

The Influence on Sexual Minorities of School-Related Gender-Based Violence and Strategies to Respond

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Abstract. School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) seriously impacts the victim's physical and mental health, academic and employment prospects. Due to the lack of protective policies for sexual minority students in mainland China at present, the well-being of those students in China is seriously endangered by SRGBV and their physical and mental health are at great risk, by analyzing the current situation of stigmatization of sexual minority students and the harm brought to them by gender violence, this study proposes some strategies to reduce SRGBV on sexual minorities. First, the nation should set laws to protect the rights and interests of sexual minorities, and second, universities should make multifaceted efforts to reduce these violent phenomena. The violence experienced by students of sexual minorities has a crucial impact on their future physiology and psychology, and through the research, in this paper the author hope can provide suggestions for scholars who try to study related fields in the future.

Keywords: Sexual Minority; School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV); Response; Strategies.

1. Introduction

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV), refers to physical, psychological, and sexual violence that occurs in and around schools based on stereotypes and role-normative expectations of sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression [1]. Millions of adolescents and families experience SRGBV, which is pervasive around the world. There have been reports of SRGBV in every continent and nation, and China is no exception.

Sexual minority students make up a high percentage of victims of SRGBV. Because sexual minorities have long suffered from stigma, they are more likely to be discriminated against and bullied on campus. According to public reports by UNESCO, in college, a sizable portion of LGBT students are victims of homophobic and transphobic violence. Statistics from some countries show that violence on campuses affects sexual minority students more frequently than it does heterosexual students. This type of SRGBV on sexual minorities is known as homophobic violence, which refers to violence based on irrational fears about sexual desire between people of the same sex and the existence of sexuality [2]. These violent phenomena have always existed, but have long been ignored or even generally accepted [2]. This generalization of homophobic violence makes sexual minority students' physical and mental health at greater risk.

In response to SRGBV, many countries and their universities have taken measures to protect sexual minority students by enacting laws and related policies. Since the Gender Equality Education Act was amended in 2004 in Taiwan, China. To comply with the law and safeguard the rights of sexual minority students, many universities in Taiwan have altered their disciplinary policies. However, mainland China currently has neither relevant laws nor do mainland universities have relevant school rules to protect sexual minorities or to counter gender bullying on campus. This status quo puts sexual minorities in mainland China's universities at increased risk of discrimination and bullying, and greater physical and mental health risk, seriously damaging their well-being. All students must be able to learn in a secure and welcoming atmosphere, which is the duty of the nation and schools. For this reason, it is necessary to suggest feasible measures to the nation and schools to reduce SRGBV and protect the rights of sexual minority students.

2. The Phenomena and Impacts of SRGBV on Sexual Minorities

2.1 The Current Situation of Stigmatization of Sexual Minorities

According to the definition of contemporary psychology, stigma is the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category [3].

Structural stigma stems from social stereotypes. Limiting a group's participation in society due to structural stigma can strengthen and maintain the stigmatized group's negative associations. Lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have been associated with negative stereotypes such as promiscuity, AIDS, and mental illness because of their different sexual orientations from the mainstream. And stigma is not only reflected in the perception but also in actual social activities, people who are given full access to society are accepted as being normal, whereas those who aren't are "othered" and marginalized. When stigmatized groups are denied equality or given different treatment as a result of their identity, prejudice has occurred. Prejudice operates at both the interpersonal and institutional levels. For example, homophobia in schools and schools that do not give sexual minority students equal educational opportunities with heterosexuals.

Sexual minority students consistently live in such structural stigma, which is "societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional practices that constrain the opportunities, resources, and wellbeing for stigmatized populations" [4]. Due to the stigmatization of sexual minority students on campus, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are more susceptible to campus violence and are at higher risk for both physical and mental health problems.

2.2 Forms of SRGBV

2.2.1. Explicit Violence

School violence is physical, and/or psychological violence perpetrated by teachers, students, and/or other school staff intended to harm, physically or emotionally, persons in schools [5]. Common physical violence includes destroying property, corporal punishment, and hitting. Common psychological violence includes rumors, exclusion, teasing, insults, and threats. Psychological violence is sometimes displayed in the form of verbal violence. Compared to general school violence, besides physical violence and psychological violence, another common form of SRGBV is sexual violence. Sexual violence may be expressed as sexual harassment, coercion, and rape. The above forms of school violence are usually manifested as explicit violence, which is violence that is visible and can be detected directly. In actual incidents of SRGBV, these forms of violence do not usually exist in isolation but occur in multiples at the same time. Of the many forms of school gender violence, bullying is one of the more influential. bullying includes many ways of violence, it is repetitive and persistent, so bullying is prone to cause greater harm to those who are bullied.

Sexual minority students are more likely than heterosexual students to face prejudice and SRGBV. Sexual minority students also suffer greater psychological health and physical health risks. Most of the data on homophobic violence focuses on bullying. Homophobic bullying includes both physical bullying and psychological bullying. Physical bullying takes the form of sexual minority students being repeatedly beaten, kicked, robbed of property, and so on. Physical bullying includes verbal bullying and social or relational bullying. Verbal bullying is characterized by victims being repeatedly ridiculed and experiencing unnecessary teasing and verbal threats. Social or relational bullying is seen as sexual minority students being ostracized, isolated, spreading rumors, etc.

There is also another form of bullying, which is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is also a form of psychological bullying in its primary stages. It involves the use of electronic tools for communication and information such as social media, email, and mobile phones. Cyberbullying is typically found in chat rooms and websites where the victim is repeatedly threatened, criticized, or sent unkind comments or images. While much of the available data focuses on bullying, other forms of violence may also target students who identify as sexual minorities.

2.2.2. Implicit Violence

In addition to explicit violence, sexual minority students may also experience many “implicit” homophobic violence on campus. The perpetrators of implicit violence can be institutions or individuals.

If the perpetrator is an educational department or institution, implicit violence can be also called “symbolic” or “institutional” violence. A type of non-physical violence is referred to as symbolic violence. It can display the disparities in social power between groups. It appears as the imposition of the socially more powerful group's norms over those of the inferior group and is frequently developed unconsciously by both groups. In different social circumstances, such as those involving race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, symbolic violence can manifest. Symbolic violence that against sexual minorities in the education sector consists of education policies and guidelines that voluntarily or involuntarily reinforce or embed negative stereotypes related to sexual orientation and gender identity, including in curricula and learning materials [6]. Implicit homophobic violence in the education sector is often less visible than overt violence, but it is no less harmful. Although implicit violence does not directly cause physical or psychological harm to sexual minority students, it will lead to the exclusion of sexual minority students in the entire educational environment and deepen their stigmatization. For instance, school has imposed restrictions on students' ability to display their gender identity through school-level laws that forbid it or through practices like gender-specific uniforms and hairstyles. Because implicit homophobic violence can lead people in the education system to believe that homophobia is institutionally “normal,” allowed, and that it is legitimate in the education system. As a result, there are a growing number of violent crimes against students who identify as sexual minorities that are committed by peers or by academic and non-academic staff.

If the perpetrators of “implicit” homophobic violence are individuals, it can result in microaggressions against sexual minority students. Microaggression is a term used for commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups [7].

Microaggressions appear in everyday life, and the perpetrator of microaggressions may be unconscious or even well-intentioned but can have unintended negative consequences because the potential consequences of their comments are unknown to the perpetrators. As an example, if a person says to a chubbier woman, “Your dress looks beautiful, it makes you look thin.”, although the statement is intended as a compliment, it may cause the person who hears it to feel hurt. Because the person who hears the phrase may feel overweight as a result.

Some LGBTQ individuals report receiving expressions of microaggression from people even within the LGBTQ community [8]. They say that being excluded, or not being made welcome or understood within the gay and lesbian community is a microaggression [9]. On campus, homophobic microaggressions can be expressed as deliberate long social distancing from sexual minority students, excessive care for sexual minority students, or snooping into the privacy of sexual minority students.

2.3 Impact of SRGBV

Sexual minorities are at high risk for bullying and institutional violence on campus. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students confront more verbal and physical abuse and discrimination, and other victimization based on sexual orientation in schools. Sexual minority students are more susceptible to this type of violence at school than in other places. Experiences of discrimination, harassment, microaggressions, and violence can make living openly as a sexual minority a stressful reality [10].

Because most perpetrators and recipients of SRGBV live in the same space for long periods, perpetrators are more likely to repeatedly inflict violence on victims. So SRGBV is usually long-lasting, frequent, and has a more serious negative impact on the well-being of the recipient than other violence. The main negative effects of SRGBV on sexual minority students include psychological health, physical health, academic and employment, social relationships, behavior, and cognition.

Suffering from homophobic violence can bring direct psychological harm to the victim. Sexual minority students report more psychological health issues than their heterosexual counterparts, according to research already conducted. Prolonged ridicule, ostracism, or isolation can leave victims in a constant state of unease, fear, anxiety, and isolation, with symptoms such as insomnia, eating disorders, and even low self-esteem, self-loathing, and self-doubt. Because the experience of SRGBV can destroy a person's self-esteem, psychological violence also causes some sexual minorities to internalize stigma, specifically the belief that they are abnormal, inferior to heterosexuals in every way, and that they deserve to be ridiculed and ostracized. As the bullying deepens, sexual minorities may also suffer from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, guilt about their sexual orientation, alcoholism, self-harm, and even suicidal ideation. Gay or lesbian youth are more likely to attempt suicide compared to heterosexual peers.

Sexual minority students who are chronically exposed to SRGBV are at great risk for physical health problems. Physical violence directly injures the victim's physical health, and some victims have minor and major injuries of varying severity.

Physical health outcomes of sexual assault and other sexual traumas include increased pain, gastrointestinal symptoms, diminished cardiovascular health, general somatic symptoms (e.g., nausea and fatigue), and sleep impairments [11]. In addition, forced intercourse can also result in unplanned pregnancies, high-risk teenage pregnancies and unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, and other physical health issues.

The stress of chronic threats of violence negatively affects sexual minority students' adjustment to college life. As victims of violence feel threatened, afraid, and unsafe on campus for long periods, they lose focus, lose interest in learning, and are unable to concentrate on their studies. Sexual trauma may inhibit students' capacity to engage with school and is associated with lower grade point averages [12].

Sexual minority students who experience violence have higher rates of school absenteeism and dropout due to fear of the school environment. School dropout due to SRGBV makes it difficult for victims to develop their knowledge and abilities to find better jobs and fetch higher income in the future.

Sexual minority students who are chronically exposed to homophobic bullying or violence may close themselves off from social activities because of the disharmony in their relationships with classmates. In addition, when sexual minority students seek help from family or friends but do not receive a positive response, the negative social response may lead the victim to disengage from social relationships.

3. The Strategies to Reduce SRGBV on Sexual Minorities

3.1 The Policy Causes of SRGBV

Structural interventions are effective ways to reduce stigma and its impact on well-being. Structural interventions are at the legislative and policy level. For example, changing discriminatory laws or adopting inclusive policies. College policies are therefore an important tool for campus gender violence intervention, but no college or university in our country has yet established relevant school rules to protect sexual minority students either.

Since Taiwan amended its Gender Equality Education Act in 2004 to explicitly protect LGBTQ students and promote gender diversity, universities in Taiwan have developed relevant school rules and policies to protect LGBTQ students from the government's actions. However, there is no specific legislation in mainland China that specifically protects sexual minorities, nor is same-sex marriage legal. The lack of protection for sexual minorities at the legislative level directly leads to the lack of policies in various social institutions such as universities.

According to data provided by sociologist Li Yinhe in 1998, it is estimated that 3% to 4% of the Chinese population is sexual minorities, with a total of about 36 to 48 million people [13]. So far, it is conservatively estimated that there are at least 30 million sexual minorities in mainland China [14].

In addition, in the Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria for Mental Disorders revised on April 20, 2001, gay, lesbian, and bisexual were no longer included in the category of mental diseases, realizing the non-pathological transformation of gay, lesbian and bisexual. However, in August 2003, Zhang Mingliang, director of the Department of Grassroots Power and Community Construction at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, stated in an explanation of the implementing regulations for the new marriage law that the Chinese government prohibited same-sex couples from marrying. This was the first formal response from the Chinese government on whether to legalize same-sex marriage. Although this response was disappointing for the sexual minority, it also means that the LGBT community is getting more attention than before [15]. At the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, Dr. Li Yinhe proposed a request to amend the marriage law to confirm the legalization of same-sex marriage, but so far none of the bills has been passed.

Like other vulnerable groups, China's sexual minorities urgently need special legislation to protect sexual minorities at the moment. And only when relevant regulations appear in the national laws can other social institutions and organizations be more active in formulating relevant policies.

3.2 The Strategies to Respond to SRGBV

All students' academic performance as well as the well-being of students who are victims of homophobic violence are negatively impacted by this type of violence. In response to the current state of universities in mainland China, the nation and universities have the responsibility to provide a safe, fair, respectful, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environment. To reduce homophobic campus violence, the nation and universities can make efforts in policy formulation, school personnel training, curriculum setting, and special support for students of sexual minorities. In addition, the mass media can also play an advocacy and monitoring role.

The nation and universities should formulate specific policies on how to prevent and deal with gender-based violence in universities. First of all, effective policies should establish a mechanism to prevent violence before the occurrence of violence and actively prevent the occurrence of SRGBV. To achieve this goal, the nation and universities should explicitly prohibit SRGBV from a policy perspective, and restrain all potential SRGBV behavior by revising the code of conduct for staff and students. In addition, universities should develop policies on violence prevention interventions, staff training, mechanisms for reporting SRGBV, support for students, and monitoring and evaluation. Finally, the nation and universities should formulate policies to clarify penalties for perpetrators of violence, and the national laws and regulations to stop and punish SRGBV should be effectively implemented. Only by ensuring that perpetrators of violence are adjudicated by law can SRGBV be effectively stopped [2]. Ensuring that the punishment for perpetrators of violence can also make the victims willing to turn to universities for help when they are subjected to violence.

Universities have to set up special institutions and personnel to deal with SRGBV, to ensure that the victims can successfully find a pre-arranged institution or teacher at the university and receive support and assistance. For example, most universities in Taiwan have "gender equality education committees" which can provide timely and professional responses to SRGBV. In addition, school staff, especially principals and teachers, are the direct recourse of victims. They play an important role in influencing the university's environment and students' attitudes. Therefore, universities need to train faculty and staff to deal with gender-based violence and upgrade their skills and knowledge in dealing with SRGBV so that they can support and respect gender diversity and respond appropriately in the face of homophobic violence.

The promotion of respect and inclusion of gender diversity for all students and staff depends on integrating sexual orientation and gender identity and expression into educational curricula and using LGBTQ supportive learning materials. Since increasing the understanding of the heterosexual community to the sexual minority community can effectively reduce homophobia, universities should strengthen the content of gender equality education and make the existence of gender diversity awareness in the curriculum, teaching materials, teaching methods, classroom practice, and many other teaching processes. This would increase teachers' and students' awareness of their rights and

reduce the incidence of SRGBV. Universities are strongly advised to guide students to challenge gender stereotypes and thereby actively create a new environment of equality and inclusion.

Finally, universities need to assist sexual minority students who have experienced SRGBV. For victims of violence, universities should provide free psychological counseling, financial support, and academic support, and help victims rebuild relationships with peers and return to social participation. If necessary, universities should give the same help to the families of victims and witnesses of violence.

4. Conclusion

SRGBV is a worldwide concern, which can seriously harm the mental and physical health, academic performance, and future personal development of victims. Due to the stigmatization of sexual minorities, sexual minority students are subjected to more homophobic violence than heterosexual students, and their physical and mental health is at greater risk. It is urgent to pay attention to and reduce SRGBV on sexual minorities.

Due to the lack of legal protection for sexual minorities in mainland China and the lack of policy protection for sexual minorities in universities, the well-being of sexual minority students in China is seriously harmed by SRGBV. To reduce these violence phenomena, legislation at the national level is needed first. By enacting laws to protect the rights of sexual minorities, the nation can promote the implementation of laws to protect sexual minorities by various departments and institutions of society. Secondly, as universities are the main places where SRGBV occurs, universities should make efforts in policy formulation, school personnel training, curriculum setting, and special support for students from sexual minority groups. To achieve this goal, scholars from all fields, including law, education, psychology, and public health, are required to come up with more professional and detailed plans to offer each student a secure and inclusive learning environment.

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