying. Face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying both occur in sociocultural environments in which cross-cutting gender subordination is historically rooted. What distinguishes sexist, homophobic or transphobic bullying from general online or offline bullying is the victims' role in actual or perceived nonconformity regarding gender or sexuality. Victims of gender-based bullying are targeted for their belonging to disadvantaged and, often, marginalized groups rather than for their mere individual traits and characteristics. Notably, as much research suggests (e.g. Meyer, 2009), emphasizing the gendered dimensions of bullying in peer context by framing the phenomenon in these terms has the potential to help raise awareness of different and interrelated axes of privilege and inequality in school communities and of how they overlap with endemic barriers to social justice. When school-based strategies to prevent harmful behaviors between peers bring to the fore this framework, young people, the school community and society as a whole benefit.

### **Gender and sexuality in cultural patterns**

Gender is related to social and cultural representations of maleness and femaleness, while sex refers to a person's biological or anatomical identity as male or female. The concept became central to feminist theorizing and to LGBTQ+ and women's rights movements of the 1960s, which have drawn attention to gender and sexuality motivated violence. The premise that the sex-gender system is embedded in patriarchal social relations that constantly produce conformity to social expectations, rather than biology, rendered visible gender and sexuality as sites of struggle. From this political-economic stand of the 1960s and 1970s to the identity-based conceptions that flourished in the following decades, gender has shifted to occupy the domain of culture and representation. Still, it continued to be seen as structuring social life and supporting gender-specific forms of injustice.

Gender injustice is firmly rooted in androcentrism, understood as a primary institutionalized pattern of cultural value. As Fraser (1997) contends, androcentrism attaches cultural value to

traits associated with masculinity while devaluing everything coded as feminine. These double-edge gender codes systemically structure social interaction by defining how we can be and how we can express ourselves and behave, shaping gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity corresponds to a person's internal sense of being either male or female, or something other or in between. A person's gender expression refers to external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as either masculine or feminine, such as appearance, dressing, and mannerisms.

Early European feminists began in the late 1700s to work to raise awareness of the legacy of the systemic gendered double standard. Historically, women were expected to occupy and play roles ascribed to their reproductive function within the private sphere, while the domain of men was in the public terrain and in the parliamentary institutions. Traditional gender roles and behavioral norms have always protected this organizing principle of collective life. The last decades of the 20th century saw laws in Western countries abandoning conceptions of women as chattel or possessions of their fathers and husbands with contingent access to a limited set of rights. However, the dominant cultural accounts of distinctly gendered roles persist, with sexism and gender stereotyping excluding and marginalizing those that violate the androcentric order.

Under the androcentric cultural order, women and girls suffer gender-specific forms of status subordination, including sexual violence, sexual harassment, social discrimination, trivializing, and objectifying representations. Likewise, men and boys who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), understood as the standard of behavior, are subjected to ridicule and disparaging stereotypical depictions. Non-conformed boys, who appear not to be strong, virile, competitive, and aggressive, are frequently depreciated and marginalized as embodying what has been considered subaltern masculinities. Androcentric order also explains why the meanings and boundaries of gender and sexuality are regularly constructed through a heteronormative lens. Men and women, and boys and girls who are perceived to deviate from appropriate gender expectations, are routinely seen as gay or lesbian regardless of their actual sexual orientation. Homophobic and transphobic discrimination – the fear and intolerance toward transgender and/or gender-atypical people – are rooted in the same system of status subordination to which women and girls have been subjected over time: the feminine is inferior to the masculine.

Mainstream media, in particular, were always a central location for the reproduction of inequality, despite their potential to offer unbounded opportunities for publics to feel included.. Even when mediated identity imaginaries became more diverse and fluid, the media continued to reify gender as a status differentiation. As shown by critical media research, men's and boys' and women's and girls's bodies are most often coded as a duality. While men and boys are depicted as powerful and agentic subjects, women and girls are represented as passive objects linked to the body through their traditionally reproductive function. Female characters often appear either as good, passive sexual objects or deviant, threatening and bad when expressing their own sexual desire, teaching girls that they are valued in terms of their sexual desirability and that their own desire makes them vulnerable. In the past decades, girls have also been portrayed as "post-feminist subjects", for whom undergoing strict diets or being submitted to plastic surgeries means having free choice or whose sexy bodies are empowering insofar as they help fulfil what in Gill's (2017) and other feminist analyses is understood as neoliberal hegemonic goals. They are also encouraged to believe that engaging in typical masculine behaviours is a way of emancipation. For their part, male (hetero)sexuality is portrayed as natural, relentless, and aggressive. It is also bounded by the limits of women's consent. This enlightens why men and boys who adopt or exhibit traditional feminine attributes such as soft voices, emotions, limp wrists, and swaying hips are frequently depicted as gay by mainstream representations. As mediated femininity,

mediated masculinity remains limited and contingent. Yet, both play an important role in shaping everyday constructions of gender and sexuality and in justifying the punishment for those who do not conform to the acceptable frame.

This double-edge gender has overshadowed that social identities are intricately intertwined and relational. Gender and sexuality interact with each other and with race, class, age, religion or disability, from which they cannot be separated. They are all rooted in contexts of privilege and oppression, which work together to form an individual's sense of self.

### **Gender and sexuality in research on bullying**

The role of gender in the prevalence of school bullying began to be acknowledged as a matter of sex differentiation. After the appearance of the first studies in the 1970s in Northern Europe, large-scale surveys focusing on the Western context began to uncover the complex reality of bullies's and victims's experiences and the role of gender and cross-gender in framing experiences of bullying (e.g. Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993). Although the first studies focusing on the phenomenon vary according to the methodological strategies adopted and the specific environments to which they relate, some trends can be found among them. Evidence documents that boys are more likely than girls to bully and be victims of overt forms of bullying, such as physical abuse. Covert offences, like rumour-spreading and friendship manipulation, appear as behaviors typical suffered by girls, primarily perpetrated by other girls. Boys mostly bully other boys, whereas girls are usually targets of both boys and other girls. When boys are bullied by girls, they most often suffer covert bullying, as with girls's victimization by other girls, which is mainly practised through indirect or relational aggression. Cross-gender physical bullying seems to be relatively scarce (Nansel et al., 2001). Interestingly, the portrayal of the "mean girl" figure employing direct aggression toward boys or other girls has become a focus of mainstream media. Physical attacks perpetrated by girls tend to be overdramatized, teaching the public that violent girls are transgressing both social rules and gender norms. On the contrary, girls' covert offences may be underrepresented in media and popular culture's imaginaries because, within the patriarchal frame, these behaviors are more expected from females and, hence, are lesser interesting.

As the framework of intersectionality pushed scholars to focus on the interplay between gender and sexuality, bullying began to be acknowledged as particularly prevalent in the lives of youth belonging to sexual minorities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth (or those perceived as such) stood at higher risk of being bullied and suffered increased insecurity, social exclusion, isolation and stigmatization. Hence, individual students who are targets of homophobic or transphobic bullying seem to be at greater risk of experiencing psychological, academic, and health issues.

Despite some variations in studies on this issue, some trends reflect the nature of the hostile school climate to LGBTQ youth. As shown by Kosciw and colleagues (2010), who examined the experiences of LGBT students with regard to indicators of US school climate, males and transgender students report more sexuality-based bullying than females. Negative remarks toward students not acting "masculine enough" seem to be more common than remarks about students not acting "feminine enough". This suggests more pressure on boys to conform to hegemonic identity patterns than on girls to behave like girls. Also, according to the same study, sexuality-based bullying is more significant to White students than to Black/African American and Asia/Pacific Islander students, who are less likely to report being harassed or feeling unsafe for their sexual orientation or gender expression. Furthermore, across groups, students from small US towns and rural areas experience higher levels of victimization than students from other types of communities.

Overall, the openness about one's identity as LGBTQ is associated with increased bullying victimization. LGBTQ youth seem to experience homophobic name-calling long before early adolescence. Typically, homophobic bullying intensifies as children grow older, become more aware of their identity, and are more sexually active. As young people are coming out earlier in life, bullying at young school age appears to be on the rise. Still, homophobic bullying also targets students whose behavior is perceived to be different from hegemonic patterns of masculinity and femininity (Meyer, 2009). The mere fear of being considered gay or lesbian may prevent children and youth from engaging in practices as allies of sexual minorities. Research in the field documents that bystanders' intervention is essential to quickly and effectively stop bullying. However, to be placed in the heteronormative social order, young people are more likely to engage in (hetero)sexualized discourses that may include various forms of gender-motivated harmful behaviors rather than offer support to victims (Meyer, 2009). School strategies and practices focused on reducing homophobic victimization and addressing academic and health disparities among LGBTQ youth should be, then, as research suggests, particularly committed to raising awareness of the link between bullying, gender and sexuality.

### **Bullying, gender and sexuality in the digital era**

Technological advances over the past decades have offered new opportunities for sociability, including new spheres to perform and shape gender norms and sexual roles, such as websites, blogs, social networks, and mobile applications. At the same time, these platforms can be grounds for sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Its features or affordances are not neutral, and the algorithms that govern them may favour normative rationales. As digital technologies have become more popular among children and youth and transformed how they communicate and interact, increasing attention is paid to technology-facilitated interactions, as they can be a site of both emancipatory and repressive power. Overall, concerns with the dynamics of new forms of aggressive behavior within school communities alongside more traditional ones have also grown. This has set the scene for cyberbullying to attract wide attention from scholars, educators, parents, government agencies and other stakeholders as a phenomenon of technology-facilitated violence. We can find in the literature various terms, such as electronic bullying, online harassment, and Internet bullying, to name this phenomenon, whose definition is still a contested terrain. A common understanding is that cyberbullying represents the use of different types of communication technologies to persistently harm, harass, humiliate, threaten, or damage the reputation and relationships of the intended victim. New modalities of harmful behaviour occur, then, on different platforms, such as email, Internet chat rooms, social networks, and online gaming spaces. However, like traditional forms of bullying, they are embedded in long-standing stereotypes and norms around masculinity, femininity and sexuality.

Under this framework, the challenges of the so-called "always-on culture" and technology-facilitated practices are not detached from face-to-face interactions. "Sexting", for instance, was born in the digital era due to technology affordances but is profoundly marked by traditional masculine privilege and gender hierarchy. Sexting practices are usually understood as sending sexually explicit text messages or pictures through mobile phones and the Internet. Whereas they allow the sexualization and objectification of the girls that send sexy pictures of themselves, they afford boys to have easy access to girls' intimacy and bodies (Ringrose et al., 2013).

Other instances of technology-facilitated interactions are usually defined as extensions of offline practices involving unwanted, repetitive, intrusive and threatening behaviors.

Cyberharassment (that involves the sending of offensive messages through electronic devices

mostly using a person's sexuality or gender as a weapon), cyberstalking (chasing an intended victim through technology facilities), or denigration (the online spreading of information that is derogatory and untrue) are not detached from traditional harassment, stalking and damaging one's reputation. The distinct qualities of these technology-facilitated practices stem from features of the technologies themselves that most often replicate the heavily gendered system of face-to-face interactions. Among these features are the easily access to peers, the possibility for perpetrators to remain anonymous, which encourages uninhibited behaviors, and the long-lasting life of digital harm, which ensure devastating impacts for victims. Powerful gender dynamics in mediated interactions are well illustrated by evidence that younger women are more likely than men to suffer gender-based harm. In contrast, younger men are more likely to suffer sexuality-based aggressions (Henry & Powell, 2017). It is also acknowledged that technology-facilitated and face-to-face harmful behaviors can coincide. Often, bullies, victims and bystanders are implicated in cyberbullying and school-based bullying. There is, for instance, evidence that those who perpetrate offline bullying are often victims of online bullying, (Kowalski et al., 2008). Being bullied offline increases the risk of being bullied online as well, where the role of bystanders may be of little relevance. These new complexities beg for attentive interventions in combating bullying in schools. Research generally agrees that a wide-ranging, whole-school approach is necessary. Yet, focusing on gender and sexuality is rarely incorporated into school strategies to tackle bullying.

In addition to a legal framework, critical research on cyberviolence has pointed to the need for a shared commitment to digital citizenship to challenge harassment and hate based on gender, sexuality, and other axes of subordination. As Henry and Powell (2017, p. 261) contend, "such a vision can be further supported by community education and awareness-raising campaigns, state curriculum guidelines that require digital citizenship skills in primary and/or secondary education, and funding initiatives directed at enhancing the participation of marginalized groups in technology design and participation." Such an approach seems insightful in addressing cyberbullying and its offline equivalent, from which it can no longer be separated.

Adopted at the IV World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action highlighted in the 1990s the importance of mainstreaming gender in all spheres of life. Education institutions have been called to support gender equality by including gender studies in formal curricula. The Member States were encouraged to favour access to formal education and training on gender-related issues. Also seen as a key to fostering gender equality was improving access to media and technology.. Indeed, media and digital technology can play an important role in compounding inequalities while also being vehicles for systemic and positive change. Preventing and fighting online and offline bullying requires a whole-school approach. But building social justice in the school environment also begs for a holistic strategy, encompassing critical issues in contemporary society and a comprehensive focus on the gendered dynamics in play.

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