Message to the attention of the participants at the Symposium

Creating a Non-Violent Future: Children’s Rights and Advances in Protection from Corporal Punishment

Loyola University, Chicago, 23-24 May 2014

Dear Friends,

Violence against children is a violation of human rights that compromises all the rights of the child. Although it may manifest itself in different forms, in every single case it hampers the enjoyment of children’s rights and undermines children’s dignity and development. Violence inhibits positive relationships, provokes low self-esteem, emotional distress and depression; at times, it leads to risk taking and aggressive behaviour. Corporal punishment of children is one of the most widespread forms of violence against children, and one that it’s often socially tolerated.

Violence has both a human and a social cost. In addition to the dramatic impact on individual children, it entails very high costs for society, reducing human capacity and compromising social development. As the UN SG Study on Violence against Children puts it so well: No violence against children is justifiable and all violence is preventable.

As the Global Survey on violence against children issued by my Office in 2013 demonstrates, protecting children from violence is an area where over the past years significant progress has been achieved. Our understanding of how and why children are exposed to violence has deepened, and strategic actions are under way in many countries to translate this endeavour into effective protection. We see a clear increase in the number of countries with a comprehensive and multidisciplinary policy agenda to prevent and address violence against children. The legal protection of children from all forms of violence (including corporal punishment) is also gaining ground – globally, the number of countries with a legal prohibition has more than doubled since 2006, counting 38 today.

Significant information and awareness raising campaigns have also been launched to keep violence concerns high on the agenda, to prevent abuse, to help child victims gain confidence to speak up and seek support and to promote a change in attitudes and behaviour. Awareness raising campaigns and parenting programmes have been particularly instrumental in the transformation of adults attitudes towards corporal punishment.

Although it is important to welcome achievements, it is equally important to recognize that progress has been too slow, too uneven and too fragmented to make a genuine breakthrough.

Millions of girls and boys continue to be exposed to the cumulative impact of different manifestations of violence, as a result of reactive, ill-coordinated and ill-resourced strategies; fragmented and poorly enforced legislation, and weak investment in family support and in gender and child sensitive approaches. Moreover, data and research on the incidence of violence remain scarce and in fact rarely used to inform policy making and budgetary decisions.

Unfortunately, many people still fail to associate corporal punishment with violence. The prevalence of corporal punishment is a good indicator of society’s understanding of the phenomenon of violence
as well as of the perception of children (as “not-yet persons” rather than as present holders of human rights).

For all these reasons, I warmly welcome the organization of this Symposium and the momentum its sponsors are creating by gathering expertise and data in a wide range of disciplines, by generating commitment and by developing a vision for a future without violence. As we know well, preventing and ending all forms of violence against children requires a steady effort on an unprecedented scale, an effort that includes political leaders as well as ordinary citizens, and children as well as adults.

The cost of inaction for every child and for nations’ social progress is simply too great to be tolerated. I wish you the best of success for your discussions and look forward to building upon the outcomes of your reflections in my future work.

Marta Santos Pais
UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children