

THE SOCIAL SITUATION OF LGBT PEOPLE IN POLISH SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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The article, by taking up the theme of gender identity formation, draws attention to the functioning of transgender people in schools and the Polish educational system. By analysing the relationship between socio-cultural gender, and the processes leading to discrimination and violence motivated by identity and gender nonconformity, the author indicates that the normal everyday public school, can be a place where homophobic violence is a real and serious problem. Therefore, the article takes a form of an appeal for the undertaking of various actions, to implement a broad and reliable anti-discrimination policy for both teaching staff, and high school and university students.

Keywords: LGBT; Non-normative sexuality; Homophobic and transphobic violence; School; Teacher; Anti-discrimination education.

1. Introduction

The social situation of LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender) people in Poland has, only just in the last decade, been the subject of cyclical analysis and research conducted by academic institutions, though the first studies on this topic emerged several years after the change of regime in 1989. Such attempts of drawing attention to the problems of the functioning of people with different sexual identities, were made particularly by non-governmental organizations (associations, foundations), in which such activities are constantly perceived as a defence of the growth of religious, political and ideological fundamentalism. The Campaign Against Homophobia and Society Lambda Warsaw since 2003 have regularly been creating reports pertaining to discrimination and violence motivated by homophobia and transphobia against non-heterosexual people. In recent years, the Foundation Trans-Fusion, established in 2008, and which works for transgender people, has joined those associations. The results of the study enabled the formulation of an alarming hypothesis that the school is not only the place of experiencing violence by non-heterosexual people, but is a place where young people - mainly in peer relationships - experience for the first time, violence arising from their sexual orientation (Krzemiński 2009, Makuchowska 2011, Świerszcz 2012).

2. Heterosexuality and the Polish culture

Poland is a country where heterosexuality retains a strong relationship with a particular form of patriarchal tradition which is contingent upon the Catholic religion and originates from the anti-sexual world view. As J. Kochanowski (2004) notes, the problem is not only about the constantly strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, but a symbolic social space determined by the paradigm of traditional Catholic view of the world dominated by homosexuality phobia, which as a consequence, suggests that any raising of the issue of homosexuality in Polish culture, is perceived as aggression and is not permitted to go beyond existing moral values (Kochanowski 2004). Therefore, the current reality of Polish society, in which heterosexual norm is admitted as the one which is in force, allows LGBT people to appear only in conditions determined for those and by those who meet certain standards. In such conditions, the most often channel of communication becomes dogmatic, stereotypical and above all an over-simplified picture, based not only on the perceived and evaluated worse differences, but specifically threatening the morality by deviance and pathology of people in that situation (hence the debates about the origins, treatment and therapy). The result sanctions a more or less violent repression against them. The results of a survey conducted in 2011 on 11.144 LGBT

people indicated that a high percentage of people still suffer from physical and psychological violence due to their sexual orientation (12 % became victims of physical violence and 44 % of mental violence). Men more often than women were exposed to physical abuse of some sort. On the other hand violence against women often had a sexual character and took place in the private sphere. This dependence is also visible in the case of psychological violence - men often suffered from it in the public sphere, and women in private - where the perpetrator was family member, and the incidents took place in their own homes. The obtained data show that up to 70 % of LGBT people do not feel safe and free, therefore they feel the need to hide their sexual orientation in the workplace, at school and at college. Half hide it in their normal surroundings, from neighbours, in their place of residence and more than a third even with their closest family (Abramowicz 2012). As a reason for this condition I blame the nature of Polish society, which is referred to as post-colonial. Although changes after 1989 brought Polish people new areas of freedom, the colonial regimes of gender and sexuality still do not lose the strength of natural instinct in a normal way, and as a result it is fairly believed that there is one standard way to behave sexually and one standard model of sexuality (Kochanowski 2011). For this reason all the attempts of presenting the issues related to cultural exclusion and depreciation of non-heterosexual behaviour is perceived as dangerous, deceitful and threatening ideology. Similarly it was about the project "Let's allow them to see us", whose aim was the presenting in public of photographs of two people of the same sex holding each other's hands, which was named as a promotion of pathological behaviours. The concept of the project was not meaningless because so far it had only published photos of parades in Western Europe, mostly presenting undressed or dressed *drag queen* men. The texts had shown the phenomenon of homosexuality in sensational way, associating it with religiously defined sin, a kind of degeneration or with criminal undertones. Homosexuality had even been described as a tragedy and a disaster. It is thought that sexual orientation ought to hide from the world (in seminary, monastery or through marriage) or should be exposed to cruel ostracism from families and society in general. Although the situation since 2003 has changed, mainly thanks to liberal media, which make report events relating to presence of non-heterosexual people in society, for Polish gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals it is far from living in peace (Abramowicz 2010). What is surprising is that neither Polish school, which clearly emphasizes the heterosexual standard as being the one which deserves to be adopted, nor higher education, which within the bounds of academic discourse is most often of dogmatic character, seem to notice this (quite big) social group, what can suggest not only specific cultural incompetence, but also some kind of social exclusion. Only a few decide and take steps towards breaking the silence and absence in the discourse of scientific reflection on "non-normal" psychosexual orientation (Kochanowski 2004, Skuza 2005).

3. Education for non-heterosexual people

The characteristic antipathy or as defined by P. Skuza, allergies toward gender and generic differences in Polish culture, undoubtedly have an impact on the Polish educational discourse, focused around specifically perceived ideas. For this reason, despite the slow process of emancipating the LGBT people (mostly gays and lesbians), diversity determined by sex or gender seems to not exist at all. In these circumstances, social perspective of the functioning of homosexually oriented men and women, bisexual and transgender people is still in the pedagogical and educational sphere, not so much controversial or embarrassing but simply ignored, absent. Therefore there exists a real and urgent need to prepare the collective consciousness, and even as P. Skuza claims, to make „a breach in the unconscious, to noticeably change the cultural context, so as to prevent a valid reason for silence and concealment” (Skuza 2005: 77). For this purpose the education of future educators and teachers MUST ENABLE acquisition of knowledge about diversity and multidimensionality of human

sexuality. Meanwhile, during education at university, students of teaching specialisations still use elaborations which include homophobic and transphobic contents, that connect non-heterosexual orientation and gender identity with immorality of behaviour, present them in the context of pathology. Thus, future teachers do not have an authentic chance to discuss and thereby understand questions relating to the functioning of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people (Chaber 2012). It is also fruitless to search for such related information with which to educate and train post-graduates and existing teachers. Even studies related to socio-cultural gender, organised usually in large academic centres, focus on the two dominant sexes: male and female. The absence of problems related to the psychosexual orientation and transsexuality marginalises it and puts it out of bracket of educational debate. Without well-educated and properly prepared educators (equipped with knowledge, skills and social competence), educational work is doomed to be hidden in educational program effects, which are automatically generated by myths, harmful simplifications and heterosexism. As a consequence, the Polish school accepts only heterosexual models of human relations, referred to as normal and deserving imitation. Teachers cannot, or do not want (it is difficult to settle what is worst), to perform a critical assessment of stereotypical contents included in textbooks and curricula, thereby contributing to one side of the argument, to the exclusion and even to specific transparency of LGBT students. On the other hand it contributes to discrimination and even transphobic and homophobic violence against LGBT youth.

3.1 The functioning of the nonheteronormative people at school

80-s of the twentieth century, carrying the inner transformation of the country, could also become an opportunity to change the school. However, after a period of socialistic politicisation the Polish school system was completely subordinated to Catholic-national values, which resulted in closing the door to everything that did not fit into narrowly defined traditional values. Therefore the school, despite given tasks and related hopes still resists changes leading it not be a place of subordination, but a place of youth's empowerment (Bilinska-Suchanek 2013: 63). Unfortunately, being still a space full of interactive tensions, which makes it impossible to realize the potential of students in the area of freedom and creativity, Polish school is a part of the canon of cultural reproduction, in which - as notes M. Janion - dominates institutionalised heterosexuality which creates the bases for homophobic and transgender violence (Janion 2004: 16). This state of affairs becomes particularly dangerous. It may generate a belief that it follows from the natural social-cultural order, because if heterosexuality is the norm in it, then it becomes natural. Therefore homophobic violence can be considered as an effect resulting from the framework of hetero-sexual behaviour, which becomes a specific kind of measure designated to observance and strengthening it – while the motivation of such activities is most often unconscious (Foucault 2010). A survey research conducted in late 2011 by the Campaign Against Homophobia among lesbian and bisexual students (585 people) indicated that a large part of the respondents due to fear of persecution did not disclose their sexual orientation at school. The results indicate that, in the opinion of the respondents, the school community do not understand what a homosexuality and transsexuality are, and treat them as something strange, sick, going beyond the norm and even threatening. Therefore school and peer violence with homophobic character is a tool of labelling where homosexual need is used for such recognition. Analysis of the results indicates appearing in the school catalogue of situations, attitudes and behaviours, reflecting to the characteristics of verbal violence taking the form of verbal aggression – the speech of hatred as well as physical violence (Świerszcz, Cieślík, Niedzielska 2012). The experience of verbal violence - according to the report - is at school nearly ubiquitous. It concerns not only the classroom, but also other school spaces: corridors, gymnasiums, sports fields and other places covering an area of the school. More than three-quarters of the respondents admitted that their schools use homophobic insults

and ridicule of people with nonheterosexual psychosexual orientation. The most often used insults referred to insufficient masculinity or femininity. Every fourth researched person experienced physical violence in the form of pushing or prodding. Often LGBT pupils also become victims of cyber-harassment (hoax call, insulting text messages and e-mails or posting abusive messages about them on social networks), thefts and even intentional damage to property. The school in such a situation is seen as the institution in which even a suspicion of homosexuality can create students' rumours, prejudices, and negative colleagues' comments, usually ending with an intentional exclusion from a variety of teaching and extracurricular activities. Alarming is fact that in opinion of the respondents suspicion of homosexuality or disclosure of their homosexual psychosexual orientation is also the cause of subtle or significant change of attitude to them by the teaching staff. Similarly alarming is data, which shows that despite the universality of homophobic violence at school, many pupils and students believe that there is no support from teachers. Respondents state that teachers ignore, (especially verbal abuse), and thus do not respond to this type of behaviour. Although in the case of homophobic physical violence, reactions of teachers seem to be firmer, the analysis of responses shows that the Polish school is lacking a strong strategy to respond to the phenomena of homophobia (Świerszcz, Cieślak, Niedzielska 2012). Therefore, it can be expected that such a wide external oppression will result in disruptions of successive solutions of developmental tasks of LGBT students, for whom psychosexual needs are an important element of identity. Disruption in its development results in many psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders. Although research on the impact of violence and growing up in a homophobic environment on mental health development of the potential and forming the identity of LGBT youth for years have been carried out abroad and bring alarming results, there is still no reliable Polish data on this subject (Świerszcz 2012: 10).

4. Conclusion

LGBT people can be found in every social group, even among students and teachers. It is considered that, statistically, in every school, gays, lesbians, bi- and transsexual represent about 5 percent of the students and 5 per cent of teachers (Biedroń 2007: 85), which only confirms that if we look for a comparison of tendencies between modern school and the wider culture, undoubtedly there is a similar proportion of difference (Witkowski 1997: 145). Therefore it becomes very important to postulate for the introduction for both staff and high school students, a comprehensive and genuine anti-discriminatory education which includes knowledge related to psychosexual orientation. If the Polish education system does not accept quickly that fact, instead of the development and empowerment place for the individual, it will still be only a place signified by sharp demarcation lines, in which what is right and positive is the result of education centred around one dominant projected heterosexual culture.

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