

FROM THE UN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Since the 1980s, advocates for children have increasingly agreed that children need rights protected by international law. Charity is not enough to protect children around the world. International law exists: November 2009 was the twentieth anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the first legally binding agreement setting standards for the care, treatment and protection of all persons below age eighteen. The treaty covers child labor, child marriage, child soldiers, juvenile justice, trafficking, violence against children as well as the fundamental right to birth registration, to acquire a name and a nationality. Embodied in law violators can be held accountable.

More countries have ratified this human rights treaty than any other. About 70 countries have incorporated children's codes into national legislation based on the conventions provisions. The US has, unfortunately, not ratified this treaty. American law reflects many of the provisions and ratifying the Convention would send an important message of humanity to the world.

As part of the treaty, the UN has established the Committee on the Rights of the Child to which countries have to provide regular reports. These reports allow us to track global progress.

While many problems remain, there has been progress in the past two decades. The number of under-five deaths fell from 12.5 million in 1990 to less than 9 million in 2008. The number of children out of primary school declined from 115 million in 2002 to 101 million in 2007. Currently, around 84 percent of children, of the appropriate age, are in primary school. Immunization programs and vaccines have saved millions of lives and helped reduce global measles deaths by 74 percent since 2002.

The declaration spurred many developing countries to register all births. Still, an estimated 51 million were born but not registered in 2007 and one in four developing countries registers only half of their births. Unregistered children are legally invisible. They risk losing access to medical care, education and passports and as adults the right to marry, vote, open a bank account or to inherit.

Child labor is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Children miss school when they work. UNICEF estimates that 150 million children between ages five and fourteen are working, mainly in agriculture. Brazil has helped some 27 million citizens climb up to the middle class since 2002 in part by paying a monthly allowance to families who keep their children in school and take them for regular health checks. Inspired by this success has promoted adaptations in almost 20 countries including Chile, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and Morocco.

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More than a third of women aged twenty to twenty-four report that they were married by age 18, often much younger and sometimes without their consent. The average age of first marriage is very gradually increasing in many countries.

At any one time, more than a million children are being held by the justice system, usually for offenses such as running away from home, truancy, living on the street, alcohol abuse or illegal immigration..In Myanmar, children are legally responsible by age seven. Five countries have executed a child since January 2005.

The US has about 2000 people under age 18, serving life sentences, which violates the convention if they do not have possibilities of parole. In 2005 the US Supreme Court declared the death penalty unconstitutional for juveniles and recently announced it will consider the constitutionality of life sentences for minors in two Florida rape and robbery cases. In one, the crime was committed by a thirteen year old.

How we treat children and the vulnerable is an important gage of the humanity and hopefulness of our culture. Children are the future and represent our vision for the years to come.

Much work still needs to be done. The United Nations will continue to push countries to protect children's rights, providing the bedrock for better lives.

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