



# Cherish Our Children – Stop Violence Now!

Thursday, 19 October 2006 • Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE: WITH EMPHASIS ON ISLAM<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Violence against children exists in every country of the world, cutting across culture, class, education, income, ethnic origin and religion.<sup>3</sup> In every region, violence against children is socially approved to a certain extent and sometimes even legally sanctioned. Every society, regardless its cultural, economic or social background can and must stop violence against children. Owing to its multidimensional nature of the problem, it calls for multifaceted approach. It requires not just sanctioning perpetrators but more importantly demands the transformation of “mindset” of societies, particularly in their ways of looking at children as persons of their own rights and not merely objects of concern. Religions are powerful in their own inherent nature in bringing about these changes within societies. Religious leaders in particular, are influential in instigating changes and reforms in highlighting on the values of respecting children and the importance of upholding their rights. To help identify approaches and mechanisms that religious leaders could use to confront and prevent violence against children, this paper seeks to address three strategic questions: first, what strengths do religious communities have in protecting children from violence and how they may have failed to prevent it; secondly, what concrete mechanisms/approaches can religious communities undertake to improve knowledge, attitudes and skills towards prevention and thirdly, what actions can be recommended for religious communities and for Government to implement these approaches. Wherever relevant, Islam is cited as illustrations to these approaches.*

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented in *Media Forum: Violence Against Children*, UNICEF, Le Meridien Hotel, Kuala Lumpur Sentral, 19 October 2006.

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<sup>3</sup> See generally, *Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations study on violence against children*, A/61/150 and Corr. 1.



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## Introduction

Recognizing the pivotal role religion play in addressing violence against children, a Global Consultation of Religious Leaders and Experts on the issue of Violence against Children, was held in Toledo, Spain from 9-11 May 2006. 50 representatives from 30 countries in all regions, hailing from different religions discussed how violence affects children and how faith communities can come together to take leadership in their societies to protect children.

The Consultation was organized by UNICEF and the *World Conference on Religions for Peace* to offer a spiritual, religious and human values perspective as input to the UN Study on Violence against Children due to be released in October 2006. It followed a preparatory consultation that was held in Helsinki, Finland in September 2005.

The objectives of the Consultation were threefold: 1) to submit a final set of recommendations to the Violence Study Secretariat for inclusion in the report that will be submitted to the UN General Assembly; 2) To develop key messages and action commitments for religious communities to address violence against children. 3) To prepare a draft declaration for religious leaders on violence against children that will be formally adopted at the *Religions for Peace World Assembly* in Kyoto, Japan in August 2006.

During the meeting, religious communities engaged in a process of interaction and reflection on issues that have violated the dignity of children. Religious leaders acknowledged that there were instances when silence about or denial of violence against children and lack of action has made children subject to violent situations. There was consensus that no act of violence against a child is acceptable, and religions must work to protect and promote the sanctity of life in every stage of a child's development. Together we identified definite areas of strength that could be better used to protect children against violence, including consciousness raising, empowerment of children, intra-faith actions and on prevention and protection of children.

Mechanisms and approaches that religious communities could use to confront and prevent violence against children were identified such as the development of child protection policies for their own communities, the use of national media to educate and make people aware of the rights of the children and the review of teaching materials to protect the dignity of children. The importance of active child participation was stressed and it was reaffirmed that the family unit is the most important place for nurturing children. The need to empower parents and religious groups to speak out about the reality of violence and hold everyone accountable for acts of violence against children was equally emphasized.



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Premised on the Consultation as the backdrop, this paper explores the role of religious leaders within the Malaysian context in protecting children from violence by embarking upon three strategic questions in order to help identify mechanisms and approaches that could be used to confront and prevent violence against children.

## I Strengths of religious leaders in preventing and responding to violence against children

Religious leaders are powerful forces in societies that can influence, reach and impact individuals, institutions, governments, civil society and other sectors to prevent and combat violence against children. Indeed, they can work together with governments to eliminate all forms of violence that can affect children. They have moral authority to promote values and serve as an example for children, young people and adults.

The principles and belief systems of most of the religions in the world aim to teach the value of each human being, through the respect and safeguarding of human dignity. This constitutes a profound framework for religious communities to work for children's rights. This strength has so far not been used to its maximum potential to prevent violent situations and to transform children's environment.

Religious communities have a unique possibility to use the inter-generational dimension of their congregations for constructive work in preventing violence against children. In situations where violence has already occurred, healing spaces could be created, especially where young people have been perpetrators of violence as well. Furthermore, religious communities have the opportunity to promote and create networks for preventing violence against children.

All religions recognize the importance of the family unit and can play a unique role in nurturing positive values, in helping prevent violent situations in families and in helping children to develop their full potential.

Prevalence of violence across societies appears to defy the contention that religious teachings and traditions acknowledge the special position of children as vulnerable human beings needing special care and protection. There are instances where their approval, silence or denial of violence had made children more vulnerable. Use of corporal punishment for instance is a commonly acceptable mode of discipline, more often than not due to literal misinterpretation of religious texts without examining them within the broader framework of child education. The Islamic approach to this issue is cited as example.



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Within the Islamic education system, there are principally three fundamental stages in the manner in which education should be imparted to children. Between birth until six a child must be showered with utmost care and affection so much so that by the time he reaches the age of seven, he is convinced and secured of his parents' love and affection. Between the ages of seven till ten, discipline must be introduced for this is the period when he reaches the age of discretion/discerning (*mumaiyyiz*) during which he should be encouraged to perform the basic rites of Islam namely performance of prayers and fasting during the *Ramadhan*. When he reaches ten disciplinary measures ought to be imposed upon non-compliance. Even so, gradual steps should be taken when punishing a child. As one commentator aptly illustrates, 'just as the doctor uses various means in treating patients, the *murabbi* (teacher/educator) must employ different methods to correct a child.'<sup>4</sup> The author outlined the following methods used by the Prophet as correctional measures (pp. 293-297):

**“Correct the mistake by showing the correct procedure.** Sayyidina ‘Umar bin Abii Salmah as a young boy, would not control his hands while eating. The Prophet said, “Son, cite the name of Allah before eating and eat with your right hand. Start with the food that is closest to you.”

**Correct by teaching tenderly.** Once, the Prophet drank something. To his right there was a youngster, and to his left, an aged person. He sought the youngster's leave to let the aged person drink first. The youngster did not agree, saying, “By Allah, I cannot give preference to anyone to your blessed leftover.”

**Correct by pointing out an error.** Sayyidina Fadl happened to glance at a woman. The Prophet physically turned his face the other way so that he could understand that what he was doing was incorrect.

**Correct by scolding.** Once Abuu Dhar spoke harshly to someone and called him the son of a black woman. The Prophet said, “You are a man on whom there are traces of the Jahiliyyah (the era of ignorance). You debased his mother. Your servants are your helpers. Treat them well.

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<sup>4</sup> See Maulana Habibullah Mukhtar, Bringing Up Children in Islam, Ilmi Publications, 1991, translated by Rafiq bin ‘Abdurrahmaan, 1996, at p 293.



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**Correct by severing ties.** The Prophet forbade the throwing of stones. Sayyidinaa ‘Abdullah bin Mughaffal remembered this advice when one of his kin tossed pebbles. He asked him to stop doing so. He told the kin about the injunction imposed by the Prophet. That person, however persisted and Sayyidina Abdullah said, ‘I told you the words of the noble Prophet Muhammad SAW in this regard but you paid no heed. Go, I will not speak to you anymore.

**Correct by using the rod.** However, this measure may only be taken when persuasion fails and subject to certain conditions. One, physical measure is allowed only as a final resort. Two, one should not exercise this right in anger; for fear that one loses control over his action. Three, one should avoid hitting certain parts of the body i.e., the head, face, chest, stomach and other parts prone to injury. Four, to always remember that the purpose of the punishment is not to hurt therefore it should either be on the hand or leg using a light apparatus. The number of ‘blows’ should commensurate with the degree of act committed and the age of the child. Fifth, a child below the age of ten should not be hit.”<sup>5</sup> When the child reforms after the punishment has been duly administered, educators should be good-natured and cheerful towards the child.

Looking at the meticulous guidelines on educating children, it is apparent that Islam **does not promote** imposition of physical punishment on children. It merely allows it as a final resort and even if needful, it has to adhere to stringent limitations so much so that by the time such punishment is imposed, the intimidating effects<sup>6</sup> would be insignificant.

Furthermore, there are a number of traditions citing benevolence towards children. The Prophet once said, “*The best among the people is he who treats the members of his family best*”. The Prophet himself was always most considerate, tender and affectionate towards his family, especially the children. In one reported occasion when the Prophet was performing congregational prayer with his followers, his grandson Hussein came and climbed on his back while he was prostrating<sup>7</sup>. The Prophet then withheld that position for a substantial period of time so much so that the people who were prostrating with him began to wonder if anything had happened to the Prophet. It was only until Hussein came down that the Prophet got up again so as to avoid the little boy from falling off.

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<sup>5</sup> See Abdul Nasih Ulwan, *op.cit.*, 326-330. See also generally, Maulana Habibullah Mukhtar, *op.cit.*, pp 18-21.

<sup>6</sup> A wide range of research suggest that physical punishment does more harm than good in nurturing good behaviour and manners among children. More often than not it leads to depression, feelings of unworthiness, vengeance, to quote a few. Worse, hitting begets hitting as well as anger and revenge and imparts the message that violence is acceptable.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Ghazali “Ihya’ Ulumiddin”, Vol.3, p.196-197.



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In another event the Prophet was kissing and hugging Hasan, his other grandson, when a man called Al-Aqra' confessed that he has ten children whom he had never embraced before.<sup>8</sup> Upon hearing that the Prophet said: *He who does not show mercy towards his children, no mercy would be shown to him.*

In another instance, Aisya reported that there came a few desert Arabs to Allah's Messenger and said: *"Do you kiss your children?"* He said: *"Yes."* Thereupon they said: *"By Allah, but we do not kiss our children."* The Prophet then said: *"Then what can I do if Allah has deprived you of mercy?"*<sup>9</sup> The mercy and tenderness shown by Allah's Apostle (May Peace Be Upon Him) towards children testified the necessity and importance of love and affection towards children advocated in the teachings of Islam.

In conclusion, the tradition which states to the effect, *"ask your children to pray when they turn seven and hit them when they abstain at ten"*<sup>10</sup> should not be misinterpreted as an encouragement for physical correctional method but rather, looking at the Islamic provisions in their entirety; it is evident that this latitude is geared towards education and not abuse.<sup>11</sup> Weighed against the abundance of traditions which promote kindness and gentle treatment over children, it further justifies that such single allowance for hitting upon abstinence from prayer is a mere allowance, which should be resorted to only as a last and final measure. Further, this stand can be supported by an established principle in Islamic jurisprudence (which actually originated from the saying of the Prophet), which states as follows:

*"Let there be no harming, nor reciprocating harm".*<sup>12</sup>

## II Concrete mechanisms/approaches that may be put in place to improve knowledge, attitudes, and skills towards preventing violence

Religious leaders, via their esteemed positions are instrumental in influencing attitudes and practices towards promoting better treatment towards children. Nevertheless, they too ought to be equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills before this duty may be discharged effectively.

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<sup>8</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, Vol.4, p.1243-1244.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *op.cit.*, at p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *op.cit.*, at para fl.2. It is also noted that it should not be done severely, but so as to discipline the child.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *op.cit.*, at p. 940, para w41.1.



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Listed below are possible mechanisms/approaches that religious leaders may undertake to improve knowledge, attitudes, and skills which they may then subsequently impart and imbue in their approaches towards preventing violence, few of which were as deliberated during the Global Consultation:

## **Education**

- Training in parenting skills and pre-marital counseling as part of the education of young people.
- Development of resources and workshops on violence against children for children, young people and adults, including religious leaders.
- Inclusion of children's rights in the religious educational curriculum.
- Review of teaching materials within religious institutions.
- Use of teaching/preaching to address issues of violence through religious style of discourse such as texts or stories.
- Creation of corrective measures for children who have been perpetrators of violence, which should include healing spaces, psychological support and educational mechanisms for accountability.

## **Cooperation and collaboration**

- Cooperation with other sectors, especially governments, in order to create alliances to protect children and to bring about cultural transformation regarding violence against children.
- Collaboration with other non-government religious organizations.

## **Awareness**

- Campaigns on positive parenting ought to be done vigorously via brochures, pamphlets, and mass media. Likewise campaigns against violence.
- Development of a web site specialized on violence against children, in different languages. This web site could be a space for sharing lessons and experiences of different organizations and individuals and for interaction among religious communities.
- Use of media to send messages of zero tolerance to violence and to educate and make people aware of the rights of the child and of mechanisms to protect children.
- Development of resources or toolkits for children to educate them about their rights and responsibilities.



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## Advocacy

- Promotion of wide ratification of all agreements related to children. The four principles of the United Nation's Convention of the Rights of the Child, namely: Survival, Protection, Development & Participation ought to be the underlying themes in all religious approaches taken in child protection for all religions support these principles.<sup>13</sup>
- Support for the implementation of laws that have already been ratified. In Malaysia, religious leaders can help inform and educate the masses pertaining to the relevant provisions of the Child Act 2001, the principal Act for child protection. For e.g., to remind the public that they have a moral duty to report incidents of abuse and neglect and for some, it is even a mandated responsibility.
- Promotion of changes in national legislation that can help in protecting children. Religious leaders can help identify legal areas which can suitably be revised to promote better treatment of children.
- Use of the recommendations to prevent and combat violence against children in the religious communities through their practices, rituals and educational opportunities.

## Accountability

- **Establishment of a protocol of ethical principles to prevent violence against children.** Within the Malaysian context, this may be relevant for those who come into contact with children: for example, the teachers at the State Religious Schools; facilitators of various motivational and religious programmes both organized by the Government and also non-government organizations.
- **Development of codes of conduct and child protection policies in religious places.** These should be inclusive of all aspects of child safety, sexual abuse prevention, bullying and other forms of abuse.

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<sup>13</sup> The UNCRC was drafted by experts ranging from multi-disciplinary sectors. Whilst there may be disputes in detail, such as the principle of adoption which is not recognized in Islam (but instead supports *kafalah* or fostering), there is a general consensus on the four underlying general themes of the Convention.



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It is gratifying to note that where Muslims are concerned, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), since its inception in 1968 has been in the forefront in promoting violence-free care among Muslim families.<sup>14</sup> Not only there exist comprehensive training and courses' modules in many aspects of family related matters such as parenting skills, pre-marital courses, dealing with problem children to name a few, JAKIM is also active in organizing forum and dialogues relating to family development and care. In fact, the pre-marital course which is a re-requisite to the solemnization of marriage is a crucial tool in which aspects of child protection can be usefully included. Unfortunately, at present this course is limited to Muslims although recognized to be a useful preventive tool if effectively carried out.<sup>15</sup>

## **Recommended Actions for religious leaders and for Government towards Implementation**

Primarily, religious leaders ought to identify, acknowledge and accept the extent of violence prevalent against children within its respective community. Such acknowledgement and identification should then lead to more effective strategic planning and implementation of protective agenda. This would naturally requires in-depth research and analysis into the problem, to identify the dynamics of it so that the problem may be suitably dealt with according to needs and priorities. For example, if the rate of child abuse is more rampant among societies living in high-density areas, then religious activities ought to be pursued more vigorously within those identified areas.

Secondly, religious leaders should rigorously study and interpret the sacred texts and traditions on childrearing and clearly define and identify the limits allowed in disciplining children. Upon this exercise, this information should then be transmitted into easily accessible manuals or booklet and disseminated to society members. It is hoped that with such clear authoritative guidelines from the religious leaders; parents, teachers, child minders and anybody coming into contact with children will not be hasty in resorting to physical disciplinary measures, which may predispose to violence, albeit unpremeditated.

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<sup>14</sup> For further details, see <http://www.islam.gov.my/portal/>

<sup>15</sup> During the Toledo meeting, pre-marital course is thought to be one viable tool to empower parties of their responsibilities towards children prior to contracting marriages.



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Thirdly, religious leaders can take the lead in supporting parents to educate their children by promoting positive parenting and using non-violent responses within their home. Violence in families is often shrouded in silence and secrecy. Religious leaders ought to break this silence and to instill positive behaviours and attitudes in favour of children's protection. One of the biggest strengths of religious communities is their holistic approach to family in all stages of life. Religious leaders have a strong platform in disseminating positive messages through preaching, trainings and other various religious activities. A good start would be to emphasize on the inherent rights of the child clearly recognized by religious teachings and traditions as it is those very rights that adults often ignore and take for granted, thus leading to possible violation.

## Conclusion

There is strong consensus across the different religious traditions of the inherent dignity of every person, including children. Such consensus requires us to reject all forms of violence against children and protect and promote the sanctity of life in every stage of a child's development. All children hold rights within the context of their families, communities and broader social, economic and political environment. They hold these rights equally and it is we adults who ought to uphold these sacred rights. Whilst religions place children on such a pedestal the reality is that as adults we have not always upheld our obligations to protect our children from violence holistically. Through omission, denial and silence, we have at times ignored, tolerated and even perpetuated the reality of violence against children in homes, families and communities and not effectively addressing the suffering that such violence causes. It is crucial that religious leaders, who are highly regarded in communities to be part of the solution to eradicate violence against children and promote their total well being. This effort cannot be tackled alone, neither in isolation. It requires partnership, solidarity and building alliances.

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