Children’s rights, our future

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Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of people who campaign to promote respect for all the human rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international standards.

Amnesty International’s program of research and action is focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination. In this context:

· It seeks the release of all prisoners of conscience. These are people detained for their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status – who have not used or advocated violence.

· It works for fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners.

· It opposes the death penalty, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment without reservation.

· It campaigns for an end to political killings and “disappearances”.

Amnesty International holds governments accountable not only for violations inflicted by their own agents, but also for failing to protect people against abuses by other individuals.

Amnesty International calls on armed political groups to respect human rights and stop abuses.

Amnesty International also seeks to support the protection of human rights through other activities, such as its work for refugees, on international military, security and police relations, and on economic and cultural relations.

Children's rights, our future

Protecting the human rights of children is to invest in the future. Children's rights are the building blocks for a solid human rights culture, the basis for securing human rights for future generations.

Children are entitled to all the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the various treaties that have developed from it. Children are also guaranteed additional rights, notably under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, because they need special protection and care. They must be able to depend on the adult world to look after them, to defend their rights and to help them develop and realize their potential.

Governments are obliged to protect all the rights of the child – economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political. States are not only responsible for the violations committed by their own state officials, but they are also obliged to take positive measures to prevent abuses against children by private individuals, whether in the community or in the family.

Amnesty International campaigns around the world to ensure that children’s human rights are protected. It calls on governments, opposition groups and all other actors who exercise control over
children to adhere to the principle of “best interests of the child” as the primary consideration in all actions concerning children.

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[photo caption]
this page: Children listening to environmentalists in Kaptagat, Kenya, 2001. © AP
cover photo: Governments are obliged to protect all the rights of the child – economic and social, as well as civil and political. Here, children from impoverished communities in the Philippines release paper aeroplanes during a protest over economic demands, July 2001. © Reuters
[end caption]

Abuse of children's rights

Almost all governments pay lip service to children's rights, but most fail to live up to their words. Children suffer many of the same human rights abuses as adults, but are often targeted because they are dependent and vulnerable or because children are not seen as individuals with their own rights.

Children are tortured and ill-treated by state officials, detained in appalling conditions, and sentenced to death. Countless thousands are killed and maimed in armed conflicts. Millions are forced by poverty or abuse to live on the streets where they are vulnerable to abuse. Millions more work at exploitative or hazardous jobs or are victims of child trafficking and forced prostitution. Discriminatory attitudes and practices mean girl children suffer gender-specific abuses, such as female genital mutilation, and are particularly vulnerable to other forms of abuse, including rape.

Amnesty International regularly highlights cases of child victims of human rights violations such as torture and political killings. It is also developing its work on children focusing on three key themes: juvenile justice, children in armed conflict, and children in the community and family.

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Juvenile justice

Children often suffer neglect, abuse and violence in the administration of juvenile justice. The very institutions that should be protecting children are disregarding their general and special rights.

When children are picked up by police, they are frequently ill-treated or tortured. Their legal rights are often ignored. Their parents are not informed of their whereabouts. They are held in degrading conditions, often sharing cells with adults. Some are denied their right to a fair trial and are given sentences that disregard the key objectives of juvenile justice – the child’s rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

“I shared a cell with three other girls. We had to watch each other receiving electric shocks...”

Döne Talun, aged 12, Turkey

Often children come into conflict with the law for minor offences – usually theft – and in some cases their only “crime” is that they are poor and homeless. Many children survive only through begging, petty crime or prostitution – activities that bring them to the attention of the police and make them vulnerable to arbitrary detention and ill-treatment.
Whatever the criminal charge they face, children should only be deprived of their liberty as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate time. There are many alternatives to imprisonment. All detained children have the right to have contact with their families and to be treated with due respect for their age. They also should be held separately from adults to minimize the risk that they will be abused or influenced by other inmates.

Amnesty International calls on governments to ensure that the rights of all detained children are respected and that children are treated according to the principles of juvenile justice spelled out in the Children’s Convention and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (known as The Beijing Rules). In line with Amnesty International’s unconditional opposition to the death penalty, the organization vigorously campaigns against the sentencing to death of juvenile offenders.

[photo caption]
A juvenile detention centre in Chaeng Wattana, near Bangkok, Thailand, March 2000. © Reuters
[end caption]

[box]
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Children’s Convention has been ratified by every UN member state except the USA and Somalia. It covers the full spectrum of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, stressing their indivisible and interdependent relationship. The rights fall into four broad categories:

· subsistence rights, including the rights to food, shelter and health care;
· development rights, which allow children to reach their fullest potential;
· protection rights, such as the right to life and protection from abuse, neglect and exploitation;
· participation rights, which allow children to play an active role in community and political life.

The rights of the Convention apply regardless of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status”. The main message is equality of opportunity. Girls should be given the same opportunities as boys. Poor children, disabled children, refugee children, children of indigenous or minority groups – all should have the same rights as others, the same opportunities to learn and enjoy an adequate standard of living.

Amnesty International calls on governments to pass legislation guaranteeing the rights set out in the Convention and make available adequate resources to implement these rights.
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[photo caption]
Afghan children in New Jalozai refugee camp near Peshawar, Pakistan, November 2001. © AI
[end caption]

Children and armed conflict
War is an everyday reality for millions of children. Some have known no other life. Others have had their world suddenly turned upside-down by the outbreak of conflict. Countless children have been killed, disabled or orphaned in the violence. Countless others have died or suffered from starvation. Millions have been forced onto the road as refugees or displaced persons, often separated from their loved ones. Many are traumatized by the climate of violence, fear and hardship.

Many thousands of children are taking part in the killing. Many have been recruited by security forces and armed opposition groups; others feel they had no choice but to “volunteer”; some have joined the fighting voluntarily. Casualty rates among child soldiers are generally high because of their inexperience, fearlessness and lack of training, and because they are often used for particularly hazardous assignments.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which came into force in February 2002, prohibits the use of children aged under 18 in hostilities. Amnesty International campaigns for the ratification of this protocol and for the prohibition of the recruitment into armed forces or the participation in armed conflict of anyone under 18.

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**Children in the community and family**

Abuses faced by children in the family and community range from ill-treatment in institutions to violence at home, from child trafficking to child bonded labour. The vulnerability of children to such abuses often depends on other aspects of their identity, such as gender, ethnicity or economic status. The denial of one set of rights leads to the abuse of others.

The Children’s Convention obliges governments to protect children from physical or mental violence or abuse while in the care of “parents, legal guardians or any other person who has the care of the child”, including teachers and employers. Children also have the right to be free from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to be protected from hazardous and exploitative forms of labour.

The Children’s Convention reaffirms the rights of the child to an adequate living standard and adequate health care, social security and education. Delivering on this commitment is an enormous challenge for any government, requiring a combination of legal, economic and social measures.

Amnesty International campaigns to ensure that all children in the care of public or private institutions are protected from all forms of mental, physical and emotional abuse.

[photo caption]
Child in orphanage in Belarus, 2001 © AP
[end caption]

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**What you can do**

Join Amnesty International and become part of a worldwide movement campaigning for an end to human rights violations. Help us to make a difference.

- Make a donation to support Amnesty International’s work.
- Tell your friends, family, neighbours and co-workers about your commitment to human rights.
For further details, please write to the address in the box below, if there is one:

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