Ending lawful assault of
children – a foundation
for eliminating sexual
exploitation and abuse

Summary
Prohibiting and eliminating corporal punishment is important in the fight
against sexual exploitation.

Giving children equal protection from assault under the law will end the
legal reinforcement of the idea that children deserve less protection from
violence than adults – a situation which underpins the commodification of
children who are sexually exploited.

Prohibiting corporal punishment will ensure that the legal frameworks
put in place to address sexual exploitation extend to contributing factors.
Replacing corporal punishment in families with positive parenting and
non-violent relationships between adults and children will strengthen and
protect families, reducing children’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

The Global Initiative
The Global Initiative was launched in Geneva in 2001 and aims to promote and support prohibition
of all corporal punishment and other cruel and degrading punishment of children, in the context of
implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Its aims are supported by UNICEF, UNESCO,
human rights institutions, and international and national NGOs. Further information at www.endcorporalpunishment.org
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Violent punishment contributes to sexual exploitation

Corporal punishment – and its legality – contributes to children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse in a number of ways:

- The widespread practice of physically hurting children in the name of punishment or “discipline” violates their physical integrity and human dignity, and makes other physical and sexual invasion “easier” and more likely. The legality of violent punishment undermines the rights-based challenge to all violence against children – including sexual abuse and exploitation.
- The lack of zero tolerance of violence against children, in the law and in social attitudes, impedes the prevention of all forms of violence and exploitation.
- Children often experience both corporal punishment and sexual abuse in the family. A home environment where a certain degree or kind of violence against children is condoned is an environment where boundaries are blurred and children are vulnerable.
- Some corporal punishment is sexual (e.g. spanking on bare buttocks), and much child pornography depicts scenes of physical punishment of children.
- Corporal punishment, and the threat of it, may be used to coerce children into sexual relationships within or outside the family and into other forms of sexual exploitation.
- Corporal punishment by parents is often the reason why children run away from home, making them more vulnerable to exploitation on the street.
- Corporal punishment is a common means of control over child labourers (including those in the sex trade) and over girls in conflict areas (who often become slave-wives).
- Experiencing corporal punishment has a negative impact on a child’s emotional and interpersonal development and is associated, in adulthood, with aggression, poor mental health and risky sexual behaviour.

The UNCRC and its Optional Protocol

Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – and other regional and international human rights treaties – requires prohibition of all corporal punishment of children, including in the home. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has long recommended this to States parties, and in June 2006 consolidated its approach in General Comment No. 8 on “The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment”. The Committee affirmed that prohibiting and eliminating corporal punishment is “a key strategy for reducing and preventing all forms of violence in societies” (para. 3).

The preamble to the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography emphasises the importance of “a holistic approach”, including “addressing the contributing factors”. The legality and social approval of violent punishment undermines the rights-based challenge to all violence against children – including sexual abuse and exploitation.

The emphasis on prevention in the Optional Protocol (article 9) supports the call for prohibition of corporal punishment to be included in strategies to address sexual exploitation. This is also stressed in the report of the UNSG’s Study on Violence Against Children, which recommended prohibition of all violence against children, including corporal punishment, and set a target date of 2009.

Clearly, corporal punishment contributes to the conditions which allow sexual abuse and exploitation to flourish in societies. Its prohibition and elimination will contribute to the reduction of sexual exploitation and abuse.