


## Policy Brief on

# A Missing Piece of the Puzzle: An Analysis of Education and Employment Policies of Sri Lanka from a LGBTIQ Rights Perspective

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## Rationale

Ensuring equality and inclusion for all, including the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning/Queer (LGBTIQ) population is not only a human rights issue, it is a country's economic development issue as well.


The discrimination and stigmatisation of LGBTIQ people leads to exclusion, which results in the waste of human capital that ultimately causes lower productivity and output for the overall economy of the country. It also undermines the agenda of achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which the government of Sri Lanka aims to achieve by 2030. "Social inclusion matters because exclusion is too costly," is a recent World Bank report conclusion.

While various international treaty bodies and forums have urged the Sri Lankan government time and again, to change discriminatory laws that criminalise same-sex sexual acts between consenting adults, the government has either ignored such appeals or claimed that the rights of LGBTIQ people are protected under the Constitution of Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> In this policy brief EQUAL GROUND will attempt to review the available government laws and policies related to education and employment to ascertain the credibility of the government's claims.

Among other factors, education and employment are vital when it comes to the economic development of a country. Exclusion of LGBTIQ people, which is ingrained in stigma and archaic social norms, is surely costly to economies because exclusion results in lower productivity and output. So, when it comes to assessing the extent of such exclusion, scrutinising existing national laws and policies, particularly those related to education and employment, will shed light on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> Following a review of Sri Lanka's record on civil and political rights by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in October 2014 in Geneva, Additional Solicitor General Bimba Jayasinghe Thilakeratne stated: "Article 12.1 [of the Constitution] ensures equality for sexual orientation and gender identity" and that under Article 12.2 "laws discriminating on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity are unconstitutional". However, she specified, "Sections 365 and 365A [of Sri Lanka's Penal Code] do not target any particular group but are there to protect public morality."





## Education


Education is the primary setting for the youth to acquire general human capital, which includes skills, ability, knowledge, and health that lead to higher productivity and economic growth. Exclusion and stigma can lead to deprivation of opportunities for acquiring such human capital and would therefore diminish future economic output.

In a mapping study conducted by EQUAL GROUND (2017) it was revealed that of all the LGBTIQ respondents only 29% have university level education (Bachelor's Degree). This is worrisome because the job market is brutally competitive and even graduates are struggling to secure a decent job. EQUAL GROUND conducted another recent mapping study (2021) in which LGBTIQ respondents described educational institutions as having an oppressive environment rather than a supportive learning environment. In another study (2021) by Gunasekara, physical appearance, stigmatisation and being different (physically/mentally) have been identified as determinants of bullying by fellow students. It is important to note, that the mapping study also revealed that it is during school days that some LGBTIQ persons first started acknowledging their differences with regard to Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity or Expression (SOGIE). Feelings of being “othered” or excluded, as well as bullying, can have a significant impact on a person's mental health, social skills, and personal development at this crucial stage. According to research, many LGBTIQ persons described the feeling of being oppressed, lonely, and isolated during their days in school. This is an issue of concern as school is meant to be a supportive learning environment that fosters growth and development.

The Constitution guarantees the right to education for all, but conflicting issues remain when it comes to addressing issues like Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), SOGIE, anti-bullying and/or harassment policy for SOGIE etc.

**UNICEF and the government of Netherlands undertook the *Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme (PBEA)* in 2012-2016 with 14 countries (Burundi, Chad, Cote d'ivore, Dem. Rep. of Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, State of Palestine, Uganda and Yemen), and one of the indicators of this initiative was to assess and increase tolerance for differences and diversity in educational institutions. Ironically, Sri Lanka did not join the initiative, despite being a member state of the United Nations.**

**The University of Colombo prepared an Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy in the 1990s while some academics of the University of Kelaniya drafted a policy on gender equity /equality in the late 2000s. However, according to a report developed by CARE (2015) none of these policies has so far been implemented.**





| Available documents/mechanisms  | Areas of concern   |
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| <p><b>Presidential Task Force’s Review of existing education system:</b></p> <p>It has set inclusive, equal and non-discriminatory education as its key values.</p> <p>This Review has suggested a few recommendations for the overall education sector. Medium term (2020-2023) recommendations for the general sector include mainstreaming human anatomy and sexuality education as core subjects.</p> | <p>Ironically, under the mentioned key values, though there is mention of religion, caste, class, ethnicity, nationality, persons with disabilities etc., there is no mention of diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identities.</p> <p>According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, sexuality education not only includes human sexual anatomy, sexual reproduction, it also includes topics like sexual orientation, gender identity. Under the medium-term recommendation, there is no mention of these topics.</p>  |
| <p><b>Public Health Inspector (PHI) Manual:</b></p> <p>Chapter 9 of this Manual mentions that PHI should assist the schools to develop and implement health promotion policies for the prevention of mental and physical abuse, bullying against children and the prevention of trauma.</p>   | <p>There can be various reasons for bullying or harassment, and SOGIE is one of these grounds. This has not been mentioned.</p> <p>For instance, a UN study from the United States found that 70% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school, and a survey in China discovered that 59% of LGBT respondents reported that bullying had negatively affected their academic performance. In a study on Peer Pressure and Bullying (2012), it was found that in Sri Lanka, 68% of schooling boys and 51.2% of schooling girls in the age group of 13–16 years were victims of bullying. Among them 23% have been subjected to humiliation (name calling etc.). As a result, the school experienced 23% of school absenteeism.</p> |
| <p><b>Health and Physical Education Teachers’ Guide (2016) for Grade 7:</b></p> <p>The teachers are guided to teach students of Grade 7 about healthy behavior, which only include feelings/ attraction towards opposite sex.</p>   | <p>The curriculum is unequivocally heteronormative as it talks about feelings towards the opposite sex only, marriage, family with only heterosexual parents, etc. This implies that feelings towards same sex is abnormal or an unhealthy practice. Due to such teaching practices students do not get proper information about SOGIE. Further discrimination and marginalisation of people of diverse SOGIE is taught and ingrained into the students from a young age.</p>  |
| <p><b>Health and Physical Education Teachers’ Guide (2017) for Grade 8:</b></p> <p>Under Guidelines to the teachers, empathy has been mentioned as one of the psycho-social skills. Under empathy it says, ‘Avoid bullying the persons with weaknesses.’</p>  | <p>The term ‘persons with weaknesses’ is not defined; the document does not mention what these perceived weaknesses might be. It should be noted that bullying does not only occur due to ‘weaknesses’ but due to perceived differences and ‘othering’ based on various factors, such as age, religion/ethnicity, wealth and socioeconomic status, interests and hobbies, SOGIE, etc. Of these factors SOGIE is an important one, but none of these have been discussed or even mentioned.</p>   |

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| <p><b>Health and Physical Education under Teachers' Guide (2015), for Grade 10:</b></p> <p>Homosexual feelings/acts have been specified as sexual harassment or abuse.</p>  | <p>Instead of disseminating proper information about diverse SOGIE, this has been labeled as a vice. A mapping study of EQUAL GROUND revealed that many LGBTIQ respondents of the study described schools as an oppressive environment, rather than a supportive learning environment. This cited teachers' guide explains the reason behind such crucial and worrisome study finding since teachers are the cornerstone of students' education and school experience. If they are taught misinformation about LGBTIQ persons and diverse SOGIE, this will inevitably pass onto the students and will also lead to teachers discriminating and marginalising LGBTIQ students.</p>  |
| <p><b>Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) National Action Plan (2016-2020):</b></p> <p>One of the key activities under the education sector are to develop interactive training modules on gender and SGBV and incorporate it in regular training programmes/counseling guidance training / school-based teacher training/pre-service teacher training.</p> | <p>A study by CARE International (2013) on 'Broadening gender: Why masculinities matter – attitudes, practices and gender-based violence' in four districts in Sri Lanka, found that 4% of the men reported experiencing homophobic violence and another 4% had been sexually assaulted by a man.</p> <p>SGBV refers to acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life based on one's gender and/or sexuality (based on the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993). Sexuality can be diverse, and it means it covers diverse SOGIE. So SGBV also includes incidents experienced by LGBT people, but there's no mention of it.</p> |
| <p><b>The Ragging Act:</b></p> <p>This Act provides provision for punishment against ragging.</p>   | <p>The definition of ragging does not include sexual orientation or homophobic attacks/assaults etc. That is why, according to an article of Counterpoint (2018) despite the Ragging Act, acts of homophobic violence and harassment experienced by university students have been reported and recorded, but have not been acted upon.</p>   |
| <p><b>University Grants Commission's (UGC) complaint mechanism:</b></p> <p>The UGC also introduced an on-line complaints system in 2017, as well as secure phone lines, where those facing any form of harassment or intimidation could seek help.</p>  | <p>It is unclear whether individuals who respond to incidents of ragging and harassment have received the necessary sensitivity training to handle cases of bullying and harassment faced by individuals of diverse SOGIE in the educational setting.</p> <p>Moreover, LGBTIQ individuals and the bullying and the harassment they might face in educational settings are not explicitly mentioned in any existing local response mechanisms.</p>  |

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| <p><b>The Psycho-social Felicitation and Counseling unit:</b></p> <p>This unit which is responsible for addressing issues pertaining to school counseling is operating as a branch of a branch, i.e., under the Co-Curricular Activities, Guidance and Counseling and Peace Education.</p> | <p>As this branch is closeted with other sub-branches, it lacks the proper attention that it requires.</p> <p>Moreover, despite a few progressive advances, several problems specific to Sri Lankan school counseling seem to have had limited progress. Among them, the most profound difficulty being; the inadequate number of school counselors. For instance, the Ministry of Education (2012) reported that there are 1,086 guidance teachers employed in Sri Lankan government schools, providing psychosocial services to 4,004,086 students; making the counselor student ratio to be 1: 3,687.</p> <p>Moreover, these counselors are not sensitised and well trained on issues related to SOGIE. That is why students may feel hesitant to approach them with their problems.</p> |
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## Employment



A person whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity does not conform to prevailing and established heteronormative patterns may suffer from discrimination in the workplace. The employment discrimination that LGBTIQ people face represents a fundamental challenge to achieving the 2030 Agenda for SDG's commitment of 'leaving no one behind'. In this light, addressing employment discrimination is therefore a crucial step in achieving a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including gender equality (SDG 5), decent work (SDG 8), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).

Another research study by EQUAL GROUND on workplace discrimination (2021) found that, almost half of the respondents (42%) did not reveal their SOGIE at their workplace. This is also because half of the respondents (50%) believed that if they reveal their SOGIE at the workplace, they might face more stigma and discrimination. It indicates that LGBTIQ employees struggle with revealing their SOGIE and being their true selves at the workplace.

Another important revelation of this study was that 58% stated that they have experienced verbal harassment, and 31% said they have experienced sexual harassment. When respondents were asked if they can complain to the management about such incidents, 44% said they cannot because they fear facing more reprisals. This indicates that even if LGBTIQ employees experienced verbal and/or sexual harassment at their workplace, they chose to remain silent because of the fear facing increased discrimination and/or stigmatisation.

| Available documents/mechanisms  | Areas of concern  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Article 12 of the Constitution:</b></p> <p>Guarantees the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law of all persons. It also prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion and place of birth.</p> | <p>However, there is no mention of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Therefore, the Constitution does not prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity and/or expression.</p> |

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| <p><b>ILO's Convention (C111) on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958:</b></p> <p>Sri Lanka has already ratified this Convention. Convention No. 111 encourages States to “declare and pursue” a national policy to promote equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation.</p>   | <p>The irony is there is no such policy or special provision in the Constitution or labour Code to prevent discrimination in employment related matters for LGBTIQ employees.</p>  |
| <p><b>The National Human Resource and Employment Policy (NHREP):</b></p> <p>Speaks about special programmes for the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to enhance employability of the youth.</p> <p>Under policy suggestions to ensure social protection of the labor force, NHREP talks about equal employment rights and an enabling environment free of stigma and discrimination.</p>  | <p>However, there is no specification as to who fall under this category. Moreover, there's no mention of sexual minority groups.</p> <p>This policy suggestion is only for employees with HIV/AIDS, whereas this should be applicable for people with diverse SOGIE too.</p>  |
| <p><b>Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP):</b></p> <p>In the latest DWCP, it mentions that the UN and the Government of Sri Lanka have committed to take united action to ensure that “by 2022, people in Sri Lanka benefit from improved data, knowledge management to address inequalities and ensure inclusive and responsive decision making.”</p>  | <p>As of 2022, no such initiative has been taken which might have assisted in addressing the workplace inequalities for LGBTIQ employees as well.</p>  |
| <p><b>Vision 2025:</b></p> <p>Talks about sustainable peace; equality; upholding, promoting and protecting human rights of all and the pluralistic nature of our society; and for inclusive and equitable growth and development of the country.</p>   | <p>For inclusive development, it suggests including various groups in the workforce like women, youth and persons with disabilities, but there is no mention of the LGBTIQ community.</p>  |
| <p><b>Code of Conduct and Guidelines to Prevent and Address Sexual Harassment in Workplaces:</b></p> <p>It states sexual harassment can involve a man harassing a woman or another man, or a woman harassing another woman or a man.</p> <p>It also says sexual harassment maybe based on sex and/or sexuality.</p> <p>This code of conduct has listed insulting a person's sex and/or sexual identity as verbal harassment, which include LGBTIQ employees.</p> | <p>Though this Code of conduct has included issues which are applicable to LGBTIQ employees too, the irony is under labour laws there is no provision for workplace sexual harassment of LGBTIQ persons.</p> <p>Only the Penal Code of Sri Lanka has provision of sexual harassment (Section 345). The same Penal Code has provisions (Section 365 and 365A) which have criminalised consenting same-sex relations between consenting adults, which is contradictory when it comes to reporting harassment incidents related to LGBTIQ people.</p> |
| <p><b>The Industrial Disputes Act:</b></p> <p>This deals with workplace related disputes, which might include sexual harassment as well.</p>   | <p>However, there is no mention of workplace related sexual harassment in the Act.</p>   |

## Other Country Examples



### In Education Setting

In 2018, Sri Lanka's closest neighbour, India introduced sex education programmes. The Health Ministry of India is also working to improve awareness about sex and sexuality. In 2017, it stated "homosexual feelings" are natural. India's National Medical Commission has ordered publishers and medical schools to edit their textbooks and curricula to exclude discriminatory and unscientific portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people. Moreover, in Namibia, the Life Skills Syllabus includes learning and discussion about diverse sexuality.

In 2019 under a project initiated by NGO Society for People's Awareness Care and Empowerment (SPACE) in collaboration with the Delhi government's Directorate of Education, with support from the Netherlands Embassy, various workshops and sensitizing programs were conducted in schools. After eight months of this project, 27 schools- including 25 government schools - have been certified as "trans-friendly".

The Ragging Act and related policies of India have specifically included homosexual assaults.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, the Implementing Rules and Regulations for the Anti-Bullying Act includes references to bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. In Colombia, the Department of Education of the Bogota District conducted a survey on homophobic bullying in secondary schools. Malta has adopted an anti-discrimination policy that specifically addresses the situation of trans and intersex students in schools.

In 2014, Nepal's education board has included sexuality and gender diversity as part of the school curriculum on sexual and reproductive health for Classes 6, 7 and 8.

**The Maharashtra government has revised its Class 11 sociology textbook (2019-20 academic year), which now lists a number of families seen across the country now: single-parent families, live-in relationships, families with same-sex parents, and those with step parents. The book talks about same-sex marriages, gender equality and the blending of different cultural influences.**

### Workplace/Employment Sector

In Ireland, equality and diversity strategies accounted for 7.9% increase in the workforce innovation and 6.5% increase in the labour productivity. This is a proof that the promotion of workplace equality and diversity now emerges as a priority focus in the implementation of the Government's National Workplace Strategy.

Article 18(3) of the Constitution of Nepal elaborates that to ensure Right to Equality special provision of law can be made for protection of the rights of sexual minorities (including other minority groups).

Taking a step further to reinforce the culture of inclusion and to enable LGBTQ+ employees to have equal rights at the workplace, Tata Steel, India, has rolled out a new HR policy that enables colleagues from the LGBTQ+ community to declare their partners and avail all HR benefits permissible under the Law. Under the expanded Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policy, Tata Steel employees and their partners will be able to avail a host of benefits including health check-up, medical benefits, joint house points, adoption leave, new-born parent leave, childcare leave, and inclusion in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Employees will also get financial assistance for gender reassignment surgery and 30 days special leave for same.

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<sup>2</sup> The Supreme Court of India vide its Order dated 16.5.2007 has ordered strict implementation of rules and regulations for prevention and prohibition of ragging in technical institutions.



## Way Forward

Reviewing the various documents that outline policies, recommendations, and interventions, it is clear, that sexual orientations and gender identities are not discussed, recognised as key factors in a person's life, actively erased, or more importantly, considered as a “vice” or a “deviation”. Despite ample evidence and research, none of these documents have acknowledged the existence of diverse SOGIE in Sri Lanka.

Including the excluded is a complex challenge which can be achieved with continuous and inclusive efforts. Sri Lanka can make some positive and inclusive policy changes towards addressing and mitigating the discrimination of LGBTIQ people in the education and employment sectors, which in the long run, will contribute to the overall economic development as well. In various government policies, it talks about inclusiveness and/or in inclusive development, but without including the LGBTIQ population in all spheres such inclusive development cannot be achieved.

### Positive in-country examples

**Ragging, Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination Prevention Policy 2018 of Wayamba University of Sri Lanka included sexual orientation as one of the grounds of discrimination. All the universities should have such policy which clearly includes this ground.**

**The ‘Trainers Guide on General Child Care Course for Careers in Child Care Giving’ developed by the National Child Protection Authority (2019) directs the trainers to put emphasis on teaching diversity of emerging sexuality (sexual and gender orientation development) to adolescents. It also suggested to use the ‘Genderbread Person’ to illustrate emerging sexual and gender orientation differences.**

Taking into consideration the initiatives adopted by neighbouring countries, to address the concerned issues of the mentioned policies, documents and mechanisms, this policy brief suggests the following recommendations:

### **Change discriminatory guidelines and/or information from school curricula**

After reviewing various national documents related to education, we found out that these documents/guidelines still contain discriminatory information. Sexuality education does not include issues like diverse SOGIE, sexuality etc. These documents are heteronormative in nature and also have labeled same-sex feelings as an unhealthy practice and vice. These provisions and guidelines need to be revised and should be made more inclusive.

### **Implement anti-bullying and/or zero discrimination policies at school level**

In 2016, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ruled that, children living or affected by HIV have the full right to education and cannot be discriminated against. However, according to a UNESCO (2017) report, apart from someone's HIV status, a child's deviation from traditional standards of appearance (i.e. being shorter than the average height, above the average weight or wearing glasses), not ascribing to heteronormative standards (standards that reflect that heterosexuality is the norm or default sexual orientation) are all factors that increase the likelihood of bullying victimisation. Therefore, it is important that school policies with regard to



anti-bullying and/or discrimination on the basis of one's SOGIE are in place. For example: The British School in Colombo (an international school) has included sexual, homophobic or xenophobic language towards an individual or group in their Anti-Bullying school policy.

## **Sensitise teachers and educators**

As studies show teachers hesitate to discuss issues like sex education, sexuality, diverse SOGIE etc. Teachers should be sensitised on these issues so that they can disseminate accurate information.

## **Assessment of mental health counselors at school level**

Proper assessment should be conducted of school level mental health counselors to identify if they are aware of and sensitised about SOGIE issues; otherwise, the students who are struggling with their sexuality or have related questions will never get the assistance that they need.

## **Research**

According to the Concluding Observations of Convention on the Child Rights, Sri Lanka (2010), one out of five children drops out of school before completing the compulsory nine-year cycle and that a high level of absenteeism and repetition persists. More research work on underlying reasons of school drop-outs should be conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and National Institute of Education (NIE), which will assist in getting quantitative data/evidence to find out if bullying and/or harassment due to SOGIE played a role behind the drop-outs.

## **Provide a specific and an inclusive definition of ragging in the Ragging Act**

Assault and sexual harassment can also take place under the guise of ragging. Thus, the Ragging Act should include a definition of ragging which will specify the acts (which will count as ragging), also it should include harassment/bullying due to someone's SOGIE.

## **Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) trainings for educational institutions and workplaces**

Both public and private education and employment sectors should conduct D&I programs within the institutions which will make them aware of issues like diverse SOGIE, various aspects of sexuality, importance of inclusion, respect diversity etc. Such D&I trainings also help engage with uncomfortable topics, break the taboo and build a safe learning and working space.

## **Review and amend policies related to workplace inclusion**

A research study on workplace discrimination by EQUAL GROUND revealed that of all the interviewed organizations 56% said they do not have any inclusive workplace policy for LGBTIQ employees and another 53% said they do not have any gender related policy whatsoever. Therefore, there is a need to review the existing policies and make them inclusive so that LGBTIQ employees' rights can be protected as well.

## **Ratify C190**

The Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is the first international standard that aims to put an end to violence and harassment in the world of work; it recognises that everyone has the right to a world of work free from violence and harassment. Unfortunately, it has been ratified by just two countries, and Sri Lanka has not ratified it. If the government ratified the Convention, it would facilitate and encourage the enactment of laws to prevent workplace sexual harassment to combat the widespread problem.

## **Include provisions related to sexual harassment in workplace in the Labour Code**

According to existing legal procedure, now the victims of sexual harassment have to go through criminal legal procedure as only the Penal Code has explicit provisions for sexual harassment. The issues covered under the labor Code are dealt by labor tribunals which make the procedures comparatively easy for the aggrieved persons. Therefore, it is about time to incorporate the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace in the Labour Code.



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