

BULLYING AND GENDER RELATIONS AT SCHOOL

BULLYING E AS RELAÇÕES DE GÊNERO PRESENTES NA ESCOLA

BULLYING Y LAS RELACIONES DE GÉNERO PRESENTES EN LA ESCUELA

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Keywords:

Bullying. Gender identity. Behavior. Education, primary and secondary.

Abstract: The aim of this study was to analyze the interfaces between bullying and gender relations in the school context. We found it in 95 boys and girls from 4th to 8th grade in a public school. Data triangulation consisted of a questionnaire answered by students, school context observations and informal conversations with management staff and students. Results showed that bullying happens through verbal aggression and its protagonists are mostly male. Gender representations that pervade the daily lives of students show that boys and girls are educated in different ways.

Palavras chave:

Bullying. Identidade de gênero. Comportamento. Ensino fundamental e médio.

Resumo: Analizamos as interfaces entre o bullying e as relações de gênero no contexto escolar, identificando essa manifestação entre 95 meninos e meninas de 4^a a 8^a séries de uma escola pública. A triangulação dos dados foi constituída por um questionário respondido pelos/as estudantes, observações do contexto escolar e conversas informais com a equipe diretiva e alunos/as. Os resultados apontam que o bullying se destaca através da agressão verbal e seus protagonistas são, em sua maioria, do sexo masculino. As representações de gênero que permeiam o cotidiano dos estudantes evidenciam que meninos e meninas são educados de modos diferentes.

Palabras clave:

Acoso escolar. Identidad de género. Conducta. Educación primaria y secundaria

Resumen: Analizamos las interfaces entre el bullying y las relaciones de género en el contexto escolar, identificando esa manifestación entre 95 chicos y chicas de 4^o a 8^o años de una escuela pública. La triangulación de los datos fue constituída por un cuestionario contestado por los/las estudiantes, observaciones del contexto de la escuela y charlas informales con el equipo directivo y alumnos/as. Los resultados señalan que el bullying se destaca a través de la agresión verbal y que sus protagonistas son, en su mayoría, del sexo masculino. Las representaciones de género que permean el cotidiano de los estudiantes evidenció que chicos y chicas son educados de modos diferentes.

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1 OPENING REMARKS

The culture of violence cuts through school routine and its manifestations often appear in newspapers, television, magazines and the Internet, pointing at bullying as a major problem in today's educational institutions.

Bullying is a set of aggressive, intentional, repetitive actions such as teasing, discrimination, and verbal and physical aggression, which are practiced by both boys and girls. Perpetrators display characteristics associated with a dangerous power of leadership, which appears in both girls and boys, and which is not always legitimated by physical force, but also by intense psychological harassment on the victim. However, it presents itself differently when practiced by girls or boys. The former often act discreetly, through verbal aggression, using gossip and intrigue, while the latter do not always act that way, because they need to use physical force such as kicking (SILVA, 2010).¹

Differences and peculiarities in boys' and girls' ways of acting and reacting in bullying situations are effects of the process of body gendering, whose results are produced in different social instances, including school. In that institution, says Louro (2010a), there is an investment in a pedagogy that educates boys' and girls' bodies in different ways. For boys, there is a particular construction of masculinity where group sports, fighting games, sweating, intense physical exertion, competition and a certain consensual violence are not only expected but also encouraged. These experiences drive them towards a certain direction and produce a certain kind of boy. For girls, school invests in producing of a referent femininity that teaches them to be obedient, good listeners, sensitive, and averse to aggression, and prescribes gymnastics and volleyball as ingredients of an education that produces a certain type of girl. Furthermore, school spaces are also gendered, since their territory is not evenly shared by students. According to Wenez, Stigger and Meyer (2013), games are gendered and sexualized, and they occupy different spaces in the schoolyard, which are disputed, negotiated and imposed. It is expected and accepted that boys occupy sports courts while girls play or sit in little groups talking in the territories taken by boys. This distinction challenges students and causes many girls to refuse participating in activities involving more physical effort such as football. On the other hand, boys themselves often reject girls' participation because they believe that girls should choose softer body and sports practices. These inequalities produce conflicts when some girls dare to disregard those rules and often result in bullying situations.

The Pedagogical Course Project and especially teachers who implement it must stop looking at girls' and boys' bodies only from the biologicist perspective or rely on sexual distinction to justify differences and inequalities experienced by students at school. Louro (2010b, p. 21) states that representations built around sexual characteristics, as well as "what is said or thought about them will effectively build what is female or male in a given society and in a given historic moment". Therefore, the concept of gender that supports this analysis intends to

[...] [c]over all forms of social, cultural and linguistic construction involved in processes that differentiate women and men, including those processes that produce their bodies, distinguishing them and separating them as bodies endowed with sex, gender and sexuality. The concept of gender emphasizes precisely the examination of construction processes and – biological, behavioral or psychological – distinctions perceived between men and women (MEYER, 2013, p. 16).

¹ The booklet produced in 2010 by Ana Beatriz Barbosa Silva for the National Council of Justice is aimed at teachers and school professionals, to show them how to identify and prevent this social phenomenon.

Thus, we understand that different social instances produce effects in which gender relations are constructed by polarizing attributes that mark the bodies of girls and boys, women and men, building normalized notions of femininity and masculinity. Therefore, girls and women are always expected to be the victims of violence while boys and men will take on the position of producers and reproducers of those actions. However, we forget that there are situations of insults, physical aggressions and deaths between women. Representations that only victimize women are challenged when we look at the high number of cultural artifacts that publish articles and images where girls and young women are protagonists, both aggressors and victims of bullying in the school context.

Facco (2009) states that the school institution represents a social micro-universe characterized by social and cultural diversity and often reproduces patterns of conduct that pervade social relations out of school. Thus, ways of relating to others at school reflect broader social practices.

Having said that, this research investigates the interfaces between bullying and gender relations in the school context, identifying the phenomena among boys and girls in primary public school in the city of Santa Maria, RS. We understand that gender relations are cut through by power relations, which are disputed and often end up being uneven when we consider how boys and girls appropriate, use and experience school spaces. By understanding how bullying happens in those spaces, we also seek to analyze how social relations intensify, especially gender ones. We note that school still faces difficulties in addressing bullying as a problem to be studied and debated by everyone. The institution seeks to solve the problem, but it often does not know what to do, for lack of means to reflect about and face bullying. However, getting to know the situation in which it happens is a moment for diagnosis of the situation that can drive the school community to place the topic at the center of school concerns.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAYS

This research includes both qualitative and quantitative aspects in order to address bullying and gender relations in the school context. Minayo and Sanches (1993, p. 247) noted that “[...] quantitative study can generate questions to be qualitatively investigated, and vice versa.”

The study targeted children and adolescents of both sexes, who were enrolled in classes between the 4th and the 8th grades of an elementary public school² in Santa Maria, RS. The survey was conducted with 95 children and teenagers studying in the morning shift, who presented the Informed Consent form³ signed by their parents and/or legal guardians. Thus, the final sample consisted of 49 girls and 46 boys aged 10-16. Teachers and school management staff (principal and educational coordinator) also took part.

The tools to produce research sources consisted of observations, informal conversations and a questionnaire. Firstly, 14 observation episodes were conducted to look closely at the school recess context as well as the fifty minutes before and after it, every other day of the week (Monday, Thursday and Friday) during one month. Each observation lasted about two

² It is a school in the outskirts of the city that receives students with low socioeconomic status, living in the neighborhood and surrounding areas and, above all, residing in an irregular area near the school, which had been squatted a few years ago. The school provides eight classrooms, an open sports court, a large covered hall, a corridor for athletics and a little park for the children. The school staff consists of 24 teachers, with 121 students in the morning shift, when data were collected.

³ The form was signed by parents or legal guardians, allowing students to participate in the study and seeking to clarify the presence of an observer on school grounds.

hours. Observations were used to capture children's actions during school recess which were somehow characterized as bullying, such as aggressive situations while playing, name-calling, shoving, that is, perceptions of violence in actions of boys and girls. At those moments, informal conversations also happened with students and with some teachers and the school management staff, in random situations. Both observations of the school context and informal conversations with teachers and staff were thoroughly recorded in a field diary.

The sources produced at this moment indicated the need for clarification about bullying, since we identified doubts and ignorance about the subject. Thus, a presentation was held at the school hall for morning classes, after which students returned to their respective classrooms and answered the questionnaire "Violence among peers" proposed by Freire, Simão and Ferreira (2006). The application started in 8th grade and descended, since younger students need more time to fill the instrument: 4th and 5th graders took around 40 minutes to complete it while 6th, 7th and 8th graders needed 25-30 minutes. According to Cervo and Bervian (2002), the questionnaire is the most commonly used form of data collection, since it allows measuring exactly what we want.

Observations of the school context, informal conversations with management staff, teachers and students, and the results obtained from the questionnaire allowed us to triangulate research sources, providing a broad view of the complexity of the study. Stake (2011, p. 138) points out that "[...] researchers triangulate their evidence [...] to get to the correct meanings, to have more confidence that the evidence is strong; they develop different practices called triangulation". Thus, results and discussion will be presented through a percentage-based record of the data collected in the questionnaire, accompanied by fragments taken from the inventory of observations and informal talks held in the school. Triangulation of that empirical material and dialogue with the theoretical framework resulted in the analyses produced in order to meet the objectives of this investigation.

3 SCHOOL AND BULLYING

Bullying has become a worldwide problem and professionals involved in education are now concerned with reducing violent behavior of young people all over the world. From the responses to the questionnaire, we noted that the vast majority of students (79%) said that school is a safe, organized and good place to be with friends. However, a small number (9%) pointed out that the incidence of fights could be lower. Taking students' sexes as an analytical element, we point out that 6% of girls said that fighting could be reduced, while boys accounted for only half (3%) of that result. Analyzing these figures, we stress that violence is accepted as something natural by boys and often ceases to be perceived as such. These different perspectives come from the naturalization of violent demonstrations in the construction of standard masculinity, while it is rejected in the construction of referent femininity. Abramovay (2009) mentions that, according to the dominant paradigms of masculinity, proving that one is strong and powerful is still a striking and valued feature for the normalized representation of masculinity. Furthermore, the author looks at violence in schools:

Violence is not experienced only as acts of aggression, but also as the usual and routine mode of relating with and treating the other. Thus, the phenomenon becomes institutionalized, common, banalized, characterizing forms of aggression that are often invisible to the school community, but which can still deeply hurt victims, thus contributing to the emergence of a feeling of insecurity and helplessness in the school environment (ABRAMOVAY, 2009, p. 4).

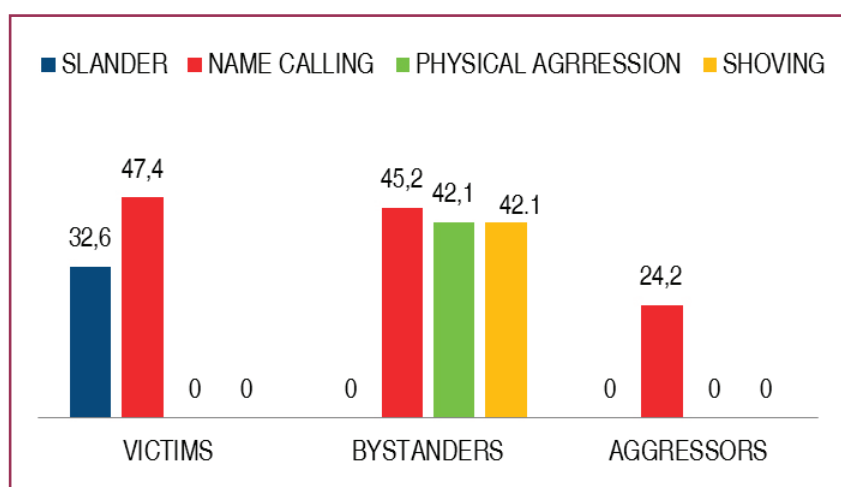
Invisibility of and silence around violence in everyday school life emerged in an informal conversation with the principal and the educational coordinator, where they showed contradictory views of bullying in school spaces. While the coordinator said she saw the need to confront the issue in classes, since she was aware of some cases confirmed by the institution, the principal tried to omit them, saying that so far they knew of only one case and that she considered it an isolated situation. Based on those speeches, we understand that school is also the institution in which different discourses emerge, cut through by different social, cultural and historical markers. However, such stance suggests what Abramovay (2005) calls banalization of violence. According to the impressions recorded on the field diary after observations at school, bullying can be seen above all as a result of the school administration's lack of action on the issue as a problem; it treated it as something normal and naturalized.⁴ At the same time we must mention that, during the research, we found that the teachers opened a dialogue on the subject, indicating that the issue could be tackled. Andrade (2007) shows that dialogue, pacts, support, and establishing confidence and information links are effective tools to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools.

4 VICTIMS, BYSTANDERS AND AGGRESSORS

Distinct positions are occupied by subjects involved in bullying situations. Silva (2010) explains that three characters stand out: victims usually have little socialization skills, are shy or reserved and cannot react to teasing and aggressive behaviors directed at them; bystanders are those who witness aggressors' actions against victims; aggressors, since very early, exhibit aversion to rules and do not accept to be countered or frustrated.

Seeking to identify those different situations from responses to the questionnaire, we pointed out that 100% of students reported being bullied in the last two weeks, since the acts of violence occurred intentionally and repetitively, but for no apparent reason. When asked about the types of violence suffered, we identified, in each group, the results presented in Figure 1. We also note that only bystanders claimed to have seen physical aggression and shoving. That is because they watch the aggressions and are more like observers while victims do not report in order not to suffer aggression again.

Figure 1 – Comparison of aggressions in the last two weeks



Source: Prepared by authors

⁴ The school is located in the outskirts of the city and students come from an area squatted by families for over a decade. The levels of violence and drug use are very high in the neighborhood. Students walk to school and some live in substandard housing without basic sanitation.

The representation (Figure 1) shows that, for aggressors it is still very difficult to recognize themselves as such in an act of violence or admit they have done that to anyone, since only 24.2% admitted that. This is because some aggressors do not consider the act as aggression, but as a joke. In addition, aggressors are mostly colleagues in the same class of the victim. Braga and Lisboa (2010) stress that when there is suffering, it is no longer a joke between friends. By analyzing the graph, we see that bystanders observed more situations than victims and aggressors reported. Grossi and Santos (2009) argue that this happens because those bystanders represent the vast majority of students living with violence and remain silent because of the fear of becoming the “next victims”.

As we can see, the main form of bullying was verbal aggression, in which 47.4% of the victims were *called names*. Indeed, that can be understood with the help of Santos (2007), when he says that the students most commonly targeted as victims are those with some difference regarding the group, such as obesity, physical disability, above-average intelligence or learning disabilities. Thus, the characteristic of victims is sufficient to cause insult, and name-calling is the easiest way to humiliate, belittle and diminish them. This type of aggression causes the victims “[...] serious and broad consequences, promoting lack of interest in school, poor concentration and learning, lower performance, absenteeism and truancy” (FANTE, 2005, p. 44).

Through a study aimed at investigating the occurrence of bullying among adolescents in three public and private schools in Porto Alegre, Bandeira (2009) found that the type of bullying that prevails against the victims was verbal, with 61.1%, characterized by nicknames, insults or jeer. Andrade (2007) states that bullying summarizes situations where the student is often threatened, blackmailed, insulted or simply called by some prejudiced or undesired nickname.

In informal conversations, we observed that the most common nicknames to offend girls were related to appearance, whereas recurrent offenses for boys were related to alleged homosexuality. Pereira and Mourão (2005) point out that, since birth, girls and boys are subjected to different treatment that teaches them behaviors and emotions that are proper and approved for their sex. When the behavior seems inappropriate to one’s sex, jokes and teasing about sexuality start and offensive nicknames are the first to be seen. As for what offended boys and girls, comments or nicknames related to appearance offended girls because care with their look refers to the idea of referent femininity, since society and culture direct and expect girls to be concerned and invest in their appearance. In contrast, boys assert their masculinity by reasserting their heterosexuality, so that offenses converge on the suspicion about a possible deviant sexuality. Kimmel (1998, p. 113) points out that when it comes to disputes between boys, the “[...] way of asserting masculinity is by devaluing other forms of masculinity, positioning the hegemonic one in opposition to the subordinate one while creating the other”. Thus, even in school, referent constructions of masculinity are used among boys to question and test their virility through physical and moral violence (JUNQUEIRA, 2009).

Thus, there is no surprise when research sources show that boys are, for the most part, the aggressors. Mazzon (2009) underscores the fact that boys have more prejudiced attitudes to gender identity than girls, which allows us to understand the higher number of male aggressors, since this issue is recurrent in bullying practices. For Lopes Neto (2005), there is also a predominance of male aggressors while there is no difference between sexes in the role of victim. Menegotto, Pasini and Levandowski (2013) analyzed articles on school bullying published in national journals between 2009 and 2011, and found that the vast majority of

aggressors are male and practice violence through physical aggression and intimidation. Girls usually practice violence through vicious rumors, group exclusion, among others. Our study pointed to the predominance of males both in the role of aggressors and in that of victims, that is, according to the victims, 46.3% are subject to male aggressors, 28.4% are female, and 25.3% said they have not suffered abuse. Aggressors, in turn, indicated that 41.05% of victims were male, 22.1% were female, and 27.3% said they did not perpetrate aggressions against their colleagues.

Given this scenario, observations and informal conversations with the school management suggest that boys practice more bullying because they do not fear being reprimanded and/or held responsible by their families. The same thing did not happen with the girls who engaged in bullying practices, since more of them suffered family reprisals due to their violent behavior, also receiving support from parents, friends and school to change their actions. It is understood that they broke the rules by attacking someone and that boys were not punished because their aggressive behavior was considered natural, which does not happen with girls. Vianna and Finco (2009) add that what is valued for girls is not often appreciated for boys, and vice versa. The authors also point out that while control of aggressiveness is seen on girls, boys suffer a similar process, blocking expressions of feelings such as tenderness, sensitivity and affection. Therefore, the school is being increasingly required to work with diversity, promoting the education of different masculinities and femininities, showing that they can be experienced in plural.

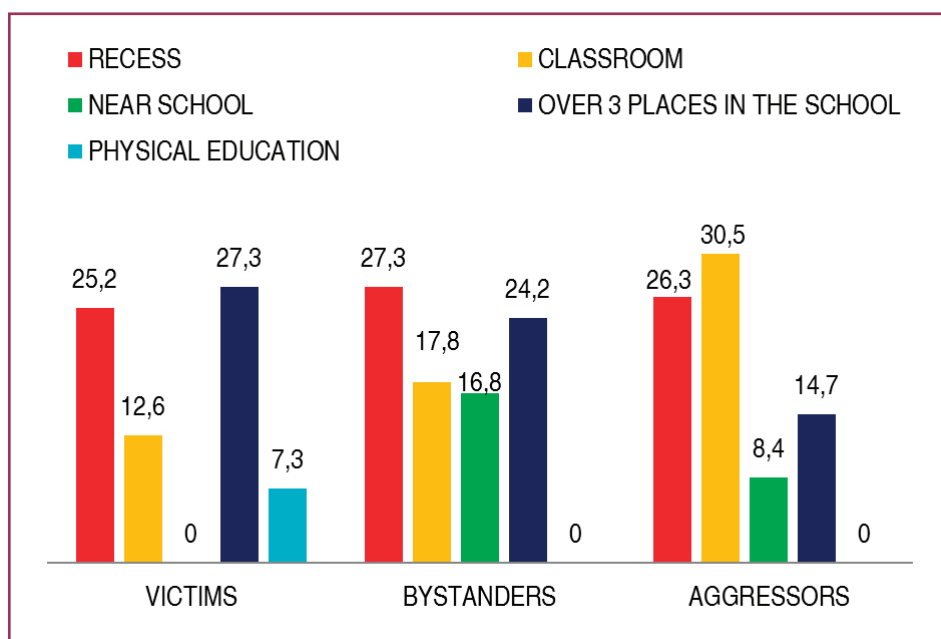
4 THE TERRITORY OF ACTIONS

School allows boys and girls to enjoy several socialization spaces where both also create the territory in which bullying actions take place and gender issues interweave. Stramann (2005) says that school spaces should be interpreted as places to move around, where movement is seen as a general principle in school organization and configuration.

Indeed, not all children are free to use any space at school. The sports court is an example of a space predominantly occupied by boys. On the other hand, few boys participate in the conversation groups we observed in school corners. Pereira and Mourão (2005) corroborate this idea when they claim that school routinely produces and reproduces actions that separate and demarcate what is socially considered as belonging to the feminine world and to the masculine world. Such a statement was confirmed when we noticed that boys and girls can even play in the same space but in different ways, i. e., girls were rarely seen with a football, even if they showed interest in the game. Likewise, boys showed no interest in volleyball, since that sport is culturally suggested for girls. In an interview with students, they said that if a boy played volleyball with the girls he could be mocked by his colleagues and they might question his sexuality. Therefore, girls enjoyed school recess seeking minimal interaction with boys. Younger girls usually jumped rope and older ones gathered in conversation circles, while boys occupied sports courts.

The way boys and girls move is also reflected in bullying practices. Thus, by mapping places where the phenomenon happens inside the school, we found that for victims and bystanders school recess is the most likely place. As for students who suffered aggression, someone pointed to the classroom as the easiest place for bullying, as can be seen in Figure 2:

Figure 2 – The places of aggression



Source: Prepared by authors

According to Wenez and Stigger (2007, p. 9), the analyses point out that both in school and during recess

[...] children are not so free, they do not play all together, they do not always do what they want, not all of them play in all areas and they also do not all play with what they would like.

What is observed is that these actions are guided by a

[...] particular cultural [construction] within the school context and recess with certain typical characteristics, which require [...] negotiation that includes how to deal with the spaces according to gender and generation.

They also claim that there is no explicit rule saying that girls cannot use the spaces of the courts, but boys somehow take over and legitimize the court as their own space for a male game. This is another example of conflict that, when it becomes routine at school, it tends to turn into bullying, for some repeatedly have fun at the expense of others who suffer, resulting in the emergence of victims, aggressors, and indirect participants, that is, bystanders. We therefore emphasize that *recess* was the place for most *victimization* practices, with aggression both to girls and boys. According to the victims, we identified that the classroom (12.6%) was the most common place for aggressions; in third place are spaces for *Physical Education* (7.3%); 6.4% also suffered aggression on the *street* or in *near school*, and 5.2% suffered it in *corridors and stairways*. We also point out that 27.3% of victims said that these aggressions are repeated in more than one place at school. Although no bystander or aggressor has witnessed or admitted to practice it in class, 7.3% of victims said there was bullying in Physical Education classes – which corroborates the study of Linhares, Faria and Lins (2013) on the difference of school bullying among boys and girls – and around 20% of students said that Physical Education is an area of bullying practices.

According to our research sources, and specifically the bystanders, the highest incidence was found during *recess* (27.3%), followed by the *classroom* (17.8%), the *street* or *near school*

(16.8%), in *corridors and stairways* (5.2%), and a considerable percentage (24.2%) said they witnessed aggression in more than one of these places. On the other hand, student aggressors pointed out that 30.5% of their actions occur in front of teachers or in the classroom. In this regard, Grossi and Santos (2009) underscore that aggression in the classroom makes sense, since it is the space of greatest intimacy for the group, and therefore, it favors recognition of differences between people.

On aggressive behavior both in recess and in the classroom, Braga and Lisboa (2010) state that for a long time parents and teachers admitted aggressive behavior as natural and normative in schools, because they mistook it by playing. Considering these aspects about schoolyards, Fernandes and Elali (2008) say that an excessively large number of students can produce aggressiveness and irritability and, on the other hand, a low number can generate isolation and low socialization. In short, we call on teachers to observe school recess carefully, since that is when negotiations take place between students, organizing the uneven occupation of school spaces, and generating exclusion, prejudice and discontent.

5 FINAL REMARKS

The results showed that males are more prominent than females in cases involving the phenomenon. That means that the boys stand out as perpetrators and victims, and also use more physical force to intimidate their victims, while girls would rather use verbal aggression. These differences in ways of acting are produced in the gendering process of the body that takes place in different social instances, including school. It was also revealed that bullying practices happen in almost all school spaces, but the time for highest incidence is the school recess period. Therefore, all those involved need to discuss the subject at school, in order to prevent aggressive behavior in any space: classrooms, cafeterias, restrooms, sports courts, etc.

Besides, school tends to reinforce norms and standards to be followed by girls and boys according to standard roles ascribed to each sex, and they often tend to encourage prejudice at school. Teachers have to work with the management staff (coordinators and principal) so they can act together effectively in situations involving gender relations. Therefore, we may think about education for diversity. Finally, we seek a less unequal society in which biological differences, for example, are not used to justify differences between men and women and perpetuate violence between them.

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