“The Nail That Sticks Out Gets Hammered Down”
LGBT Bullying and Exclusion in Japanese Schools
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Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all.


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The comics in this report tell the stories of specific individuals Human Rights Watch interviewed, using their own words to describe their experiences. In a few instances the artist added language to provide necessary context. © 2016 Taiji Utagawa
Why are gays treated as if we don’t exist?

Y.N, College student

I was bullied when I was in elementary school. After that, I stopped going to school. However, I decided to go back to school when it was time for me to enter high school. For me, that decision required a lot of courage.

After I started going to school, I was able to get used to it better than I had expected, so I was a bit relieved.

No one imagines that there are gays around them. That’s why everyone talks badly about gay people.

Cheers!

I wonder whether there are any gay people in this school

But ever since I realized that I was gay, there was a feeling that dampened my heart.

Oops, I didn’t realize!

Good morning!

You forgot your notebook at the McDonalds yesterday!

If there is, I will ask for an injunction not to come close to me.

Even though I had learned that there is nothing bad about being gay...

You are awesome! I love you

Stop it, people will think that you are really homos
Everywhere in my high school life, I heard discriminatory comments against gay people.

Gays live just like everyone else – we care about our friends and have dreams for the future.

But no one ever imagine how sad gay people would feel when they hear those comments.

Then a thought came to me – if everyone realised that they have a gay classmate, maybe something would change.

HAHAHA

Hehe, what you said is discriminatory

Who cares about discrimination
I want what I dislike to disappear

I am shocked already just by the fact that you are gay – don’t make more troubles in school too!

Mom, I... want to come out at school

My mother strongly opposed.

But, I still want everyone to know – that there are gay people around them.

Isn’t it terrible he is making me seem like I’m gay

But at school, not only students but also teachers were making discriminatory comments. Hearing them every day was unbearable for me.

It would be horrible to become gay
Is that shirt serious!? 

I'm Gay

One day, I took action. I stood in front of my classmates wearing a T-shirt that says “I am gay”.

I wanted my classmates to know that gay people are around them and we are hurt by what everyone is saying!

Wait in the classroom

I was blamed for corrupting school’s public morals and my mom was called to the school. The teacher had a chat with my mom in a separate room. They had no interest in hearing how I felt.

I could never forget these words from the teacher.

Did you not think about how you are troubling others? From now on, people will think that I too am gay just by standing here and talking with you
Since then, serious bullying began. Being ignored and physical violence happened daily. People began to frequently talk behind my back.

On social media like Twitter too – I was bullied with my real name and photos exposed.

Homos are disgusting, I want them to disappear. I became too scared to attend classes.

I had to start using nurse’s room when changing clothes.

Get out!

Go change in the girls’ changing room!

“Pretend that gays don’t exist, and if they exist, kick them out.”... that’s the kind of high school reality I lived in. At that time, I often did not even realize how hurt I was. But now, the scars from then have become pains and continue to torment me today.

I know nothing about gays and all that. It is not bullying – just friends fooling around right?

Teacher hardly ever consulted with me.
I knew that I liked people of the same sex, but I did not feel like coming out to anyone.

I thought:
I should never say to anyone that I am a lesbian.

When I searched about homosexuality and gay people on the internet, I could tell that there are many people who don’t feel comfortable about homosexuality. I saw rude comments like...

They can live but I don’t want them to come near me
I will quit being friends if I find out they are homosexuals

“There are people who are homosexuals but they have an unnatural existence as human beings, and their morals are not good either.”

One day in class, the teacher said “it is natural for a woman to get married and have children.”
I was so upset that I started crying.

I was so shocked by what the teacher said, because I felt as if I were told that I have a defect as a human being.

I felt like I was told that I am a human being unworthy to live.

I told the nurse for the first time that I am a lesbian. I told everything to the nurse, including how shocking my teacher's comments were in the class.

I went to the nurse’s room...

Tell me what happened.

Both teachers and students know nothing about homosexuality. There is no opportunity for learning. They say it is “unnatural” or “not acceptable” while not knowing anything about it...

When I thought about that, I couldn’t stand it.

The nurse said “I cannot answer you well, because I know nothing about homosexuality. There is no opportunity to learn about it, so I think other teachers have no idea about it either.”

Will you teach me about homosexuality?
After a while, I applied for a national high school speech contest. I submitted my speech to the teacher, which was about human rights of LGBT people.

About this speech draft…

Perhaps you will win the national contest

Hehe that won’t happen

What the teacher said surprised me.

You must change the topic because with this topic there is a possibility that the school gets talked about badly.

It so happened that the news on same-sex partnership in Shibuya and Setagaya wards came out soon after, so the teacher realized for the first time that the topic can be discussed as a social issue, so he reluctantly said OK to my speech topic.

The topic is free to choose – then isn’t it strange to be denied like this?!

My friend helped protest to the teacher with me, but the teacher still said no.

My speech passed the local round and I was able to enter the national contest. The teachers wished me good luck, but they never said anything about the content of my speech.
I did well in the national contest, so I performed it at my school's culture festival.

There has to be 1 or 2 gay or lesbian students in a class, but the teachers have no intention even to learn about it.

But I don't think the teachers deepened their understanding of homosexuality just because of my one speech.

The teachers and students who know nothing about sexual minorities... LGBT high school students have to live in such environment until graduation – by hiding themselves and sometimes being subjected to discriminatory comments.
Do minorities have to make an effort to fit into the majority?

H.T, High school student

Ok, no one is here

I always have to enter toilets secretly.

Please don't use female toilets because it is disgusting

I feel uncomfortable being a female. So it is painful to act like a woman. I cannot make myself look like a woman either. When I was in junior high, my classmates often approached me harshly about it.

These things kept going, so there was a time when I became depressed and could not go to school.

Perhaps, you are a man inside?
I eventually entered high school but that school did not allow students to commute or attend classes in our (gender neutral) P.E. uniforms. That was the time when most boys were getting more masculine and most girls were getting more feminine. I was completely isolated from both groups in the crowd.

And... if possible... I want to be granted permission to use the male toilets.

Can I at least take this ribbon off the uniform during commutes?

I made up my mind to tell my teacher that I felt uncomfortable about my gender and made a request regarding my uniform.

Both of those cannot be permitted.

Why? What kind of importance does this ribbon carry?
I then began to feel nauseous when I got to school every day. Even though I wanted to attend classes properly, my body wouldn’t allow it.

The psychiatrist I saw knew almost nothing about gender identity or gender identity disorder (GID). That’s when I learned that it was really difficult for me as a high school student, to even find a doctor who can answer my concerns.

It was so difficult that I consulted the nurse. She told me to go see a psychiatrist.

Go see a professional
My mother tells me "you should wear a Kimono and present yourself to your grandma at the coming-of-age ceremony..."
Homophobia among teachers
M.F, High school student

I had always been bullied even since long before I came out as gay.

I have come out in my school that I am gay.

One day, a student from upper class came to interview for the school paper.

I always thought: I should not be who I am I always have to pretend as someone else.

I had been subjected to serious physical violence since I was little, because the way I talked and acted was different from other boys.

So that is why you came out as gay.

But, it is extremely hard to live while denying and distorting myself...

Yes.
There were scribbles on notebooks I had to turn in... Things I needed to turn in were stolen and trashed... It continued in a way so that there is no place for me in the classroom.

I was attacked even more seriously after I came out.

There are also teachers who explicitly show their homophobia.

Then I realized something.

Homos, die.

My school puts efforts into bullying prevention, and teachers always watch students. But they pretend not to see, when bullying takes place because of being gay.
I don’t think I am the only gay student in this school. I also think there will be gay students entering the school. They too will be subjected to terrible bullying if it is found out that they are gay.

Gay or not, there should not be anyone who it is ok to bully.

Is it ok to ignore bullying because it is about being gay when bullying can even lead people to take their own lives? I decided to do this media interview because I wanted to make that appeal.

Thank you for talking to me. I will make sure to write the article that portrays your feelings.

I thought that although it might be a small step, it will be a first step for everyone to understand about gay people and bullying against gay people.

Thank you!
The article with my interview is nowhere to be seen...

Don't publish such a disgusting article!

A teacher... requested to take away the article right before the publication...

But... I could not hide my shock when I read the school newspaper.

I thought that I was making a sincere appeal about the current situation. But then one word - “disgusting” - from the teacher crushed and trashed the story I told from my heart.

What would heterosexuals feel, if they are treated like that for being heterosexuals?

But I thought that the only way is to keep making my appeal, even though I was feeling a lot of frustration.

I am sorry that it ended up like this when you took the courage to speak out...
School bullying is a notorious problem in Japan. Students target peers they perceive to be different with harassment, threats, and sometimes violence—including by singling them out based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The Japanese government compounds and even fuels this problem by promoting social conformity and a climate of “harmony” in schools, and by insisting that no student is more vulnerable to bullying than any other. In doing so, it fails to address the vulnerabilities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students.

Based on more than 100 in-depth interviews with sexual and gender minority youth and Japanese education experts, “The Nail That Sticks Out Gets Hammered Down” examines the shortcomings in Japanese policies that expose LGBT students to bullying and inhibit their access to information and self-expression. Lack of comprehensive sex education, silence on LGBT topics in the national curriculum, and inadequate teacher training on sexual orientation and gender identity all contribute to LGBT students’ vulnerabilities. Policies that require transgender people to obtain a diagnosis of gender identity disorder as a first step toward gaining legal recognition are harmfully rigid and discriminatory, and can have a particularly harsh impact on youth.

While Japan’s education ministry has taken positive steps in recent years to recognize, understand, and protect LGBT students, further action is needed to develop specific policies to address bullying. As the public debate on LGBT rights in Japan gains momentum around same-sex marriage and employment non-discrimination, the government has an opportunity to bring its policies in line with its international human rights commitments, including the right to education free from discrimination for all children.