

Afghan Boys Still Beaten at School

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Ban on corporal punishment continues to be widely ignored.

One day, 13-year-old Farhad schoolboy decided that the frequent beatings his teachers subjected him to were just too much to bear.

Horrified by the prospect of being hit yet again, he and his parents agreed that he would simply leave school and get a job.

Today the teenager earns just two dollars a day working at a blacksmiths near his home in Mehtar Lam city, the provincial capital of Laghman.

“My teachers used to beat me very hard,” Farhad told IWPR. “I became so afraid of them that I used to skip school two or even three times a week.

“Finally, my parents suggested that I look for a job so that I could avoid the abuse and earn some money as well. So now I’ve left school and work at a blacksmiths. It’s very tough work.”

Farhad’s father, Mohammad Azghar Niazaei, said that this was not the future he had envisaged for his son.

“It’s so disappointing to hear about teachers beating students these days,” he continued. “I’d wanted my son to receive a proper education but that dream has been shattered now.”

Farhad’s is not an isolated case in a country where – although theoretically illegal – corporal punishment remains common in schools. Schoolchildren in the eastern province of Laghman told IWPR that it was not unusual for boys to leave education early rather than suffer the abuse.

(See **Afghanistan: Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child**).

The situation is not helped by the fact that many parents in Afghanistan see corporal punishment as an important part of school discipline.

Shahidullah Khan, a 12-year-old pupil at Sayeed Murad school in Alisheng district, said that he regularly played truant to avoid being beaten.

He said he pretended to leave home for class in the mornings, but often spent the day wandering the streets with friends.

“One day a teacher beat me so hard on the head with a stick that my head was covered in blood,” he told IWPR.

“After this happened I asked my father to move me to a private school because teachers don’t beat up the students there. But because my family can’t afford it I still continue to study at my old school.”

But Shahidullah’s father Atlas said that he had little sympathy with his son’s plight.

The 46-year-old explained that teachers needed to physically punish young boys, claiming that “good manners do not come without beatings”.

“Children won’t obey or respect their elders unless they are threatened and punished,” he continued.

For some students lucky enough to have families who can afford it, moving to a private school can provide a solution.

Mazullah, a 17-year-old pupil at Saheeb private school in Mehtar Lam, added, “One day a teacher came to our class and started beating me with a stick just because I had grown my hair.

“Now I’m studying in a private school and I feel relaxed and comfortable. I really enjoy my studies here and am one of the best students.”

Syed Aslam Mesaq, a psychologist, told IWPR that it was now widely recognised among those in his profession that corporal punishment was both an outdated and ineffective response to poor discipline.

He emphasised how mistreating children could damage their confidence and lead to a variety of other problems in adult life.

“Behaving appropriately in front of children – showing them respect – is critical to their development,” he said. “Treating them with dignity allows them to gain self-confidence.”

Jamal Ahmad Mujahid, a religious scholar, also told IWPR that Islamic teachings suggested beating children was wrong.

He urged schools to show appropriate compassion to their students and recognise that all pupils required careful nurturing.

Drawing a comparison with the way in which the prophet Muhammad treated his two grandchildren - Hasan and Hussain - he said, “Sometimes Hasan and Hussain sat with him during prayers.

“When prophet Mohammad finished praying, we’re told how he hugged and kissed his grandchildren.”

Officials insist that attitudes were changing in favour of a gentler approach to discipline.

Mohammad Karim Rahimi, a spokesman for Laghman’s department for education, said that there was a growing acceptance in schools that corporal punishment was harmful to a child’s development and should no longer be tolerated.

“The issue of teachers beating students isn’t one that exists very much anymore,” he said.

“We’ve taken tough action to tackle the problem, including holding meetings with school principles to stress that corporal punishment is now banned.

“We’ve also sent out documents which make it very clear that any such beatings will no longer be tolerated.”

Shah Mahmood Sarhadi, headmaster of the Dr Abdullah Laghmani High School in Mehtar Lam, also said his staff were working hard to ensure physical beatings had no place on modern schooling. He acknowledged that instances still occurred but claimed they were few and far between.

“Whenever there’s an occasion where a teacher has hit a student we instruct that teacher to apologise and to put into writing that he will never beat a student again,” he said.

Abdul Aleem, a teacher at Gul Pacha school in Mehtar Lam, admitted that he had previously beaten some of his students. But he went on to say that he had learned that a more compassionate approach produced much better results.

“Over the last three years I’ve altered my behavior and I’ve treated my students much better,” he said. “I’ve seen how they show more interest in their lessons and respect me more if I refrain from beating them. I regret the way I behaved in the past.”

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