

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS: CHILDREN AND THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS

Charity is not enough. Children need their rights protected by international law.

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Throughout the world many children are denied their human rights: forced to become child soldiers, trafficked for labor or sex, and put in adult jails under life sentences without parole. Since the 1980's advocates for childhood human rights have increasingly agreed that children need their rights protected by international law. Charity is not enough to protect children. November 2013 was the 24th anniversary of the UN convention on the rights of the child. It is the first legally binding agreement that sets standards for the care, treatment and protection of persons below age 18. This convention is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. The only exceptions to ratifying this treaty are Somalia and the United States. Somalia is expected to ratify soon.

Why a human Rights approach? When a country ratifies a treaty it must incorporate the provisions of the convention into its national legislation. Over 70 countries have done this, thus strengthening the protection of children. An additional reason for a rights approach is universality, which means this treaty applies to all children and carries with it accountability. Under stringent human rights legislation violators will be held accountable.

Why has the United States not ratified? One of the biggest barriers is an aggressive misinformation campaign by parental rights organizations. US ratification of the human rights treaty for children is complicated by the continued practice of sentencing child offenders to life in prison without parole, which the convention specifically prohibits. This practice has fortunately been increasingly whittled away by the US Supreme Court in recent years.

Let us examine some other issues facing the world's children:

Trafficking

After drug dealing, human trafficking (both for sex and forced labor) is the major and fastest growing criminal industry in the world today. The UN estimates that this activity involves over \$32 billion per year. Worldwide UNICEF estimates that there are nearly two million children in the commercial sex trade.

The International Justice Mission (IJM) relates the story of 14-year-old Manna from India. She ran away from her abusive home and met a woman who offered her a job selling fabric. She accepted the position and the woman provided her a place to sleep for the night. When she woke up, the woman was gone and she discovered that she was in a brothel. She was freed after two years when IJM investigators discovered her captivity and alerted local authorities that freed her and three other girls. She was lucky, but many others are not.

Child Soldiers

Worldwide hundreds of thousands of children are recruited into armed forces, paramilitary civil militia and other armed groups. Under international law the participation of children under 18 is prohibited. The recruitment and use of children under 15 is a war crime. Often they are abducted.

Others enlist “voluntarily”, usually and sadly, because these children see few alternatives. Since 2008 UNICEF and partners on the ground have been involved in the release of over 12,000 children from various armed groups in 9 countries.

Juvenile Justice

According to UNICEF, more than one million children are detained through the justice systems worldwide at any time. The vast majority has not committed serious offenses. Many are charged with offenses such as running away from home, violating child related curfews, truancy and alcohol use. Children are also detained in the context of immigration.

The US is particularly harsh in its judicial system. After the 1970’s the trend was to be tough on crime and especially on the use of mandatory sentencing for drug crimes. Over the past decades those laws pushed the American prison population to more than two million, the highest rate of incarceration in the world. African Americans are 20 times more likely than whites to be sentenced to life without parole. Human Rights Watch and the ACLU estimate that in 2011, more than 95,000 young people under the age of 18 were held in prisons and jails, many of which use solitary confinement, a particularly harsh punishment for young people.

You can support children’s human rights by donating to and assisting the work of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UNICEF, and Equal Justice Initiative.