BULLYING AGAINST LGBTQ COMMUNITY

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In the context of the LGBTQ community, "bullying" refers to any form of repeated aggressive behavior, harassment, or intimidation directed at individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. This can include verbal, physical, or emotional abuse and can occur in various settings, such as schools, workplaces, or within communities. Bullying of LGBTQ individuals can have severe negative effects on their mental health, well-being, and sense of safety. It can lead to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and even thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

It`s crucial to address how younger individuals, particularly students in high schools, are increasingly discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, this process of self-discovery is not always met with acceptance from their peers, leading them to become targets of bullying.

As more young people explore and come to terms with their LGBTQ identities, they often face hostility, ridicule, and discrimination from their classmates. This can manifest in various forms of bullying, including verbal taunts, exclusion, physical aggression, and cyberbullying.

MEANWHILE IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria faces serious issues regarding discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, as evidenced by numerous national and international studies:
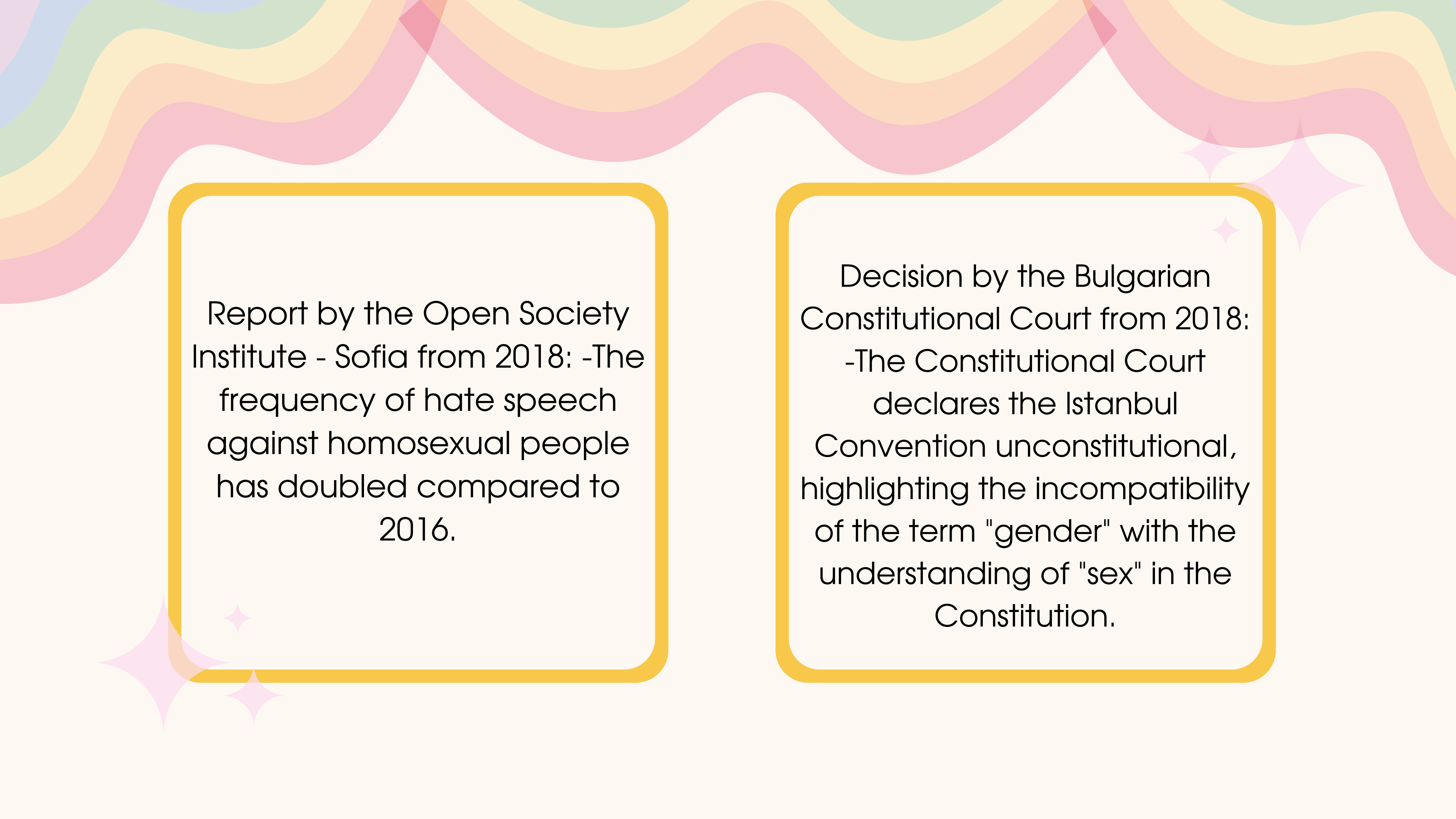
Index of the Rainbow Map by ILGA-Europe (2019):
-Bulgaria ranks 26th out of 28 EU member states, scoring 20%.
-Statistics from 2014 to 2018 show a trend towards regression in the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) from 2013:
-Bulgaria is among the three EU countries with "widespread" offensive language towards LGBTQ+ people by politicians.

Report by the Open Society Institute - Sofia from 2018: -The frequency of hate speech against homosexual people has doubled compared to 2016.

Decision by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court from 2018: -The Constitutional Court declares the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional, highlighting the incompatibility of the term "gender" with the understanding of "sex" in the Constitution.
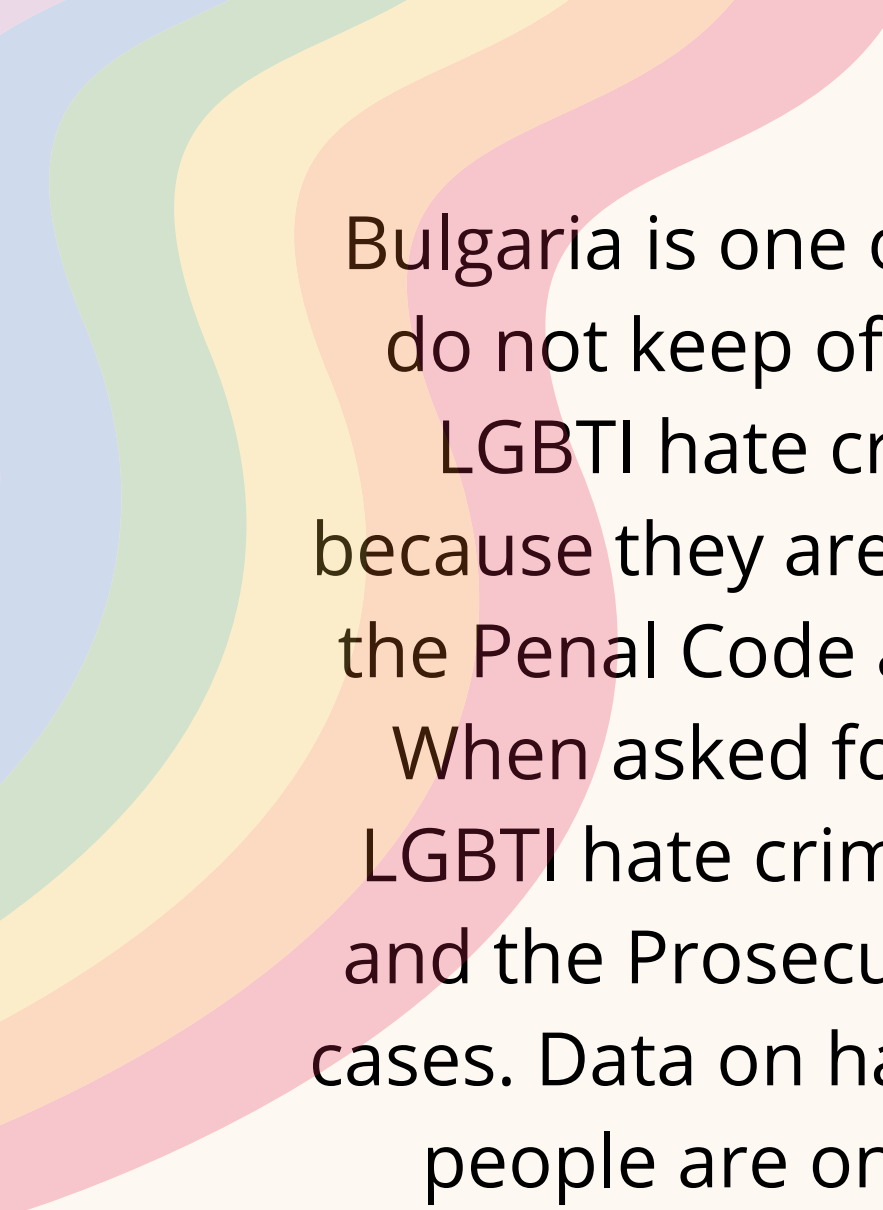
Against the backdrop of legal vulnerability, the educational sphere, particularly schools, is most affected by the rejection of contemporary understanding of sexual and gender identity. In 2018, a university discontinued a course that included the term "gender" in its title, while media outlets stirred controversy over brochures on sexually transmitted infections distributed in some high schools, which included content about men having sex with men.
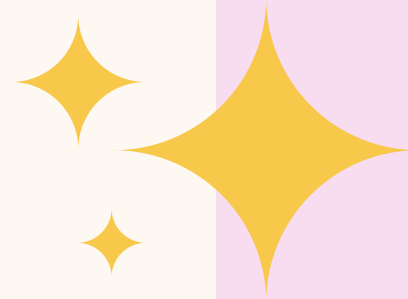
The Minister of Education made a public statement in 2019 that every effort would be made to remove content related to gender from the public education curriculum. Schools began rejecting collaboration with non-governmental organizations on projects related to sexual education, sexual health, or prevention of sexual violence, due to concerns that they may promote "gender ideology". The opposition to progressive understanding of gender and sexual diversity has become so strong and widespread that "gender" has become an offensive term used against anyone deviating from societal norms.
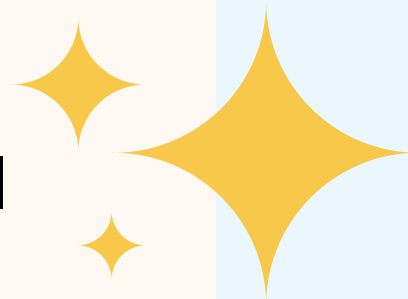
SOME STATISTICS

According to data from the Eurobarometer published in October 2019, 71% of respondents in Bulgaria completely disagree with the statement "There is nothing wrong with sexual relationships between two persons of the same sex." Regarding the question "How comfortable would you feel if one of your children were in a romantic relationship with a person of the same sex?", 80% responded "uncomfortable". As for whether lessons and educational materials should include information about diversity regarding sexual orientation and transgender and intersex individuals, Bulgaria again has the lowest percentage.
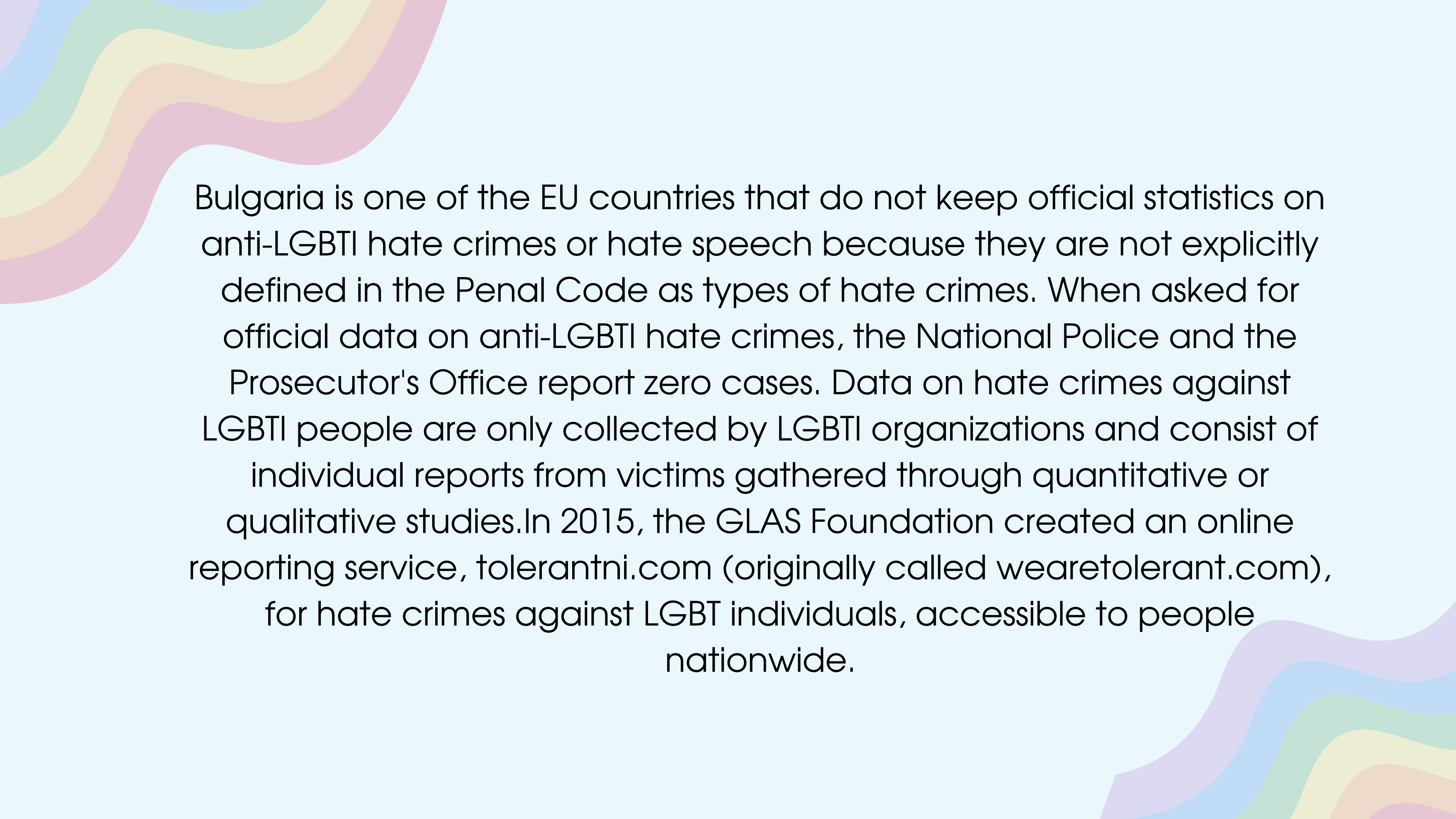
Bulgaria is one of the EU countries that do not keep official statistics on anti-LGBTI hate crimes or hate speech because they are not explicitly defined in the Penal Code as types of hate crimes. When asked for official data on anti-LGBTI hate crimes, the National Police and the Prosecutor's Office report zero cases. Data on hate crimes against LGBTI people are only collected by LGBTI organizations and consist of individual reports from victims gathered through quantitative or qualitative studies.In 2015, the GLAS Foundation created an online reporting service, tolerantni.com (originally called wearetolerant.com), for hate crimes against LGBT individuals, accessible to people nationwide.

Tolerantni.com was the platform used for the GLAS Foundation's victimization study for 2017 (47 reports in 6 months), which showed that most anti-LGBT incidents in Bulgaria occur in schools, followed by incidents on the street and at home. A smaller number of incidents also occur in bars. In 2019, a new Coalition for Registering Hate Crimes was launched. The platform is founded and managed by LGBTI organizations Bilitis, GLAS, and Action, the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the UNHCR in Bulgaria, the National Network of Roma Lawyers and Law Students, the Legal Aid Center GLAS in Bulgaria, the Association Integro, the Association Initiative for Equal Opportunities, and the Access to Rights Foundation – FAR.
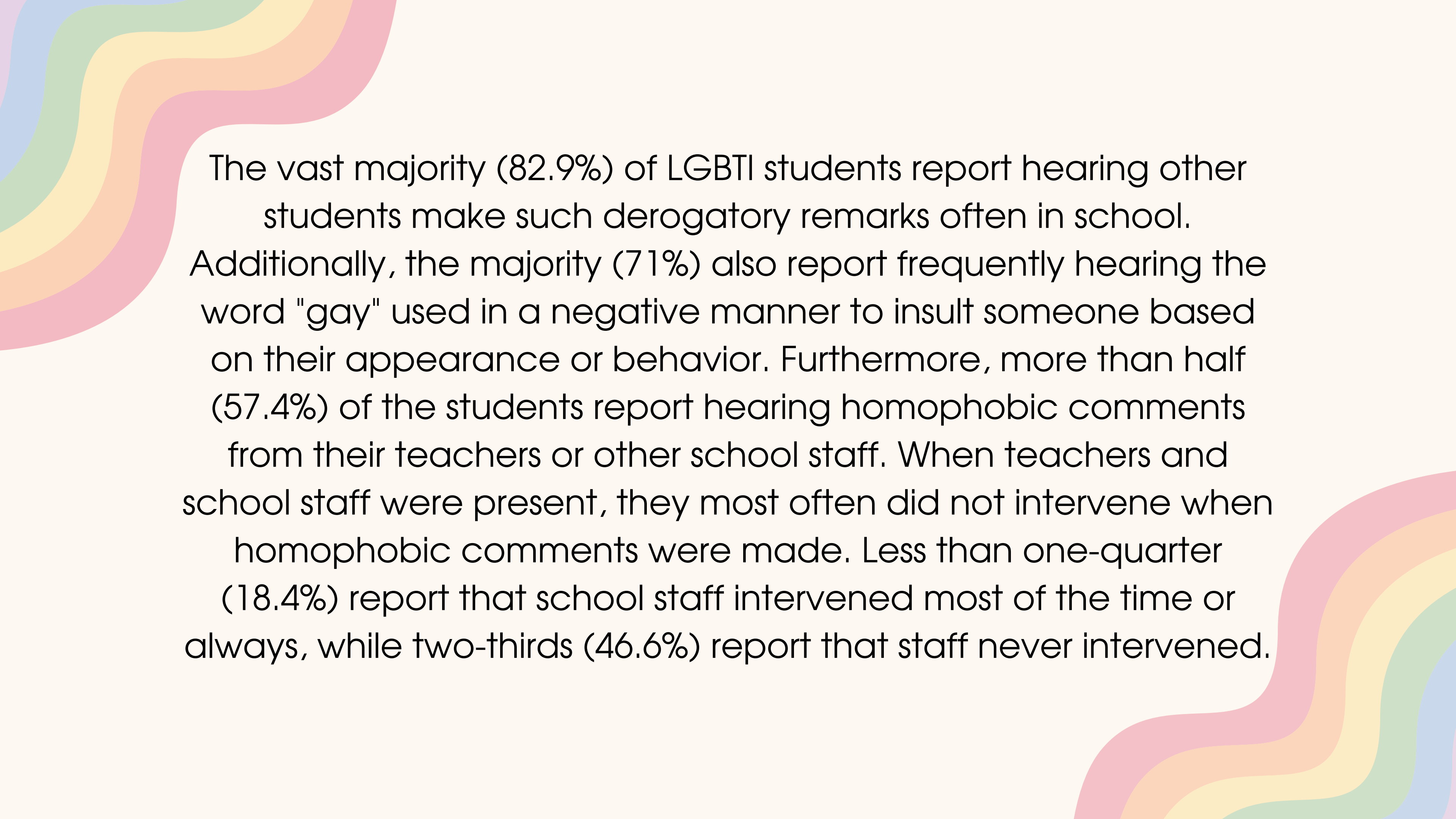
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IN SCHOOLS

The latest national study on the situation of LGBTI youth in the educational environment is the climate survey conducted in schools in 2018 by the "Single Step" Foundation and the Resource Center "Bilitis." This online survey generated 880 valid responses from students aged 13 to 19 from all regions of the country.

LGBTI students most commonly feel insecure in school due to their sexual orientation, appearance, and expression of their gender: 48.3% reported not feeling safe in school in the past year due to their sexual orientation. 31.2% did not feel safe due to the way they express their gender. 22.5% reported not feeling safe due to their body or weight.

The vast majority (82.9%) of LGBTI students report hearing other students make such derogatory remarks often in school. Additionally, the majority (71%) also report frequently hearing the word "gay" used in a negative manner to insult someone based on their appearance or behavior. Furthermore, more than half (57.4%) of the students report hearing homophobic comments from their teachers or other school staff. When teachers and school staff were present, they most often did not intervene when homophobic comments were made. Less than one-quarter (18.4%) report that school staff intervened most of the time or always, while two-thirds (46.6%) report that staff never intervened.

Regarding physical bullying, one-third (34.2%) of LGBTI students have been physically bullied (such as pushed or shoved) at some point in school during the past year based on their personal characteristics. Their experiences with physical bullying follow a pattern similar to verbal bullying—students most commonly report being physically bullied in school due to their sexual orientation or gender expression:

-26.4% of LGBTI students have been physically bullied in school due to their sexual orientation, with 6.5% experiencing this bullying often. 23.1% have been physically bullied in school due to their gender expression, with 6.8% experiencing this bullying often. 16.1% of respondents have been physically bullied in school due to their gender, with 17.8% experiencing this bullying often.

Less than half of these students report incidents to school staff (46%), and fewer than one-tenth indicate that they regularly report bullying or attacks (16.8%) to school personnel ("Always" or "Most of the time"). Less than half of the students (45%) share that they have informed a family member. As a conclusion, we can infer a complete lack of trust in school staff. Students either believe that no one would take any action or they think that even if something were done, it would be ineffective. Overall, 54.9% do not find school staff effective in their response to reports (36.2% "Not effective at all" and 38.7% "Somewhat ineffective").

SCHOOL POLICY AGAINST BULLYING

The majority of LGBTI students (68.2%) either do not have a policy in their school or are unaware of one, while only 3.3% state that their school has a policy mentioning sexual orientation or gender expression.

On a positive note, the majority of students (77.5%) can identify at least one staff member at the school whom they believe supports LGBTI students. Resources within schools, such as supportive school staff, better-trained psychologists and counselors, and policies for reporting bullying, violence, and attacks, have helped create a more positive school environment for LGBTI students in specific cases.

INTRODUCTION OF METHODS TO COMBAT BULLYING AGAINST THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY IN BULGARIAN SCHOOLS REQUIRES A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH:

1.Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment: Schools should establish an environment where LGBTQ students feel protected and accepted. This may include forming support clubs and educating students on tolerance and mutual respect.

2.Updating Educational Materials: Textbooks and curricula need to be updated to include information about LGBTQ history, culture, and rights. This will help promote better understanding and recognition of diversity within the school community.

3.Supporting Teachers: Teachers should be trained and supported in their role of creating a friendly and tolerant environment in school. Their training should include issues of equality and discrimination, as well as methods for supporting LGBTQ students.

4.Collaborating with Parents: Schools should strive to involve parents in their efforts to combat bullying. This includes informational sessions and collaboration to create community initiatives for tolerance.

5.Monitoring and Evaluation: The effectiveness of implemented methods should be regularly monitored and evaluated. This includes analyzing data on incidents, conducting surveys among students, and obtaining feedback from teachers, students, and parents to continually improve programs and activities to combat bullying.

This approach will help create a more tolerant and friendly atmosphere in schools where all students feel protected and accepted, regardless of their sexual orientation or identity.

REFERENCES

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https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en

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