

Ending violent punishment of girls: essential for their right to education

Oral statement for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's half-day of general discussion on girls'/women's right to education by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children

Corporal punishment of girls and boys is the most common form of violence against them. It is experienced by a majority of children in all world regions. Violent punishment directly violates girls' and boys' rights to freedom from violence and to respect for their physical integrity and human dignity. In schools, it also violates their right to education.

Prohibiting and eliminating all corporal punishment of children, in the family home and all other settings, is an obligation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments.

Widespread recognition of the human rights imperative to prohibit all corporal punishment has led to accelerating progress towards universal prohibition. Today, 37 states have prohibited corporal punishment in all settings of children's lives including the family home and 121 states have prohibited it in schools. But much remains to be done. Corporal punishment remains lawful in schools in 77 states, and in 161 states, violent punishment can lawfully be inflicted on girls and boys in the family home.

Legal protection from corporal punishment is essential to fulfil girls' right to education. Corporal punishment is a barrier to accessing schooling. It is often a reason given by girls and boys for not attending or for dropping out of school. Even when children continue to attend, corporal punishment creates an environment of fear, inhibiting learning and promoting a low level of education.

Starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international instruments have highlighted that education must aim to strengthen respect for human rights. Legal and social acceptance of corporal punishment of children is incompatible with this aim. A school in which children are subjected to corporal punishment can never meaningfully promote human rights. It cannot be a safe or violence-free environment and cannot provide an accessible or acceptable education.

The legality of corporal punishment also contributes to other barriers to education. It reinforces hierarchical and patriarchal power structures which perpetuate concepts of girls' and women's inferiority to men and children's inferiority to adults and promote the idea that it is acceptable for those with perceived higher social status to inflict violence on those perceived to be subservient. The widespread legal and social acceptance of corporal punishment opens the way for and perpetuates other violence, including sexual violence, against girls by teachers and others in schools.

In light of children's right to legal protection from all corporal punishment and the importance of ending corporal punishment for girls' right to education, we hope that the General Recommendation on Girls' and Women's Right to Education will highlight the human rights imperative to prohibit corporal punishment in schools and all other settings.