Children’s Rights Apply Without Exception: On This Year’s Ashura March in Berlin

In recent days, numerous videos and images related to the Shiite mourning ceremonies of this year’s Ashura march in Berlin have been circulated on social media. They show how children and adolescents were involved for many hours in high temperatures in a way that disregards their dignity and gives the impression that they are being instrumentalised for ideological or political purposes. The footage has deeply moved many people.

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression are among the cornerstones of a democratic society. However, these freedoms find their limits where the well-being and rights of children are impaired. It is unacceptable for minors to be used to convey political or ideological messages or to be exposed to situations that endanger their physical or psychological integrity and their human dignity. Children’s rights, physical integrity and the free development of personality apply universally and without religious or cultural exceptions.

From a psychological and socio-psychological perspective, children and adolescents are in a decisive phase of their personal and identity development. They are particularly susceptible to social influence, peer pressure and emotional bonds. If they are confronted early on with images of the enemy, ideological narratives or the glorification of suffering and violence, this can impair their capacity for independent judgement, for empathy and for a pluralistic and democratic understanding of values.

At the same time, we have been observing increasing social polarisation for several years. Social tensions, identity conflicts and the need to belong create fertile ground for ideological radicalisation and the emergence of rigid group identities. Where constructive dialogue, mutual tolerance and rational debate recede into the background, emotional polarisation and the division into “us” and “them” gain

influence. As a result, social problems are not solved but often further aggravated.

For this very reason, such incidents should not be regarded merely as isolated cases. They can be an occasion to engage seriously with the causes of social tensions. These include questions of integration, social participation, the development of a stable identity and the promotion of democratic values and respectful coexistence. In the long term, an open and nuanced public debate is more effective than denial or sweeping condemnation.

As a medical association, we do not view these events primarily from a religious or political perspective, but from the perspective of child welfare, physical health and the psychological and social development of children and adolescents. Children are not carriers of religious, ideological or political messages. They must not be turned into symbols of social, religious or historical conflicts.

In this context, the situation of children and adolescents in Iran also deserves particular attention. In recent months, numerous children and young people who peacefully stood up for freedom, human dignity and fundamental rights have fallen victim to severe state violence, as we most recently witnessed in massacres and the systematic use of violence and the killing of more than forty thousand people.

From a human rights perspective, it is important that such events are not forgotten and that the international community consistently stands up for the protection of the rights and dignity of all children and adolescents, regardless of the country in which they live or the religion to which they belong.

We expect politicians, authorities and institutions in education, healthcare and social services to take a clear stance and to be consistently guided by the best interests of the child. An open society does not prove its strength by avoiding difficult questions, but by protecting the most vulnerable.

As an association with a medical focus and members with their own migration background, we expressly point out: our criticism is directed neither against people because of their origin nor against their religion. It is directed solely against practices that can impair the health, dignity or free development of children.

Children’s rights are universal.

Yours sincerely,

Patriotic Doctors of Iran (PDI)