



Dar es Salaam

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Speech by Swedish Ambassador Staffan Herrström on corporal punishment in Zanzibar, 20 January 2010

Mheshimywa Waziri wa elimu,
Rafiki,
Mabibi na mabwana,

Some of you might have heard of Astrid Lindgren. Creator of Pippi Longstocking. The author of so many dearly loved books for children. Translated to an unbelievable amount of languages – 94 actually, kiswahili included.

In 1978, the year before Sweden passed anti-smacking legislation, Astrid Lindgren received the German Book Trade Peace Prize. Her acceptance speech was entitled “Never Violence” and included a story once told to her by an old woman. As a young mother, the woman had heard that smacking was a necessary part of a child’s upbringing. One day her young son had done something she thought warranted punishment, so she told the boy to go into the woods to find a birch with which she could beat him.

“The boy was away for a long time and eventually returned in tears, saying:

– I couldn’t find a birch but here’s a stone you can throw at me.

The mother suddenly saw the situation through her son’s eyes and began to cry too. The child must have thought:

– My mother wants to hurt me so she might as well use a stone.

She hugged him and the two cried together for a while. Then she placed the stone on a shelf in the kitchen, where it remained as a constant reminder of the lifelong pledge that she made at that very moment: never violence!”

Let that be the motto for me today. Let that be the motto for us all when addressing the issue of corporal punishment.

Never violence.

Never ever violence.

I have been asked to share some Swedish experiences on this topic.
Corporal punishment of children.

I am doing this with some pride. The use of corporal punishment has decreased tremendously during my lifetime. The same can be said about the tolerance for outright assault.

I am doing this also well knowing that conditions are different. I am not here presenting a blueprint and pretending I have all solutions.

But I am certainly doing this based on a firm conviction that violence against children is wrong in all cultures and all contexts all over the world.

It is also ineffective as well as bad for development of a modern, democratic society and a modern, dynamic economy. Let me start there.

A couple of months ago I made a field trip in Tanzania mainland, visited one of the chambers of commerce, discussed the need for entrepreneurship leading to economic progress and ultimately eradicated poverty. Why is it still so rare?

The answer I got from the three businessmen present made me reflect: We have a very traditional, authoritarian, topdown education system – mobilising fear too often and creativity too seldom. And students are caned.

Sounded like an echo from the Swedish debate. Why was the law against hitting children passed? “Because our democratic community needs children taught to think for themselves, who are used to making their own choices and to shouldering responsibility. It is impossible to beat a child into obedience and at the same time expect it to be able to think for itself.” This was one of the key answers given to the Swedish public 1979 and I got

very much the same message from these Tanzanians in Tanga thirty years later.

In parallel I hear from many Tanzanians that corporal punishment is decreasing on family level. There is an evolution taking place there among parents – putting the child in the centre more than before. That ought to facilitate change also in education.

Abolishing corporal punishment is – and should be recognised as a question of quality of education. Quality in two dimensions.

One is clearly spelled out in the study *Voices of the children*. There, the fear of corporal punishment – engendered e.g. by teachers who carry a stick in class – was expressed as a significant obstacle to learning.

And the second is about the concept of learning. Is it a process where you have 50-60-70 subordinates that you are supposed to make so scared that they do not dare do anything but listen? Or is it a process where you try to develop the inherent capacity of young human beings?

Somewhere there is a new Mwalimu Nyerere sitting. Or a new Asha Rose Migiro. Or a new Haroun Suleiman. Are they given a chance to explore the world around them, to pose curious questions – and even to question some of the messages coming from adults? Like innovators always have done.

You can't cane kids to creativity. It just doesn't work.

Still: Abolishing corporal punishment is more than a tool. It is about rights. It's about children's' rights. They are individual persons, holders of human rights. The child is not a possession of parents, nor a possession of the state.

Says who? you might ask.

Says the UN, is my answer first and foremost. Consequently the global community. Us.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – ratified by both Tanzania and Sweden – requires states to protect children “from all forms of physical or mental violence”. The UN monitoring body for the CRC has repeatedly

underlined that this includes the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment in all settings.

Challenging all forms of corporal punishment however “light” aims at changing perceptions so that children are respected as rights holders just like all other humans.

It has not happened all over the world yet – but it is spreading. The poorest country in Europe, Moldova, recently became the 24th country in the world with a total ban. And over 100 have abolished it in schools: Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia and South Africa being among them. Actually, 40% of all children in the world live in countries having abolished it in schools.

There is a paradox here.

Medically, psychologically it is strange that adults are beating small human beings that are growing and developing. You wouldn’t think of legalising physical punishment of adults. I remember a DC who did it and, rightly, was disciplined for it.

I am certainly not allowed to cane my staff at the Embassy.

But children being particularly vulnerable are treated differently. Not with special care but with legalised violence. We teach them that the stronger has rights over the weaker. Is that the message that we really want them to follow as adults?

And I am not exaggerating. There is no clear limit between corporal punishment and abuse. On the contrary, corporal punishment tends to give way to more serious violence. The acceptability of some forms of violence makes other forms of exploitation and violence easier. In my country violence against children is often part of a pattern of family violence – in almost half of the cases. Violence breeds violence. It’s common that the victims eventually become aggressive themselves.

Clear message in Voices of the children: Regulations are not adhered to in almost all cases. And I have heard that message while talking to children myself: they experience punishment that is violent, unfair and used beyond all reasonable limits.

I admit it must be a challenge for any teacher to teach and set boundaries in a classroom with more than 50-80 pupils, which is often the case in Zanzibar and elsewhere in Tanzania. However, as we have seen legalised violence tend to give rise to over-use of caning. I believe prohibiting caning altogether gives a clear border for teachers. No violence is a clear limit to follow.

Tanzania with its tradition as a haven of peace has all possibilities to become an example for others. Children can be raised with a combination of clear rules, clear rights and mutual respect. You can do it. Yes you can.

Coming back to the specific question to me: How did we do it in Sweden?

Gradual process. Norway was first with a ban in all schools 1936.

Sweden started with some categories of public secondary schools 1918. Ten years later a more qualified category of secondary schools followed. 1958 it was prohibited also in the lower classes – hence in all schools. Again the paradox. Was discipline easier among older students? Probably not. But they were bigger and stronger...

The argument was very much the educational one: A modern school should be based on interaction, care and mutual respect – thus laying the foundation for a society based on the same values. Care and cane were simply incompatible.

The debate was very much the same as here. Adults asking for alternatives.

But as it turned out:

The problem was not abolishing the punishment in itself. On the contrary, that kind of punishment was the problem. Removing it meant removing a problem.

The challenge was something else. You need to be clear with what a teacher is allowed to do and not to do.

Children need to know that there are limits for what they are allowed to do – and why they are there. And there are governmental regulations on that:

Contact with parents. Staying on in school after end of school day. Report to headmaster.

As is said in a publication from South Africa. “It is important to make a distinction between discipline and punishment. Punishment is based on the belief that if children are made to suffer for doing wrong, they will not repeat their inappropriate behaviour. This approach has done untold damage to countless children, often resulting in feelings of alienation, entrenched patterns of anti-social behaviour and even acts of violence”.

I know that there are whole packages of guidelines and advice on this. A very good entry point is the website www.endcorporalpunishment.org.

I cannot offer the one and only solution to the challenge of discipline. You are going to work on that, and I know that there are schools like the Barbro Johansson-secondary school for girls in Tanzania which have done it and seen it working in real life. Corrective measures like cleaning up or doing practical work in school gardens were examples mentioned there. When I have listened to children here in Tanzania mainland and Zanzibar they have had similar ideas.

I think that is a way to move forward on discipline: Involve the children. Let them be part of setting the rules of the game. Use the Children’s councils as well – they are here and they are working.

My main advice is this: Don’t mix things up. Violence is one thing. Setting limits is another. Removing violence is not the same as removing rules.

There should be rules – for students as part of their upbringing as well as for teachers as part of their professional regulations.

But you should not have violence against anyone, anytime, anywhere.

The process continued in Sweden around 1960 when corporal punishment was abolished in child care institutions and reformatory schools.

In 1966 the parental right to smacking or caning disappeared from legislation and you might have guessed that was the end of the story.

However, it was not - which takes me to another lesson learned. You cannot remove physical punishment through a silent reform. The signal must be clear and unambiguous.

In Sweden there was a case of a stepfather beating a small girl to death in the early 70's. That created a public uproar. A new organisation for childrens' rights was created, a helpline was established and finally the prohibition was approved by Parliament: 259 votes against six – also banning humiliating treatment. Entering into force 1979.

The decision was accompanied by a broad information campaign with a brochure being spread widely: "Can you bring up children successfully without smacking and spanking?". There were even messages printed on milk packages explaining the purpose of the law. After two years more than 90% of the Swedish families were aware that the law was changed.

The change over time in behaviour is remarkable. One study done with people in my age - born between 1955 and 1958 – shows that all of them had been experiencing corporal punishment. (I am actually an exception...). In the 60's most preschool children had been smacked by their parents and one third of them regularly. In the 80's that was down to one third. After 2000 data provided by the parents suggests that it is down to just a few percent.

We have also seen a narrowing of the gap between what adults think is right and what they do. 1960's half of parents thought it was wrong to use physical punishment but almost everybody did use it anyway. Now only around 10 per cent think it is right and would use physical punishment.

We started asking children in the mid 90's what they thought. School children born around 1990 say they are smacked considerably less often and with less force than children born ten years earlier.

We have also seen the tolerance among the public for abuse decreasing. Many more cases of assault are reported. Not because there are more in real life but because they are no longer regarded as a family business. ...

Have parents abdicated from their parental duties? A research study shows: no. they exercise discipline and control by other means. Sharp admonitions,

physically preventing the child from doing something and redefining the situation or problem were the most common methods.

Upbringing by verbal rather than physical methods. Educative discipline rather than punitive. A key factor turned out to be the extent to which the child understands the parents methods of upbringing as legitimate.

Why are attitudes now so negative towards corporal punishment in Sweden?

- Tradition of resolving conflicts by discussion and agreement – like in Tanzania.
- Stronger position for women – which has meant a stronger position also for children.
- Also men increasingly taking part in the care of children from their birth and onwards.
- Child centred society.
- Legislation unambiguous – and combined with broad inclusive information and debate.
- Seen as a community interest that children grow up to independently minded, socially competent individuals with powers of initiative.

Religious leaders been supportive. In the brochure I have brought with me there are quotes from Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders in Sweden – all along the same lines.

Certainly we have not solved all problems. Abuse occurs. Violence occurs. But still we have seen huge changes just during my lifetime.

Zanzibar could be in the forefront. With this process you have already taken a significant step. And I would like to add one additional piece of advice: You would benefit a lot from a speedy approval and implementation of a Law of the Child act. That would put the issue of banning corporal punishment in schools into a broader context of strengthening children's rights.

Let me end here. End by reminding us all of that stone from the story of Astrid Lindgren. The stone reminding the mother of her lifelong pledge. And let's make that the pledge for all of us here: never ever violence against the children of ours and of our societies.