

Homophobia And Gender Discrimination

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The idea of talking to children and youth about homophobia and sexual diversity can elicit resistance and fear. In some instances, this may be due to confusion between anti-homophobia education and teaching about "gay sex". We can talk to young people about the varied forms of human sexual and expression in age-appropriate ways. Leaving room for many possibilities in our discussions about families and relationships is one way of being inclusive. Knowing the systemic roots of homophobia can prompt us to explore what we have unwittingly learned as products of our society and to commit ourselves to "unlearning" that which is false and hurtful.

Description of Homophobia

Homophobia and/or heterosexism exist when heterosexuality is expected and assumed and any other form of sexuality is rendered invisible or actively discouraged, suppressed and feared. Society is homophobic and/or heterosexist when it is organized and structured so that heterosexual dominance is reinforced at all levels (in our institutions, policies, culture and interactions). Stereotypes about people who are LGBTQ justify and reinforce this form of social organization, which excludes same sex couples, families with same sex parents and many others.

Through gender discrimination, homophobia and are inextricably and profoundly interconnected, with insidious consequences for the way people learn to behave and identify as girls and boys, women and men. A strict polarization of what is considered "masculine" and what is considered "feminine" (behaviour, attributes, appearance, activity, etc.) is manufactured and enforced through rigid gender norms. A hierarchy is established between the two poles whereby the masculine is valued above the feminine. The result is the undervaluing, hatred or disparagement of everything that is labelledfemine, known as "misogyny".

Gender discrimination occurs when people are targeted because they do not adhere to gender norms related to their biological sex.

Targeted groups of Homophobia

Homophobia and gender discrimination affect everyone to some degree. At one level, those of us who are straight are affected when we are punished for straying outside gender norms. For example, if a woman expresses anger assertively, or if a man expresses fear or cries, each may be ostracized. It may be assumed that each is lesbian and gay, because stereotypes about LGBTQ people abound.

Those of us who are LGBTQ are affected when we transgress gender norms either through a same-sex relationship, or throughout gender identity. For example, a person may be a man biologically, yet identify with the female gender and with traits that are labelled "feminine". Other people may locate themselves somewhere between feminine and masculine. In some instances, people who identify with a gender that does not reflect their biology may choose to undergo treatment so their biology reflects their gender identify. Trans-gendered and transsexual people are actively persecuted and excluded in our society.

In a school setting, homophobia and gender discrimination may be directed against students, parents, teachers, support staff or members of the administration, for example:

- students and adults who are straight and labelled as "gay" due to stereotyping;
- students and adults who have come out as LGBTQ;
- students and adults who are attempting to hide their sexual orientation or gender identify;
- students and adults who are attempting to explore and question their gender identity;
- students with same sex parents.

Forms of homophobia

Society is deep-seated homophobia and heterosexual dominance are reproduced in schools and classrooms in many ways. Homophobia can lead to blatant and aggressive expressions of disdain or hatred, for example:

- **Homophobic slurs :** These are normalized to such a degree they are not always said with hatred, though they are extremely hurtful. Homophobic slurs are often comprised of misogynous comments directed against gay men or people assumed to be gay.
- **Physical violence :** LGBTQ youth may experience being hit, punched, kicked, threatened, chased home, chased at school, spat upon, persecuted, or tied up and beaten.
- **Rejection :** When a LGBTQ youth or adult comes out at school they risk being rejected by their parents (in the case of youth) and by their peers (co-workers or students).
- **Exclusion :** LGBTQ youth (or straight youth labelled as LGBTQ) may be excluded from gender-specific activities and teams by their peers. In some instances, they may feel uncomfortable participating in gender-specific activities, since they do not feel a sense of belonging and safety with either girls or boys. That sense of discomfort is a form of exclusion.
- **Suppression :** LGBTQ youth may be actively discouraged from growing into their chosen sexual identity. For example, they may be told, "You're too young to know, wait until you're older". Trans-gendered youth may be forbidden from dressing the way they wish.
- **Homophobic cyber-bullying or "outing", for example, on Facebook.**
- **Homophobic websites :** Some websites may contain homophobic attacks by students against teachers, or by students against other students.

Heterosexual dominance in schools can also lead to more subtle or implicit expressions of assumptions and stereotypes, for example :

- **Assuming someone is straight :** Unless presented with other information, it is usually assumed that someone is heterosexual, and that a student's parents are heterosexual.
- **Assuming someone is gay :** Assumptions about someone's sexual orientation are usually based on stereotypes and preconceived notions that obliterate individuality.
- **Making assumptions about someone's gender identity :** People's biology does not always correspond with their gender identity.
- **Gender-specific activities are facilities :** Trans-gendered youth may be forced to use washrooms and changing rooms where they do not feel safe and comfortable.

- **Silence, secrecy and invisibility :** Schools maintain silence, secrecy and invisibility about gender diversity with unspoken, unwritten policy that can best be described as "don't ask, don't tell". Schools where no one talks about sexual diversity, where it is never mentioned in the curriculum, are enforcing a code of silence around the issue.

Homophobia affects all members of school communities across Ontario. Each of us suffers from rigid gender norms. There is no absolute, fixed formula for being a man or a woman. Gender traits are different aspects of human character, personality and potential. Gender discrimination imprisons us all in conditions that prevent us from being fully human, fully ourselves. Moreover, in every school there are LGBTQ students and staff who have the right to feel respected and included.

The reality of homophobia in our society and schools highlights the need for dialogue. Teachers can encourage initiatives in schools recognizing and validating the existence of diversity in sexual orientations and gender identity. We can seek to provide safe forums for those of us with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (students, staff and parents) to :give voice to our needs and experiences;

- be heard and have our experiences and concerns validated by the school community;
- engage in a process with all members of the school community at every level to build bridges and create a climate of fairness and belonging for all.

For tools and resources to stimulate discussion on these issues with students.

Power and Privilege

Discussions about power and privilege may be emotionally challenging, triggering feelings of guilt or defensiveness. However, it is important to recognize that in our society, heterosexuality confers power and status, such that it is an advantage to be straight. As a result, those of us who are heterosexual have certain automatic privileges that tend to reinforce and perpetuate the power imbalance between straight people and 1 GBTQ people Heterosexual privileges may come to be seen as "normal".

Like any other form of inequity and exclusion, homophobia has negative consequences for an individual's mental and physical health and well-being. Those of us who are

targeted by homophobia feel shame, guilt, powerlessness and fear or terror. We feel violated and voiceless. Hopelessness, broken self-esteem and mental health issues such as depression are further repercussions.

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