

The rights of every child

Walking down the street in a village or city. Confined to a prison cell or trying to survive in a war zone. No matter who you are and no matter where you are, all young people everywhere have fundamental rights that are protected by international law.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights established that people of all ages, regardless of their sex, race, religion, language, politics, disability, and social status, share certain universal human rights. In 1989, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a landmark international agreement recognizing that every child has certain basic needs, including health and safety, education and a nurturing environment in which they can reach their fullest potential.

Because children -- generally meaning anyone under the age of 18 -- are continuing to grow and develop mentally, and because they usually can't participate in government, the Convention says governments have a special obligation to ensure that their needs are met. And the Convention obliges governments to safeguard the rights of children against any abuse of these rights, even when these abuses are carried out by institutions within the community or by members of the family.

The overwhelming majority of the world's governments have ratified the Convention, meaning that they have made a commitment in law not only to meeting children's needs, but also to ending the violence and abuse that deprive children of these needs. Only two countries have not ratified the Convention: the United States and Somalia. However, many others, routinely violate the Convention through their own actions or by turning their backs when children's rights are violated in the community and in the family.

The Convention is one of the most comprehensive international frameworks for human rights protection. The Convention stresses that the rights it protects cannot be isolated from each other, protected only in part, or exercised only by some, but are interdependent, indivisible and universal.

The Convention requires governments to always act in the best interests of children. All children have the right to food, shelter, education and the best possible health care. Children are entitled to rest and play, to be informed, to express themselves and to have their privacy respected. Children have the right to maintain their language, family and cultural ties. Governments have an obligation to protect these bonds -- all the more so for indigenous children and children of ethnic minorities. Governments must ensure that parents, legal guardians or others responsible for the care of children have the protection and the assistance that they need to provide a nurturing environment for children.

The rights protected by the Convention are not be denied to any child - even during war or when children come in conflict with the law.

The Convention says children have the right to be shielded from the effects of war. Those under fifteen are not to be recruited into armed forces. All children have the right to have a name and nationality. This includes children driven from their homes by war. They are not to be persecuted for who they are or because of the identity of their parents. Children who have been uprooted by conflict have rights as refugees, and the right to be re-united with their parents. Children have the right to rehabilitation from conditions of neglect, maltreatment, exploitation and war.

People under eighteen who come in contact with the law are entitled to a justice system that promotes their dignity and worth, and encourages their reintegration into society. Young people have the right to appropriate justice: this includes fair and prompt trials, not being subject to torture or the death penalty, and not being locked up with adult prisoners. As well, juvenile justice systems should include alternatives to imprisonment such as counseling, probation, and foster care.

Until they attain maturity, and full political participation, children are entitled to special safeguards from exploitation. Governments must create laws to shield young people from physical and mental abuse, and from sexual and economic exploitation. For example, states must put into place labour standards so that working children don't lose their rights to education and development, health, and well-being. Slavery is forbidden.

The Convention recognizes the right of children to hold and express opinions and to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. The Convention calls on governments to ensure that children know and can exercise their rights.