

# MIND THE GAP(S)

## Family, Socialization and Gender



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UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG SUISSE  
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LGBT CHILDREN BETWEEN PUBLIC HOMOPHOBIA AND THEIR  
PARENTAL FAMILIES' DISMISSAL INSTEAD OF SOLIDARITY AND  
PROTECTION<sup>64</sup>

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*Zorica Mršević*

Adolescence is a hell. But lesbian  
adolescence is a special kind of hell. While  
I was living in that hell,

I was the loneliness teenager

A Slovenian poet and writer Urška

Sterle<sup>65</sup>

Nearly 49% of LGBT people became aware of this before 15. They are vulnerable and dependent and need family support, protection and love, solidarity and protection. There are elements of identity which are not the result of family upbringing, e.g. sexual orientation and gender identity. Other, like values, beliefs,

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<sup>65</sup> Barzut 2012: 73.

goals and even thought patterns are rooted in our family experience. Our identities, understandings and behaviour are shaped by the lifelong process of socialization but also by something that we had from the very beginning (Fetoski, 2012: 9). Families are major agent of socialization and are especially significant agent of child socialization (Gelles, 1995: 3, 314). Differences between boys and girls are assumed to be natural, but most of these differences must be taught (Gelles, 1995: 108). We are constantly engaged in re-creating social meaning simply by following our normal daily routines. Morality tales teach about good and evil, but they also carry implicit messages about gender. Although these stories are not presented as true, children take them much more literally than adults do, primarily because young children are less able to distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy (Coltrane, 1997: 108).

The social character of practices of gender, sexuality, parenting and family life, which once appeared to be natural and immutable, became politically charged (Stacey, 1996: 46) and challenged by practice. Statistics regarding divorce rate, remarriage, blended families, single parenthood, joint custody, abortion, domestic partnership, two-career households, and like evidences of decline of modern family system, contributes to the politics of gender, sexuality, reproduction and family here became very polarized and socially divisive (Stacey, 1996: 87, 47).

Some authors stressed the expected role of mothers within patriarchal system. Writing about role of mothers, Adrienne Rich, wrote on motherhood without autonomy, without choice, because they must deliver their children over within a few years of their birth to the patriarchal system of education. Mothers are expected to prepare children to enter the system without rebelliousness or “maladjustment” and to perpetuate it in their own adult lives. Patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values even in those early years (Rich, 1995: 61). Fathers appeared in our research as less capable than mothers to accept sexual orientation of their children when it is different of what they perceive as “normal”. They are more ready to put pressure on them, being nostalgic for the “Father Knows Best” world they had lost (Stacey 1996: 87).

## **Research on situation in parental families of LGBT children and youth**

The sources of data used in this research on LGBT children and youth and their parental families in Serbia are: the coming out stories of adult LGBT persons (e.g. Vučaj, 2006 & 2009), parents of the LGBT people's stories (e.g. Fetoski, 2012), literature on LGBT topics (e.g. Barzut, 2012), LGBT organisations' records and reports, the media and case studies.

*An example<sup>66</sup> of the family's forced "changing".* Suspecting that Vlada, a seventeen year old student of the third year of grammar school, was "too much" interested in men, Vlada's father thoroughly searched his room while the boy was away on a field trip. On that occasion, he found in a locked suitcase under the bed, whose lock he forced open, the "compelling" evidence in the form of a number of what he considered gay pornographic magazines. Under the influence of popular psychological literature, such as Zoran Milivojevic's on the responsibility of fathers not to let their children become homosexual, and the obligation to "take their boys by the hand and show them the world as seen by men", he decided to take serious steps towards "making his son normal". Since he firstly beat Vlada after the boy had returned from the school trip, the father set a new code of conduct for the boy, under which Vlada had to spend his days locked in his room and think about his "mistakes". At each and every smallest sign of the "unmanly" behaviour on Vlada's part, the father responded by beating him up, while he was forbidden to leave the house, except for going to school. He also forbade him to do training at his handball club and to go to the gym, so that that he wouldn't be able to "pinch his gays" there and look at

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<sup>66</sup> For the sake of confidentiality, the names of all characters in the text are fictional, while the situations are real. All the above examples are a combination of real and recent cases of violence and discrimination against LGBT young people in their families, communities and schools. These real cases have been reported to and documented at the organizations for LGBT people's rights, mainly at Labris, GSA and Gayten, in the period from 2005 to 2013.

the “naked men” in the changing room. Vlada complained to the school psychologist that his father was abusing him, to which the school psychologist promised that he would talk to his father. He also advised Vlada that he should try to give his father fewer reasons to suspect him, that he shouldn't dress himself like a “gay” person, that he shouldn't wear a little comb in his hair, that he should cease to wave his arms as he talks and “giggle like a woman,” and just make sure he behaved as serious as an adult male. He wouldn't even raise the question of Vlada's sexuality, simply believing that a correction of his behaviour was the solution to all his problems. He also advised Vlada to improve his school marks, as that would certainly make his father let him go out, since one of the reasons for Vlada's “house arrest” was certainly his increasingly poor school achievement. After Vlada talked with the psychologist and improved his school marks, his father allowed him to go out once a month, but only with girls. Every time Vlada went out, his father cross-examined him about whether he “did anything” or whether he “started” a girl. If the answers were convincingly positive, the father rewarded him with a piece of some carefully selected “masculine” clothes, such as a jacket, a pair of woollen trousers, a white shirt or weights to be used at home, so that Vlada's body wouldn't remain undeveloped without sports. For Vlada's eighteenth birthday, his father's presented him with a gift of a paid night with a prostitute, so that he could “remove the darkness from his eyes”. He praised himself to his friends and neighbours that he had acted at the right time, due to which his son became a real man. Vlada's suicide attempt after his graduation and his suicide note, in which he wrote that he was gay and that there was no way he would be anything else, was received by Vlada's father as a terrible and unjust blow that was dealt to him by his “ungrateful” son. Upon Vlada's recovery, he told him that he would finance his studies at the University that was in a different city, that he couldn't come back home any more, that he couldn't turn to him on any issue any longer and that he would publicly renounce him (Okuraži se, internet).

Members of national and religious minorities, regardless of how badly they are treated in the majority ambience, are, at least, always and unconditionally accepted in their families and communities, and in a specific way, protected by their language, culture and religion. The micro social acceptance is even more pronounced when and if rejection from the outside increases. The only male and female members of the LGBT community are those who are frequently rejected by their family members, even by those who are the closest to them, by those whose support they must always and necessarily get. That still doesn't mean that their position when compared with other discriminated group is the worst one, but when it comes to discrimination, it is one of the circumstances that you certainly need to keep in mind when analysing the problems that LGBT people face in today's Serbia (GSA, internet). LGBT children lacking caring, nurturing, cherishing – the essential components of good parenting may easily turn into so-called “skinless” persons. The term is coined for children growing up without protective armour that is provided by loving parents and supportive communities (Hewlet & West, 1998: 29).

*An example of domestic violence.* Anelka came to Belgrade from a small town in central Serbia to study. She was always attracted to women, but she didn't dare to express such preferences at home. In Belgrade, she finally found women like herself and struck up friendships with them, and also began to pursue long-term relationships. As she was an excellent student, her brother, at whose place she was living, didn't exercise particular control over her, nor did he even think about what kind of relationships she could have with her friends that occasionally visited her, learned together with her, and even spent the night with her in her room. Towards the end of her studies, Anelka decided to stop hiding, establish a lasting relationship with her partner, leave her brother's apartment and move in with her partner. When he realized what was happening, her brother was terribly angry, because he “hated gays and lesbians” more than anyone else in the world, so that he threatened that he would “beat her black and blue”. While he was at work, his wife advised Anelka that she would best leave

as soon as possible; knowing that his threats were serious and Anđelka began to move out quickly. However, when she came back to pick up her last things, her brother had already come back. He beat her up and threatened that if she continued seeing “that” woman, he would find them and kill them both, because “such” persons mustn't live and corrupt youth people. He informed their parents that he had to do it, because he didn't want his sister to maintain “perverse and sick relationships,” and added that he would do everything that he could, because “something like that” simply couldn't be allowed, with which the parents totally agreed (Okurazi se, internet).

### **What do parents when facing with fact that their children are LGBT**

First reaction usually is shock, fear and denial (“this is not possible, this simply is not true, this is a mistake”) (Fetoski, 2012: 12). Then bitter questioning follows, “why my child”, and “what was my fault”. Questions are followed by guilt feelings and searching for medical, psychological and sociological theories on how children become like that. All the time parents experience strong emotions such as fear, anger, disappointment, shame (resulting in self-isolation), feeling of lost (Fetoski 2012: 11), self-deluding that this is “just a phase”. In many cases happens the pressure on a child to return to “normality” and “not to be such”, denial of his/her freedom of movement, of having sexual intercourses (Fetoski, 2012: 15), searching for medical treatments, dismissal, total break in communication (Vučaj, 2006: 34).

### **Reaction of children to their parents' negative reaction**

Most frequent LGBT children's response to their parents' negative attitude is search for support from grandparents (Vučaj, 2006: 35), alcohol and drugs misuse, leaving school, increasing conflicts within family, destruction and self-destruction (Fetoski, 2012: 17), serious mental problems, suicidal tries, homelessness, poverty (Barzut, 2012: 87), criminal activities, prostitution and other forms of sex work.

### **Parental acceptance**

Acceptance happens after the denial phase. The first noticed step of acceptance is reorganisation of domestic life in accordance with the fact of having an LGBT child (Fetoski, 2012: 13). It mostly is directed toward child protection. Process of acceptance involves also rejection of own stereotypes, often followed by investigation of new (education, professional, housing) possibilities for their children and families. Second step usually is searching for and meeting with other parents of LGBT children, joining self-help parental groups (Vučaj, 2009: 49), searching for expert assistance in improving communication, finding and meeting own LGBT friends and their children LGBT friends and partners.

### **Stigmatization of parents**

In homophobic social and political environment, parents of LGBT children usually face with negative attitude by their surroundings because their children “are such”. They usually share discrimination and isolation (Barzut, 2012: 133), sometimes violence and wider family rejection. They experience the loss of friends, relatives, colleagues, feeling of loneliness. Although many of them are well aware that silence and hide do not connect people, and do not support self-esteem and self-confidence, they rather choose self-isolation (Fetoski, 2012: 34).

### **LGBT children are rarely completely accepted by their families**

Long after acceptance of their LGBT children many parents continue to believe that in same sex partnership “there is no love”, that such partnerships are “not lasting”, that LGBT people are promiscuous (Fetoski, 2012: 23). They keep advising their children that it is better to “be silent”, meaning, to stay invisible, to pretend in public life they are straight, not to talk on own sexuality or gender identity as long as possible. Complete acceptance sometimes seems as impossible

mission; sometimes it is just shrugging shoulders: this is your choice, your decision (Vučaj, 2009: 75). There is no happy end, having in mind that some of LGBT children's parents never accept to meet their children's partners or to be informed about their problems in partnership.

### **Public expression of homophobia**

Social acceptance of homosexuality in Europe is greatest in the Netherlands, with Sweden and Denmark running very close. In most Southern European countries, but especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the situation is substantially less positive (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper, 2013: 13). A majority of the population in Central and above all Eastern Europe, is rejecting the view that gay men and lesbian women should be allowed to live their own lives as they wish (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper, 2013: 10). In Serbia situation is similar to other Eastern European countries: the very existence of LGBT people is perceived in public as a threat to a "healthy" or "natural" family, and that is almost a common content of the public discourse of hate towards them (Istraživanje javnog mnjenja, internet). Attitudes of LGBT children and youth parents are shaped in this social environment, listening to the social theories and psychological studies which are concerned with helping children occupy their "proper" or "natural" places in the family and in society. These theories and studies about gender, like all forms of knowledge, are products of cultural understandings prevalent at the time (Coltrane, 1997: 109). Social support for parents usually is contained within that patriarchal context, creating a set of values that became increasingly unacceptable to progressive sensibilities (Hewlet & West, 1998: 130).

One of the messages is that children need to grow up in families that provide them with a "stable relationship to male authority" (Stacey, 1996: 69). Popular discomfort with same sex marriage in inventory of the family values of "reasonable people", as well as explicit condemnation of lesbian childbearing (Stacey 1996: 69) is widely spread even among tolerant intellectuals.

The attitude of a female activist for LGBT rights, perhaps, in a summarized manner, best expresses the hope for a change:

“The deep-rooted prejudices in society are like a granite rock and it takes a lot of work to get through that armour of granite. Various tools and aids are used, but one should never give up, because at any moment, the wreck may come off as an old shell. Maybe right this year. A pride parade is one of the tools for breaking down prejudices. And when they ask me what the parade is for, I always say ‘It's for the kids, the gay kids in schools, the children growing up in fear and trauma. For the children who lead two parallel lives, the first one, which is false, and which is for families, schools and the public, and another one, which is their own and hidden. For the children who don't live freely and breathe free air as all other male and female citizens do’” (Andjelovski, 2013).

The homophobic discourse is still dominant in Serbian society where the same-sex love is the field of prohibitions and taboos, while national deputies freely animate their electorate by homophobic hate speech, using the fact that they are legally protected by parliamentary immunity (Cvejić, 2013: 3)<sup>67</sup>. The reproduction of homophobia, among other things, is achieved through promotion in the media of the unscientific authoritarian attitudes, prejudices, and efforts to protect the “traditional Serbian values”, both religious and moral ones. The non-discriminatory education is one of the strong points of development, while the current situation slows development down, because it is dominated by the unscientific and discriminatory attitudes towards virtually all "others", in particular towards LGBT people (Kovačević, internet).

Here are some of the key points of the negative public perception that education could certainly reduce or eliminate from the public discourse (Ombudsman's special report, 2011):

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<sup>67</sup> JS (United Serbia Party) Leader, Dragan Marković Palma, is a national deputy that most frequently made negative statements about the LGBT population – as many as 41 times.

*Wrong perception 1*      Institutions should be always on the side of ordinary people and the majority of the population.

*Fact 1*      Institutions should equally treat and protect the rights of all who are affected, both of the so-called ordinary citizens or the majority, and of the persons belonging to the minority. By the logic of things, in Serbia, as anywhere else in the world, the rights of various minority groups are far more and very frequently violated, be they ethnic, religious, age or sexual minorities. It is important to understand that the rights of minorities are not inconsistent with the rights of the majority and that their protection doesn't, in any way, reduce the rights of the majority. On the contrary, the respect for minority rights contributes to the quality of the human rights of all, as well as of those of the majority, so that this is the way for the whole society to be in a win-win position.

*Wrong perception 2*      It all comes from aside, from other cultures, and aggressively imposes itself on us<sup>68</sup>.

*Fact 2*      LGBT people exist in all nations, including Serbia. Their thus-far relative invisibility in public and private relations doesn't mean that they emerged recently, or that they came from somewhere aside. They are all around us, they are our children, brothers and sisters, our relatives, our neighbours, colleagues and fellow students or work mates, friends with

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<sup>68</sup> *The European Commission exerts a lot of pressure and it announced that it would monitor if the rights of sexual minorities in Serbia were respected. Representatives of the European Commission, who, as part of the Enhanced Permanent Dialogue between Serbia and the EU, were in Belgrade in February 2013, stressed that a great deal of attention, in the coming months, would be paid to the monitoring of the respect for the rights of sexual minorities, which would include the holding of a pride parade this year. In: Stojanović, 2013: 2.*

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whom we spend our summer holidays, see New Years in and cheer at football games. We sometimes know about their minority sexual orientation and we sometimes don't. Due to the fear of censure, loss of work, various forms of violence, discrimination, humiliation and insults, they still mostly opt for leading a "double" life, which means keeping their sexuality in discretion. One thing is certain and that is that "these" topics can't be abolished because some people don't agree with the existence of people of different sexual orientations in comparison with their own ones, with their demands to be equal and their rights to be protected.

*Wrong perception 3* It can't pass in Serbia.

*Fact 3* Right-wing group members and conservatives in many countries say the same thing for their countries, but nowhere in the modern world did they succeed in preventing the existence of lesbians and gays and their struggle for human rights, equality and freedom from discrimination and violence, except, of course, in those tyrannical regimes that punish homosexuality as a criminal offence.

*Wrong perception 4* The West is against the Serbian culture.

*Fact 4* This is just one aspect of the famous paranoid conspiracy theory against Serbia. But even if it were proven that the "Serbian" authentic culture includes killing, violence, bullying, discrimination or elimination of homosexuals, then under the influence of modern conceptions of human rights (not the West) and the needs of contemporary people, first of all the citizens of Serbia, it would have to change.

*Wrong perception 5*

There are more important problems.

*Fact 5*

Everyone thinks that their problems are the most important ones, unemployment to the unemployed, violence to those suffering from it, hunger to the hungry, discrimination to the discriminated against. It is difficult and unfair to rank the problems in order of their importance. That is why there are political liberties and rights, so that all those who believe that their rights were threatened or violated, could publicly express their discontent. It is wrong to think that only popular groups have the right, or that only the problems bothering most or all citizens can be shown in public. The right to publicly express their problems often has to be used by the most unpopular persons, just because they are socially marginalized and rejected and because they are small in terms of numbers or don't have the social power to resolve their problems in a different way.

*Wrong perception 6*

LGBT people violate the rights of the majority that opposes homosexuality.

*Fact 6*

No right of the majority is really in any danger unless such a "right" implies the non-existent "right" to a life free from the existence of different persons, the others and minorities.

*Wrong perception 7*

LGBT people belong to domain of abnormality and immorality <sup>69</sup>, according to the generally accepted standards.

*Fact 7*

Minority sexual orientation isn't a deviation, but it is a normal manifestation of human diversity. The majority,

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<sup>69</sup> LGBT people offend public morality by their very existence. In this case, the question/morality test articulated in Kant's manner isn't what would happen if we were all alike, but what would happen if all the people were free regarding their orientation and identity.

because it includes a great number of people, doesn't necessarily imply normality and the minority, because it includes a smaller number of people, doesn't imply abnormality. The generally accepted criteria, as the measures of the majority, aren't the measures of normality, but only a reflection of the numerousness, and numerousness and normalcy shouldn't be equated. Human diversities should be accepted, tolerated, protected, and they shouldn't be judged, eliminated, fought against or discredited in any way by declaring them less worthy, abnormal or even dangerous.

*Wrong perception 8*                      It is simply not the time for “such people”.

*Fact 8*                                      By such attitude, the inevitable reform of the educational system is indefinitely postponed, as “*nextopia*”<sup>70</sup> (it will be, but not now, when the moment isn't right). Some parts of society are mature, others aren't. When asked in a survey “Do you support homosexuality”, most answers will be negative, but if you ask citizens whether they support human liberties and the right to choose, most of them will respond positively. The Serbian society values human freedoms and the right to choose and that is what non-discriminatory education should be built on, without any indefinite delays. If we were to sit and wait for them to come on their own, we would never see them come.

Political history shows us that marginalized groups always had to fight for the equalization of their rights (GSA, internet 2012). Women and African-American population are good examples of this. The unacceptability of “*nextopia*” or of an

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<sup>70</sup> The term was introduced into the economy by M. Dahlen, a Swedish economist and theorist of marketing strategy, in his book *Nextopia* (2008). It means postponing the realization of the objectives, while constantly waiting for the „right moment“, major news and changes.

indefinite delay, not only fails to bring any changes, but it also fails to maintain the status quo, because the situation, due to the waiting and delays, gets worse.

Security is top priority for LGBT people and without it one can't move forward in the improvement of their position (GSA, internet 2013). The individual has a fundamental right to personal safety, and one of the prime responsibilities of government is to secure those rights (Pleck, 1987: 3). The obligation of the state to protect from violence all its citizens without discrimination hasn't been completely fulfilled, which is a problem that requires more efficient operation of the police, judiciary and prosecution, since they still lack willingness or are unable to effectively combat violence and threats of violence against that population, which has been escalating to the present day. The fact is that LGBT children in their parental families are often exposed to domestic violence. Concerns of domestic violence devastating effects – the physically and sexually abused swell the ranks of homeless; they also make up large share of runaways, violent criminals, prostitutes and even assassins. Some victims of abuse suffer depression, social isolation, and are prone to suicide; others lash out their friends, relatives and even strangers on the streets (Pleck, 1987: 3).

Experience shows that the police certainly became more professional and efficient in the protection of LGBT people against violence, but this is still far from efficient protection. There must be a better solution against those perpetrating violence against LGBT people (and other minority groups) planned and implemented in creating institutional synergies in an organized fashion.

*An example of public violence due to the perceived sexual orientation.*  
*The reaction of parents.* On the last day of the seminar on programming, a secondary school student, Igor, along with other seminar attendees, went to a local coffee shop to mark the completion of the seminar. Domestic customers expressed a typical local hostility towards the newcomers and the company immediately began to verbally provoke them, occasionally throwing at their group petty cash, boxes of matches and cigarettes, and to publicly call out “Are you LGBT rights activists, who have come to spread

your perversions in Serbia”. The coffee shop staff tried very hard to calm the situation down, and they repeatedly said that the point at issue was computer programming, as well as the promotion of computing literature, after which the provocations temporarily stopped. However, as Igor sat next to his friend Zdenko, with whom he talked all the time, sometimes holding hands, touching his knees, and putting his hand over his shoulder, the group of local young men once again cracked down on their group, this time especially on Igor. “You there, in the green T-shirt, you like men, don't you, you like most in the world to be fucked in the ass, you faggot”? In the general confusion that occurred when the group of attackers started beating Igor, Zdenko, a young man with whom Igor talked, got stabbed in the stomach. One of the attackers pulled out a gun, cocked it, and cried out threateningly “Well, that does it, someone is going to pay”. His friend, thereupon, also pulled out a revolver, the handle of which he used to repeatedly hit Igor on the head, until Igor fell covered in blood. He then said: “Brother, don't waste your ammunition on scum, it's better this way”. It was subsequently determined that Igor had concussion of the brain, so that both he and Zdenko were transferred to the Emergency Treatment Centre in Belgrade, where they were kept for several days. The police intervened at the coffee shop and stopped further fighting. Apart from Igor and Zdenko, who were driven away by an ambulance, everybody else was detained, both the attackers and seminar participants. The local attackers told the police that they had been provoked by the “propagation of a gay pride”, to which they responded verbally, but as Igor had started to “woo” and urge them to have “sex from behind” with them, they “had had enough” and reacted physically. They denied threats with their revolvers and said that the two of them only “showed their uncharged” revolvers to each other. All these statements were confirmed by the staff of the coffee shop, who entirely blamed the group of newcomers for the incident. The police detained all seminar participants and called them propagators of “gay pride and gays”. All of them were beaten up at the police station for the mess that

they had “caused” and they were threatened that if they didn't compensate the damages to the coffee shop, they would be immediately handed over to a magistrate and would get a maximum prison sentence of two months, and that criminal proceedings would be launched against them. Igor's father, who doesn't live with him, because he divorced Igor's mother about ten years ago, blamed her for what had happened to Igor, since she supposedly “ let Igor develop in the wrong direction”. However, she blamed him, because despite sending the money, he didn't care for his son, his education or upbringing, which is primarily the duty of the father when it comes to a male child. Igor's father, thereafter, decided to stop paying child support for him, although he didn't finish school and wasn't yet an adult person. He also initiated legal proceedings for taking custody of Igor from Igor's mother, requesting from the court to assign Igor to him, since he was the father that would “know how” to deal with his son in the “right” way in order to make him a “normal man” before it was “too late”. The major evidence that he submitted to the court included the medical documentation of Igor's injuries received in the fight, as well as the police report in which Igor and other participants in the seminar “publicly promoted gay parade and courted” those gathered in the bar (Okuraži se, internet).

Sports clubs and associations, as well as sports venues, are still the places of unimpeded public expression of high levels of homophobia and transphobia, which appear as “normal” companions of sports fan groups and cheering. Legislative and other policies in this area are still insufficient, because sportsmen are vulnerable to discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

*An example of discrimination based on sexual orientation in sports. The reaction of parents.* Andrija was born in a small town in Vojvodina and, as a child, he started going to Novi Sad for sports. He continued playing sports in Italy, where his parents lived for a few years. Upon changing from the junior to the senior age, he signed his first professional contract with a big sporting club in Belgrade. The first year was the fulfilment of his boyhood

sporting dreams, he immediately gained the trust of the coaches and teammates, so that, although the youngest among them, he became the one who would begin every game of the first team. He was satisfied in every respect, such as with the treatment at the club, his earnings, living in Belgrade and with the support from the audience that he always had. Also, he visibly progressed in sports and his health served him well. The problems began at the start of his second season, when the coach began having doubts about Andrija's same-sex sexual orientation. The coach asked him for a "friendly" talk, during which Andrija, who had confidence in the coach, fully opened up and admitted that he was gay, expecting support and protection from his coach. The coach, however, expressed disappointment over the fact that he was gay and made it clear to him that he had no future at the club. He told him that he could no longer train with the first team, let alone appear in public and "shame" the club. The coach told him to look for another engagement and that he, on his part, would help him get the document on his withdrawal from the club without any problems, as well as that the club, as a gesture of goodwill, wouldn't say anywhere that the real reason for his being expelled was his sexual orientation. Andrija was appalled, saying that it was, after all, a private matter, and called on the Sports Act, which prohibits discrimination. The coach, in turn, replied that it might be a private affair of anyone else, but not when it comes to sports, as "pederasty" was a problem that, in his view, made it essentially impossible for a sportsman to achieve top results, for the alleged "lack of testosterone". "Our team needs extraordinary men, tough men, champions and thugs, and not some feeble persons that are men only in their identification cards," he said literally. He added that homosexuality was like a boil, something that needed to be urgently removed surgically, if it hadn't already been removed during the past medical treatments, that he had already had several cases like Andrija's, who were urgently removed from the club, because "everyone knows" that gays couldn't become top sportsmen and were a "bad influence" to others. As for the Sports Act, the coach said that there

was no mention whatsoever in it of sexual orientation as the basis for protection, and that it was clear why, just for all the above-mentioned reasons of sports needs for the “unimpaired masculinity”. Andrija's parents were very affected by the reasons why he had to leave the club. They said they were naturally anxious about drugs, alcohol and crime, but they had a lot of confidence in him that he wouldn't succumb to the challenges of a bachelor living in a big city. They also said that he had terribly disappointed them, that he had done the worst thing one could imagine and that by having been unserious, he had practically called his sports career into question, since where would he “like” that ever be able to play sports? (Okuraži se, internet)

Constant negative public reaction to the justified demands for an increased protection of the rights of sexual minorities is still present in the dominant public discourse in Serbia and they continue justifying violence as an acceptable means of combating these other undesirable persons. “The acceptability” of violence is a clear political message that we have seen for years, either at meetings and conferences of differently coloured right-wing groups, or at sporting events that are an ideal public booth for presenting such views. Homophobic graffiti, which have been contaminating the public communication space in the cities for months, are written out everywhere, especially around schools and colleges (Mršević, 2012: 9-11). The educational system hasn't, so far, found the right answers and system solutions (Miladinović & Vučković, 2009: 196).

### **Young people's opinions**

It is in the atmosphere of present and unfettered public speech in which LGBT people are openly called sick, crazy people, a disgrace to their country and their families, mistakes in upbringing, immoral, abnormal etc. It is no wonder that due to such attitudes of adults and political leaders, young people follow such attitudes as

examples. The attitude of young people that violence against them is justified has been expressed many times (What kind of children, internet).

Over the past five years, according to the results of a recent research, youth and children were increasingly supporting the idea of an ethnically pure state and were intolerant towards the gay community and willing to commit violence against them<sup>71</sup>. A significant proportion of children and young people have a negative attitude towards non-believers, HIV positive persons and excellent students. The first place on the negative ranking list is held by people of different sexual orientation, towards which 36 per cent of responders has a negative attitude, the second place is held by atheists (23.0%), the third by members of other ethnic groups (21.8%), followed by HIV-positive persons (19.0%) and excellent students (18.9%). Negatively evaluated are men who are not football fans - 15.3 per cent of children and young people have a negative attitude towards them, those who think differently from the majority (15.2), students of NGO programs (14.5%), persons with disabilities (14.0%), compatriots of different faiths (11.8%), members of other races (11.2%) and women (10.5%) (Redovan godišnji izveštaj Poverenika, internet). The research shows, among other things, that the situation has deteriorated in terms of relations of children and young people's human rights, because the idea is now even less familiar to them than it was to earlier generations (What kind of kids, internet).

The attitude of society towards those who are different is best illustrated by their attitude towards the LGBT population: 80 per cent of secondary school students believe that discrimination against them is justified, while 38 per cent of young men support violence against gays. Members of the Roma community in Serbia are in a similar situation, who, in addition to being exposed to violence, have difficulty with studying and struggle to find work (Human Rights in Serbia 2013: 94). Adult citizens express a high degree of social distance towards the LGBT community, because they want such persons in their environment (Agencies, internet) the least.

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<sup>71</sup> The Young Justify Violence against the LGBT Community, Danas 2013: 4.

### **Education system failures**

There are young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people sitting in every classroom and every school in our society. They are mostly invisible, the laws governing education, curricula, teachers and schools ignore them, while their peers, if they noticed their departure from the “normal”, stigmatize, ridicule and insult them, and expose them to peer violence (Savić, 2009). This results, most frequently, in isolation, depression, low self-esteem, victimization and premature withdrawal and dropout from school (A 14 - year old boy: „If they only connect you with something that is considered wrong or disgusting, you're dead, you have to deal with it yourself, only yourself, no one else can help you with it.“ Fetoski, 2012: 18).

LGBT youth is the group which attempts suicide two to three times more frequently than any other group. The suicides of gay/lesbian youth represent 30% of suicides among young people. The suicide rate among LGBT youth is higher than the rate of suicide among the elderly aged 75 and sick people suffering from incurable diseases (Puača, 2009: 49). The position that no child or young person should fear for their physical safety in their own family, or while in an educational institution, was adopted a long time ago. However, this doesn't seem to be true for LGBT kids and youth, so that postponement of things for who knows when, is not a solution of the present problem.

And whenever intention is to talk generally about intolerance and discrimination of the educational system, and not particularly about LGBT rights, it is always necessary to pay most attention exactly to them, maybe because they are exposed to various forms discrimination more than other discriminated groups of citizen (Agencije, internet). It is necessary to talk about safety, because when we talk about discrimination, it is of such level and intensity that it is literally a threat to one's life. The discrimination suffered by LGBT children consists literally of domestic violence, which includes beatings, denial of the freedom of movement, forced medical treatment and removal from their homes. Violence against LGBT

children is not a way of discipline but act of domination (Pleck, 1987: 185). This is then followed by bullying at school, street violence and violence in public places, which is motivated by the hatred of LGBT youth, which is a constant threat.

The present fear of "otherness" is noticed in the contents of the public debate about the LGBT population, which, due to its mere ("brutal") existence<sup>72</sup>, is perceived as a provocation and a threat to the Serbian society, or even the main cause of violence against them. There is a reproduction of negative attitudes in the educational system. In the field of education, there is a lack of understanding regarding LGBT persons, thus new generations coming out of school are ready to perpetrate violence against various groups, including LGBT people (Redovan godišnji izveštaj, 2012).

*An example of peer violence that school failed to prevent. Reaction of parents.*

At elementary school, Nikola's certain physical effeminacy was rather obvious, but it didn't create any problems for him, because everyone knew each other well, both the students and the teachers, all of whom generally accepted him as he was. There was, indeed, some teasing, they openly called him Nikolina or Lina (female names), for short, but Nikola wasn't bothered by any of it. Upon completion of primary school, he enrolled in the secondary technical school, and the problems began immediately. However, his classmates didn't mistreat him, but the word spread quickly around the school that the first class enrolled in a "faggot", and the older students showed openly their intention "to educate him," which, on several occasions, ended badly for Nikola. In the beginning, they "only" shouted threats and curses at him, then they repeatedly slapped, punched, ripped and soiled his clothes etc. Nikola duly reported every single attack to his class

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<sup>72</sup> A reputable journalist Teofil Pančić, being a victim of hooligans by himself, coined ironical term "brutal existence". It indicates an innocent (a victim who didn't anyhow provoke) but unfortunately unpopular victim who is perceived as deserving violence (Pančić 2012: 1108).

teacher but, in spite of all that, nothing changed. His class teacher advised him to “calm down” and that it would all “go” by itself. He told Nikola's parents that the alleged incidents occurred outside the school, for which the school couldn't be held responsible. When asked by Nikola's parents whether the school had an anti-violence team, he told them that that wasn't a legal obligation, that that was a small school and that few schools had it, as well as that he himself wasn't aware that any secondary technical schools had something like that. “Let's face it, we don't have the time or the talent for some psychodrama, this is a secondary technical school and not a ballet school,” he literally said. Due to this situation, Nikola's parents often, or whenever they could because of their work, started to bring him to school and back from school by car, because the attacks usually occurred outside the school yard or on the streets near the school. In the school, Nikola didn't get out of his class during the breaks, so as not to meet with older students who attacked him in the hallways and on the stairs. Realizing that Nikola escaped them successfully, a group of attackers decided to take the initiative. During one of the long breaks between the classes, while chanting “Kill, kill the faggot,” they burst into his classroom, threw a few students out of his classroom with the threats, “Friends of the faggot, your turn will come, too”. They beat him up, dragged his bloody body down the hall, as an example to other “faggots”, and threw him from the first floor into the school yard. Nikola got a concussion, several broken ribs, a shoulder dislocation, a number of abrasions and haematomas, and following the first intervention at the Emergency Treatment Centre, he spent another month recovering. After that, the school principal advised Nikola's parents that, for the sake of the school's reputation, Nikola's safety, and the safety of other students, it was best for Nikola to drop out of that school and either enrol in another similar school, or maybe, which was the best solution, since he “didn't fit” among other students, prepare the exams privately and thus pass the grade, which they accepted, “recognizing that the problem was actually caused by their son” (Okuraži se, internet).

By some sort of inertia or negligence of education system, “true” values are incorrectly considered to be the denial of existence of sexual minorities or the covering up of the problem, in accordance with the principle of what isn't mentioned, it doesn't exist. Parents weren't taught anywhere (RTS 2013: news), and often don't know (or won't know) that if their children are LGBT, that doesn't mean that they are sick, or that it is the result of an error in their upbringing or a bad influence of some dangerous people in their children's surroundings. As things stand, no one in any school told the parents, during the education of their children, that “it” wasn't a disease and that it wasn't transferable, that about 10% of people were born “like that”, that “it” was in-born though not hereditary, that “it” had nothing to do with the fact that no family member remembers that there were any “such persons” on the mother's or father's side of the family, that “it” was neither fashionable nor the copying of others, that no one can be forced to or “tricked” into becoming homosexual or heterosexual, that no public scenes of gay life can change their heterosexual children, just as no hiding of the fact that “such persons” do exist can prevent their homosexual children from being what they are.

Schools are missing the chance to open the door to a better world to new generations. No measures were taken to raise the awareness of and provide information to people, institutions, youth, the media, public figures, decision makers, all levels of the educational system, etc. that homosexuality isn't a contagious disease but a minority variety of normal human sexuality, and that there is no danger of the spread of homosexuality by speaking about the topic openly and without prejudice, that pride parades or other public events would occur and that the same-sex unions would get legal recognition. One of the recommendations of the Commissioner for Equality that was sent to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia, the National Council of Education and the Department of Improving the Quality of Education (649/2011), is related to taking the necessary measures to ensure the implementation of affirmative and accurate display of the same-sex sexual and emotional orientation, transgender, trans-sexuality and inter-

sexuality in all textbooks (both natural and social sciences), including the examples of LGBT individuals as part of historical and modern democratic societies.

What is dangerous for children and youth is the prevention of their normal development and innate sexuality, as well as rejection, harassment, violence and discrimination from family members, peers and at school, which makes it really difficult for them to become mature and causes psychological crisis, despair, depression and suicidal moods. Because of such attitude of the family, the problem of an increased risk of homelessness of LGBT people is being frequently stressed, especially of young people, who were rejected by their families, which is even more dramatic in times of high unemployment and the general crisis (GSA, internet 2013).

It is important to examine the possibility of non-discriminatory education as an increasingly necessary means against intolerance and discrimination and the willingness to use violence against those who are perceived as “others” or “different”, all of which are clearly manifested attitudes of young people, acquired and supported in the educational system (Mršević, 2013: 78-80).

### **Necessary changes in the institutional educational system, a utopia today, the reality tomorrow**

Children are 100 per cent of our collective future (Stacey, 1996: 28). Rigid and polarized stereotypes prohibited boys and girls from developing their full human potential (Coltrane, 1997: 109). Therefore measures are needed to combat these negative and false perceptions about the alleged "threat" that LGBT people, by their very existence, pose to their surroundings. The example of the Netherlands may be seen as a good one: much attention being devoted to the suggestion of lower acceptance of homosexuality in schools and the consequences of this for young LGBTs. Attempts have been made in recent years to promote acceptance of homosexuality in schools, and since December 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 it has been mandatory to

provide information on LGBT issues in Dutch primary and secondary schools (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper, 2013: 23).

There must be some effective measures against hate speech, especially those aimed at the efficient identification, prosecution and punishment of the offenders that cause, spread, promote and incite hatred and other forms of intolerance towards the LGBT community, whether they are made at public meetings, in the media, on the Internet, in street, or hate graffiti. It is very important to encourage government officials and prominent political figures to publicly advocate for the human rights of LGBT persons and tolerance. The inflammatory speech of public figures has the effect of cancellation of several years' long efforts of institutions and civil society towards minimizing the negative social perception of LGBT people, contributing to the creation and maintenance of negative publicity towards LGBT people, whereas, in the international context, it creates a negative image of Serbia in general.

Today, Fukuyama's rhetoric question of whether we are poor because the economic situation is bad, or because we have "dysfunctional social habits" is topical more than ever. Those are deeply rooted habits that would be at work even if the economic benefits existed, and that would still lead us, instead to progress, in the opposite direction. Such dysfunctional social habits certainly include intolerance and acceptance of discriminatory behaviour as normal, which atomize society, prevent wider social connections and permanent establishment of social solidarity and cooperation (Fukuyama, 1997:20).

For parent families to become the shelter and protection from homophobia to their LGBT children, and not an extended hand of homophobia, some institutional changes are needed, especially in the educational system. It is necessary to identify the ways of establishing a value system in which otherness and diversity aren't seen as a threat, regardless of how much their realization, from today's perspective, seemed utopian. For the sake of the future development, it is necessary to dismantle a retrograde matrix, according to which the majority can't be better off if the minority isn't in a worse position. No matter how much it still seems utopian, even if we are supporters of the, so-called "policy of limited action" (Badiju, 2008: 67-

74), the educational system has to change, either faster or slower. It must denounce the negative effects of discrimination, violence and intolerance towards others who are different, instead of supporting them, because, in that way, a chance to open the door to a better world to new generations would be missed. An analysis of the discriminatory contents of the current system of education is needed, as well as of the school that currently openly opposes the display of intolerance, peer violence and research. Also needed are institutional and even utopian proposals to change this situation. Recommended as appropriate (Preporuke, 2011) is the following:

1. That the contents of the teaching materials, male and female teachers, through their teaching practices and the ways of working with students, foster the awareness of diversity, promote non-violent culture, equality and non-discriminatory practices, as the postulates of a democratic society based on the respect for human rights;

2. Raising the awareness of diversity, intercultural and shared values through the presentations of famous people from different ethnic and religious groups and cultures, etc.;

3. That the teaching contents and teaching materials present to the young different models of families in contemporary society (single parents, foster families, families without children, the right of the same-sex partners to have families etc.);

4. The removal of stereotyped presentations of gender roles/ professions and encouragement of varieties; the insistence on multiplicity and complexity of human identity, the considering of individuality, solidarity and creativity as valuable, regardless of gender;

5. Improving the curriculum of Civic Education to include specific workshops on the prevention of discrimination and the alleviating of prejudice towards children from vulnerable and marginalized groups (children with disabilities, learning disabilities, children who are socially deprived) in all grades, but in accordance with the principles of inclusive education with the use of modern and appropriate terminology;

6. Including the contents and programs of Civic Education into other subjects, too;

7. A greater visibility of children from disadvantaged groups in textbooks, curricula (texts, workshops, photographs), in accordance with the principles of inclusive education;

8. The introduction of affirmative and accurate presentations of the same-sex sexual and emotional orientation, transgender, trans-sex and inter-sexuality into all textbooks (both natural and social sciences), including the examples of LGBTTIAQ<sup>73</sup> male and female individuals, as part of both historical and modern democratic societies;

9. The removal from textbooks and curricula of the terminology that is outdated, obsolete and offensive, especially of the contents which abound in medical approaches and diagnoses and prejudices in relation to the capacity of children, especially children with disabilities;

10. The usage and putting an emphasis on the standardization and legal regulation of the gender-sensitive language and language of non-discrimination (children and youth with disabilities and special needs, and not children with special needs, a person that suffers/commits violence, not a victim/abuser, a person who uses psychoactive substances, and not a male or female drug addict, etc.;

11. That male and female teachers, through the appropriate professional development, improve their knowledge and skills in the field of children's and human rights, equality and non-discrimination, gender equality, non-violence, that they overcome their own particular prejudices and stereotypes and increase sensitivity to the gender contents of the teaching materials and teaching practices.

The legislation is relatively good, but the implementation in practice is another story (GSA, internet 2013). For the time being, LGBT issues are generally not recognized by the institutions, aren't considered as important, and are considered

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<sup>73</sup> A wider version of the LGBT acronym, which includes various categories, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, asexual and queer people.

even less as a priority. The existence of individual cases of an alarming degree of misunderstanding and intolerance towards the LGBT community by some responsible persons in the institutions was pointed out. State institutions are expected, as with every other marginalized group, to support project activities of LGBT organizations, for instance, to advocate human rights of LGBT people and to enable the operation of the SOS hotline. The state needs to focus on the maintenance of the existing services of non-governmental organizations by well-trained and competent persons. No institution can do it by itself and there must be cooperation between institutions, independent bodies and the non-governmental sector. The institutional synergies against extremism are necessary. The institutions still don't recognize crimes against LGBT people or cases of discrimination against them, so that no appropriate records on the issues are kept, while the relevant statistics and information on that are completely missing. Cases of violence and discrimination must be monitored and adequately documented. It is necessary to educate the staff working in the institutions. Institutional procedures are underused due to a high level of distrust of LGBT persons in their work, their effectiveness, willingness to act, the understanding of the specifics of LGBT existence and discretion. Similarities in children's gender schemes will help lessen inequalities in the society at large. There are likely to be more room for more individual choices about what to do in the family and how to relate to other family members. New family rituals and practices will undoubtedly emerge. Men and women are slowly moved toward more similarity in the things that they can do both inside and outside families (Coltrane 1997: 133 & 177).

Changes in the educational system should be accompanied by (and caused, initiated) changes in the family's perception of LGBT children, too. Family members must jointly find a way to deal with discrimination and prejudices. The question of how to make it easier for parents to accept the minority sexual orientation of their children and how their relationship could be more tolerant or honest (Fetoski, 2012: 23) hasn't yet been answered in Serbia. Dealing with the fact that their children are of LGBT affiliation is a difficult and stressful process in

which it is necessary to jointly break the silence. Parents are the only ones who can devote themselves unreservedly to the care, love, and understanding of their LGBT children, whereas the educational system is the one that should provide answers and solutions. It takes time and support to understand that silence and hiding don't link people, don't encourage self-confidence and self-esteem. The goal is that different people don't see any longer their difference in Serbia as their bad fate, due to which they choose isolation and loneliness, but to see it as a bridge between the infinite variety and richness of the world in which they live. The role of the family is to help, accept and support, together with the institutional system of education, their children, young people and all other and different persons, so that they could find the other way.

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