What Works to Prevent Violence Against Children in Afghanistan? A policy brief.

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Globally, one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.[1] In Afghanistan, 56% of married women aged 15-49 report ever having experienced emotional, physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, increasing to 92% in some provinces.[2] Violence against women is associated with intergenerational effects such that the experience and perpetration of intimate partner violence is linked to individual childhood abuse.[3] Furthermore, evidence suggests that children's exposure to various forms of violence such as family violence in the home and corporal punishment at school are strongly linked to children's perpetration of violence against their peers, suggesting that children learn and reproduce violent norms and practices from adults.[4] Therefore, preventing violence against children is critical to the long-term prevention of violence in general and violence against women in particular. This brief presents the final evaluation findings of Help the Afghan Children's (HTAC's) school-based peace education and community-based social norms change intervention and is intended to raise awareness among governmental and non-governmental organisations, donors and policy makers about what works to prevent violence against children.



Girls participate in a school-based peace education lesson. Photo: Wahid Siddiq, HTAC.

Summary

Globally 17% of children experience extreme forms of corporal punishment. In Afghanistan 78% of children aged 5 to 14 have experienced violent psychological or physical punishment and more than a third experience extreme physical violence.[5] At the school level, children are also exposed to high levels of corporal punishment by teachers[6] and peer violence perpetrated by other children.[7] The aim of HTAC's intervention was to prevent violence against and between children through school-based peace education with children and social norms change activities implemented with adults at the community level. The evaluation found significant reductions in peer violence between students and significant reductions in children's experiences of corporal punishment by teachers at school and by family members at home.

Key messages

- School based peace education and changing community social norms through awareness raising activities are effective approaches to preventing violence against children at school and at home.
- Given that children often learn violence at home, school-based interventions may not be sufficient and community-based interventions play a vital role in shifting violent norms and practices.
- Scaling up the intervention to other regions in Afghanistan is an important step towards reducing violence against children and mitigating the intergenerational effects of violence that can lead to violence against women later in life.

The Issue

Against a background of more than four decades of war and conflict, Afghan society suffers from endemic violence, including violence against women and children and harmful traditional practices. Violence against children occurs at many levels, including within families, communities and school settings.

Intervention

In order to prevent violence against children and to lay the foundations for peace, HTAC implemented a school-based peace education and community social norms change intervention with multiple components over a two-year period.



HTAC's peace education consisted of thirty-three 35-minute lessons per year delivered in 10 boys and 10 girls schools, reaching 2000 boys and 1500 girls. Fifty teachers were trained to facilitate the peace education and an additional 400 teachers were trained in peace education and peaceful conflict resolution.

HTAC's community social norms change activities included conflict resolution, peace building and women's rights training with parents, community and religious leaders, women's Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and government officials. These trainings were implemented in the same 10 communities in which schools receiving peace education were located.



HTAC also implemented radio messaging activities, including weekly round table discussions and scripted radio dramas related to peaceful conflict resolution, women's rights and violence against women and girls.



Evaluation methodology

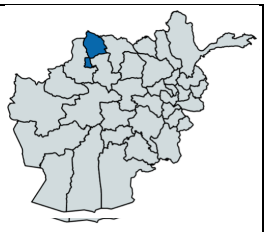
The evaluation employed a cross-sectional, interrupted time series design with three data collection points and approximately one year between baseline and endline time points. This is the first time that a peace education program has been evaluated in Afghanistan, with or without a community social norms change intervention.

How?

A quantitative survey was conducted with students in schools receiving HTAC's peace education. The questionnaire was designed for the study, translated from English to Dari and administered by trained enumerators using pen and paper.

Where?

The evaluation was implemented in seven girls' and four boys' schools in three districts of Jawzjan province in the north of Afghanistan.



Who?

The sample varied slightly at each evaluation point and at endline 373 girls and 361 boys were included in the study. At baseline students were in grades 7 and 8 and the same grade cohorts were sampled at midline and endline in grades 8 and 9.

Why?

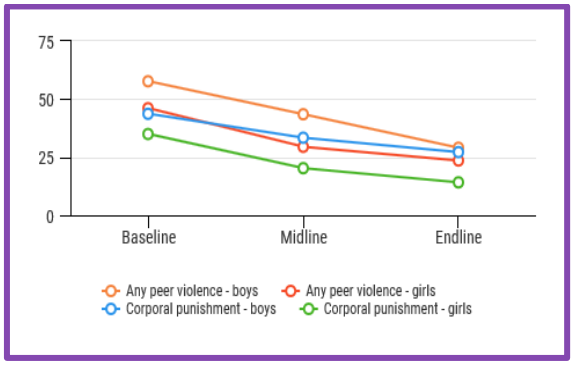
The study was primarily interested in measuring outcomes related to children's experience of violence in the past month. At the school level, key outcomes included peer violence victimisation, peer violence perpetration and corporal punishment by teachers. The study also measured children's experience of violence at home, including experience of physical punishment and observation of family violence. Other outcomes included depression, school attendance, gender equitable attitudes and attitudes towards child punishment. The objective of measuring these outcomes was to generate knowledge on the impact of HTAC's intervention on children's experiences of and attitudes towards violence, and children's mental health and school performance.



Training with male community members on conflict resolution, peace building and women's rights. Photo: Wahid Siddiq, HTAC.

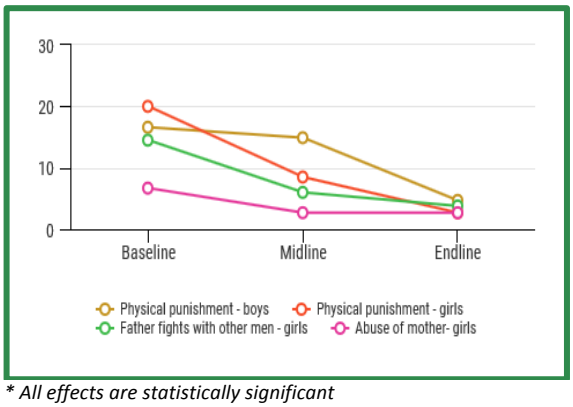
Findings

The evaluation found large decreases in children's experiences of violence at school. Boys' reports of peer violence perpetration reduced from 31.7% to 13.6%, and their reports of peer violence victimisation reduced from 49.7% to 25.2%. For girls, peer violence perpetration reduced from 17.6% to 7.2%, and peer victimisation reduced from 43.3% to 21.7%. There was also a reduction in corporal punishment by teachers in schools: 27.2% of boys and 14.2% of girls reported having experienced corporal punishment at endline compared with 43.7% of boys and 35% of girls at baseline.



** All effects are statistically significant*

At the household level, the proportion of boys reporting physical punishment dropped from 16.6% to 4.7% and, for girls, physical punishment dropped from 20% to 2.7%. Furthermore, fewer children, particularly girls, reported observing family violence in their households, including their fathers fighting with other men or their mothers being beaten or abused by husbands or other household members.



** All effects are statistically significant*

The evaluation identified a range of additional positive outcomes. Both boys and girls had significantly fewer symptoms of depression.

Students' attitudes also shifted significantly at endline. Both boys and girls had significantly more equitable gender attitudes, particularly in relation to attitudes about men's violent and controlling behaviour towards women at the household level. There was also a significant reduction in girls' and boys' violence-supportive attitudes in relation to the punishment of children; for instance, that it is acceptable for children to be physically punished by parents, teachers or other students. Girls' school attendance improved significantly between baseline and endline and this is partly related to the reduction in peer violence that they experienced at school.

Conclusion

The evaluation of HTAC's intervention suggests that although violence against children is highly prevalent in Afghanistan, it is preventable. The findings indicate that conducting peace education with children in schools, coupled with activities aimed at changing community social norms, can lead to a reduction in various forms of violence, including children's peer violence, corporal punishment of children both at school and at home and domestic violence against women at the household level.

Implications

Given the intergenerational nature of experience and perpetration of violence, preventing violence against children is critical to disrupting cycles of violence later in life and facilitating the long-term prevention of violence against women. If interventions targeting children and community members, such as HTAC's intervention, are not implemented, the cycle of violence, and the corresponding physical, social and emotional costs associated with violence, will continue.

Recommendations

- Donors need to prioritise and resource violence prevention interventions with children; however, targeting children in schools settings will likely be insufficient if interventions are not simultaneously targeting and raising awareness among adults. Effective measures to prevent violence against children thus require multi-layered approaches implemented in both school and community settings.

- HTAC's intervention and evaluation were implemented successfully in Jawzjan province. Scaling up the intervention to other regions of Afghanistan is an important step towards preventing violence against children and mitigating the intergenerational effects of violence.

- Educational institutions play a critical role in creating peaceful, respectful and violence-free environments for children. However, such institutions could also play an important role in longer-term violence prevention and peacebuilding efforts through the implementation of peace education with students. The Ministry of Education in particular should consider adopting peace education into the general school curriculum.

Programme team

The research was led by Professor Rachel Jewkes and Dr Julienne Corboz from the South African Medical Research Council, and Hemat Osman and Wahid Siddiq from Help the Afghan Children.

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