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Kosovo Chronicle 6 – Violence in School in Kosovo

by CRDP

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School bullying in Kosovo became a major topic of concern lately, when a Youtube video of a 14 year-old hitting a schoolmate surfaced on the internet. The video became an overnight sensation in social networks, and then the media caught on to shock the viewers with the violence-inflicted story. As the story unveiled, so did the public discussion on why this was happening, and what ought to be done about that.

Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon, especially in a post-conflict setting like Kosovo. However, not much research has been done to measure its scope and prevalence. Additionally, every inquiry into this topic should take into account what the community and the individuals believe bullying to be. To illustrate the complexity of the issue, it is worth mentioning that there is no specific word in Albanian language for “bullying”. Some of the attempts to research this issue in Kosovo mention this lack of definition as a possible barrier to approaching this issue. Other barriers might include the lack of understanding and maybe a lack of willingness to acknowledge and deal with the problem of peer violence (UNICEF, 2005).

A report by Kosovo Center for Gender Studies that inquired in prevalence of violence among teenagers in 2012 finds that 77.1% of their respondents experienced or witnessed student to student physical violence in school. Around 67% of their respondents also reported experiences of insults and ridicule. According to the respondents of this study, the causes of school violence were association with the “wrong crowd”, defending one’s friends, revenge/spite, and being called humiliating names. This way, schools as institutions that ought to provide security are turning into spaces that impinge on children’s security.

Kosovo Police (as cited in Indeksonline news article in March 2013) claim that 351 cases of youth violence in schools happened during 2012. Within this number, 64 were minor bodily injuries, 9 serious body injuries, 10 violence threats and 9 cases of firearms and cold weapon possession. In only the first semester of 2011, more than 210 incidents involving students have been reported to the police. In 2010, 37 incidents within students resulted in serious bodily injury (Brajshori, 2011). On this topic, the advisor to the Minister for Education, Science and Technology had stated that the instruments available to the ministry to tackle the issue of youth violence at schools should be amended, as the form of violence itself has evolved. She claims that the ministry should develop strategies and mechanisms “to deal with bullying in schools, violence among youth and neglect of the teachers to solve problems among students.” (Indeksonline, 2013).

The case of Duda Miftari, a 14 year old from Mitrovica that picked on and beat up her classmate because she heard she had said that she wasn’t a good student revealed the incapability of the system to deal with this issue in current times. Because the video was posted by an accomplice to the whole act (the person behind the camera seemed to be enjoying the bullying act, according to her exclamations throughout the whole process), it seemed as though the act itself was looking for a way out in public. The participants in the act were comfortable with documenting the whole deed. The video found a way to the internet and all its performers were at the focus of national television for some time.

The public reaction to it was even more intriguing. As many condemned the acts of violence of teenage girls, the media had embedded the Youtube video on their web-sites generating clicks and most malevolent comments directed towards the perpetrator. To top this, 14 year old perpetrator’s Facebook account was flooded with malicious messages and threats of violence. Some media wrote that her family had moved from the community they were living in to avoid their neighborhood’s ostracizing after the video had surfaced.

The question that was bothering the public was this: Does the state have the necessary mechanisms to deal with violent behavior at schools? Could this behavior have been prevented? Sadly, these questions could not be answered by anyone, precisely because of the lack of data available on this question. It’s common knowledge that youth violence is wide-spread in Kosovo. In schools, aggressive behavior, including fighting is mostly perceived as a minor disciplinary problem. Particularly, bullying is frequently associated with discrimination against students from poor families or ethnically marginalized groups, or those with particular personal characteristics (e.g. appearance or a physical or mental disability) (Kosova Education Center, 2009). With the exception of the video capturing the case of bullying among teenagers, there



are many more cases which go unnoticed and unheard of, which are not publicly discussed and stay in the shadows (Sulhasi).

In the institutional level, Kosovo subscribes to the main international instruments that protect children's rights. The UN convention on the Rights of the Child and Council of Europe resolutions and other documents pertaining to child protection are instruments that have been taken into account while drafting legislation pertaining to child rights. Kosovo's constitution ensures the Right to Education with its Article 47, whose 2nd paragraph states that "Public institutions shall ensure equal opportunities to education for everyone". Article 50 on the Rights of Children ensures that "Children enjoy protection and care necessary for their well-being" and that "All actions undertaken by public or private authorities concerning children shall be in the best interest of the children." (par 4, Art. 50).

The Law on Pre-University Education touches on issues of child protection and prevention of violence. Article 4 of this law obliges all persons employed in educational institutions to take all reasonable steps to ensure that pupils [...] are not injured or exposed to any offensive words or actions. Additionally, the Municipality is prescribed the competency to deal effectively with violent or bullying behavior through co-operation with parents, police and other public authorities (par 3, Art. 7 Law on Pre-University Education).

Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011-2016 classifies bullying as an aggressive behavior and disciplinary problem, defining it as a challenge in the Pre-University Education in Kosovo. The strategy recognizes bullying to happen to "students from poor families or from minority communities and marginalized groups, or by children and persons with disabilities" (pg. 67, KESP 2011). It also acknowledges the gender dimension of this phenomenon. Most of the time, this form of violence is seen to be exercised verbally, but physical violence may also occur. Bullying does not happen in isolation from other negative phenomena in community. Schools will be affected by these phenomena as well; in case when incidences of gang culture increase in a community, the frequency of violence at schools will also increase.

The problem of bullying is seen as an impediment to inclusion and equity, and the 2011-2016 strategic plan aims to "develop counselling measures to reduce aggressive behavior and disciplinary problems" to deal with this issue. On this note, the strategic plan envisions that introduction of counselling and child friendly classrooms, combined with raising awareness of teachers and students will help fight bullying. This awareness raising would aim at promoting understanding of diversity, non-discrimination and tolerance.

In a country that suffers not from a dearth of laws, but from its capacities to enforce the plethora of legislation it has approved, such lack of more in-depth elaboration on treatment of issues of peer-to-peer violence, and bullying in particular will be translated in a minimum effort to enforce the policy measures envisioned to alleviate the problem at hand. The treatment of bullying as a phenomenon that is truly worthy to spend money and effort on, would require a more comprehensive approach and concerting of actions of central level, local governance and non-governmental actors that already have started exploring the issue.

The problematizing of the issue itself seems problematic at the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011-2016. Bullying is categorized under Inclusion and Equity heading, and as such, is more likely to be seen as more of a problem of the "inter-ethnic violence" realm. This impression is strengthened when proposed solutions to the problematic of bullying are explored. The remedy proposed in the Strategic-Plan mostly elaborates on awareness raising campaign that focus on diversity, non-discrimination and tolerance, a discourse usually used in cases of inter-ethnic violence.

Such an approach towards basic problems such as bullying can lead to lack of treatment of the issues at hand. Having in mind that inter-ethnic problems are seen from a large-scale and macro-level perspective, which requires measures from the central level, the local level incidents of youth violence risk to be viewed as mere externalities of the lack of inter-ethnic cooperation. This marginalization of the problematics may account for the lack of systematic effort to focus and prioritize school bullying and violence. The treatment of this issue may be viewed as a part of a larger problematic that is nowhere to be solved, and as such, any action taken towards the smaller incidents may be viewed as inefficient and unworthy of trying.

Proper policy measures to the comprehensive treatment of the problem of bullying at schools should include holistic approaches that complement various stakeholders' efforts in this topic. Bullying is addressed marginally through various national legislative acts, which sometimes overlap and most of the time leave gaps in proper address of problems at hand. A central national plan of action should be drawn to tackle school bullying, in which responsibilities are specified to the central and municipal governments. This plan should set a monitoring authority, and place co-ordinating mechanisms between national and local level. To ensure sustainability, sources of data collection should be established in the ministry and municipality level which will regularly feed the policy making cycle with information about gravity of the situation, most efficient measures, and best practices of dealing with bullying.

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