



ORAL STATEMENT

Why Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Must be Specifically Referenced in the Forthcoming CEDAW General Recommendation on Girls' and Women's Access to Education

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Lesbians, bisexual women and girls, and transgender people –or LBT people face multiple obstacles which prevent them from accessing education.

Barriers such as gender stereotyping, violence, imposed gendered dress codes, and bullying create immense burdens on LBT students resulting in a lack of access to school and a disproportionate number who are denied their right to education. I will address each of these obstacles in turn. We urge the CEDAW Committee to follow its own precedent and include explicit reference to sexual orientation and gender identity in its forthcoming General Recommendation on Education of Girls and Women.

LBT people face unique obstacles in accessing education because of **gender-based stereotypes**, which directly fuel discrimination and abuse. Many LBT individuals defy gender stereotypes by their very being and are thus seen as disruptive in society generally and distracting in schools. At the root of much prejudice against LBT people is the belief that their deviations from mainstream culture, religion, and tradition are a choice. Consequently, many who arrest, beat, and otherwise punish LBT people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity believe that people who flaunt prevailing norms deserve to be violently disciplined. The Committee must combat the continuation of gender stereotypes, which threaten the right to equal access to education for girls and LBT youth.

Violence is a second major obstacle to education for LBT students. A survey of students in Argentina published in 2010 found that transgender people encounter aggression from other students and from school authorities. This abuse predictably leads them to miss or eventually drop out of school. The same study found that nearly half (45 percent) of transgender people dropped out of secondary school. Shockingly, less than 3 percent completed college, meaning that trans people in Argentina were seven times less likely than their peers to graduate from college.

Mandatory dress codes that require gender-specific outfits for boys and girls in school also impair LBT children's access to education by imposing sanctions and facilitating exclusion.. Prohibiting LBT students from dressing to reflect their gender expression is sending the message that they are somehow "wrong." Over time, this feeling of "wrongness" can contribute to depression and the conviction that violence and discrimination is inevitable. Mandatory dress codes in schools can result in increased dropout rates for LBT youth and may lead to segregation or marginalization of LBT students. According to a recent U.S. study, for example, LBT youth missed class because of feeling unsafe or unwelcome 31% of the time, a rate of five times higher than that for secondary school students taken as a whole (only 5.5 percent). When administrators make dress codes gendered and enforce the code strictly according to students' assigned gender at birth (rather than permitting dress according to each student's chosen gender expression), they are contributing to acts of harassment and violence toward LBT youth.

Bullying, the final obstacle we highlight for the Committee, is a behavior that presents a serious obstacle for LBT students. In Nepal, Bangladesh, India, and Latin America, among other places, transgender people face bullying and harassment in schools, and this targeting causes them to leave school prematurely.

Bullying creates a hostile educational climate. A 2009 United States National School Climate Survey found seventy-three percent of students heard homophobic remarks frequently at school; 66.5 percent of students were verbally harassed because of their gender expression; 44.1 percent of students had been physically harassed (pushed and shoved) because of their sexual orientation; and 30.4% because of their gender expression.

School climate is not just about physical safety but also encompasses soft factors that permit student to realize their right to education. LBT students who experience frequent harassment based on their sexual orientation were more likely to report missing school and had lower GPAs than students who were not as frequently harassed.

We respectfully request that the Committee acknowledge these four major obstacles that LBT people face in accessing education and include reference to sexual orientation and gender identity in the Recommendation.