

Case study – feature article

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Date: 2008-12-23

Keywords: violence, physical and humiliating punishment, Jalalabad, Nangarhar, Dawlatabad, Balkh, Afghanistan, student council, school, girls, boys.

Article on children and violence in Afghanistan

START

The school is huge and filled with children. The old building and the walled area is a school for 11.000 students, mostly boys. There are only 157 teachers and the school works in three shifts. Mia Omar High school in Jalalabad is a typical city government school in Afghanistan.

- The lack of classrooms and the lack of funding to hire more teachers are the main problems, the Head Master Haj Farooq says, when speaking about his school in his crowded office. Grown-ups and children sit along the walls and teachers come in constantly to have papers signed.

- We sometimes have 110 students in one class, he continues, there are educated teachers, but the government will not give us more money.

The school is one of three selected by Save the Children for a new project in the area: Violence free schools. There is a lot to change. In Afghanistan it is not only a question about getting children to school, but also about making it a safe place for those children who already are there.

If the Head Masters main problem is lack of funding, the main problems for the boys in the school are violence, physical and psychological humiliating punishment from teachers and from other students.

Beating and humiliation are a daily reality for many children in the country. Afghanistan still legally permits teachers to physically punish children in their care. Since 2005 there is a ban on violence in Afghan schools, but abusing children in school is not punishable by law and there is no follow up.

In a survey conducted by Save the Children in Nangarhar and Balkh provinces children speak of all sorts of abuse in school. Boys talk more about physical punishment by teachers than girls, who speak mostly of degrading treatment.

- The teacher made me stand in front of my own class and took me to other classes telling them that this girl is lazy and did not memorize the lesson and her homework. That day I was weeping all day and felt degraded, a 10 year old girl tells.

Beating with sticks, canes, rubber pipes and ropes is very common in boys' classrooms. The girls get beaten with rulers and are subject to more emotional assault.

- Once the teacher immediately started beating all students with a rubber pipe because some of us played and made the classroom dusty, but it was not fault of all students. He just stopped beating as he got tired and left the classroom, a 13 year old boy tells.

This way of violently disciplining children is widely accepted and used, but also sometimes questioned by teachers. A younger teacher tells Save the Children in the same survey:

- I am personally against these harsh behaviors, but children are some times beyond one's control and that is why we need to use force or stick to shut them up.

The run down classrooms of Mia Omar High school are filled with students and the dark corridors - there is no electricity - are loud and filled with anger. A man is chasing away small boys with a stick at the end of the corridor, screaming at them. It is crowded and the air is thick.

Outside the main building are the small children's classes. They are all in a big yard, sitting in groups in front of blackboards. Their shift is just to begin, some teachers are not there yet so the children play in their small groups. One boy is standing by the black board with a stick in his hand - he is the teacher.

The yard is packed with children and the distance between the classrooms a few meters. Everywhere you see the stick - in the hands of teachers or in the hands of other children. One teacher discreetly drops his stick when I aim the camera in his direction.

The Save the Children program that just started is quite straightforward. Staff will train teachers in child rights and in alternative positive disciplinary methods. Children will also be trained – told, maybe for the first time, that they have rights. School administration will get help in setting up rules and systems that will protect children from abuse and children will learn that they can complain. The program will be closely followed by resource persons that will be at the schools and follow up daily. The goal is uncomplicated and corresponds to the demand raised by children that Save the Children talked to: Stop beating and humiliating us.

- Change in attitude and behavior comes quickly in Save the Children's experience, Sarwar Hakimi, child protection officer at Save the Children says. Once you start to talk about child rights and people realize positive change follows.

The group meets every two weeks to discuss and solve issues concerning children and their wellbeing in the local community. This group in Dawlatabad, a district in Northern Afghanistan, has 26 members, including four boys and two girls from different schools.

They worked hard for a couple of years to get it started and now the group includes all important actors in the village: Mullahs, village elders, school principals, police officers, parents and children.

- I am now also a child advocate police officer, I intervene in ways I did not do before, Gul Raihan says. To be honest, we cannot hide that there is a lot of violence towards children in our society.

He is one of the members of the committee and points to one of the problems when it comes to care about children's rights in Afghanistan, the law:

- There is a limit to what I can do as a police in families. I cannot stop violence directly. But now I can inform and tell parents about better ways, this work with the committee has given me the tools.

Maybe the most important thing the community based child protection committees do is to change the attitude among parents and other grown-ups in the villages. When mullahs and elders talk about the fact that children have rights – attitudes change quickly.

The child protection committees, together with Parent Teacher Student Associations, create a strong grass-roots movement and effectively help children in need. Save the Children support these activities in all areas where it has programs in Afghanistan.

Parallel to the adult structure, the children have their own meetings, without any grown-ups present. The Student Councils are the third component in what Save the Children sees as a strong structure to prevent child abuse and violence in school as well as promoting participation and accountability from the children themselves.

END

FACTS

How Save the Children work to stop violence against children in Afghanistan

- Save the Children is capacity building the Government's Child Protection Secretariat, a central government body that will be in charge of child protection policy and work.
- We advocate for a Law on a ban of physical and humiliating punishment by arranging country wide public events and by assisting the government in drafting the law.
- We support the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in promotion of child rights both on national and local level.



- Through village and regional councils we focus on the relation between Islam and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We believe that Islamic values play an important role in changing conditions for children for the better.
- We support government schools, and provide alternatives to physical and humiliating punishment, and we advocate the rights of the child both with teachers and parents as well as students.
- We help establish community based child protection committees in all villages we work in.
- We start and train Parent, Teacher, Student Associations and independent Student Councils in all schools we support and work in.
- The number of children we reach in Afghanistan with our projects in 2008 is tripled compared to 2007 – now over 100.000 children are reached by our programs in the country.

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