

Child

RIGHTS and ARMED CONFLICT

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS? Human rights are the rights and freedoms that we all have. Our rights include: the right to life, to be free from torture and abuse, to go to school and to work. We have the right to shelter and to food, the right to practise a religion, and the right to think and say what we want as long as we don't hurt anyone. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.

WHERE DO RIGHTS COME FROM? Human rights are based on fairness, dignity, justice, equality and respect. These are values that everybody can understand, and that have existed for hundreds of years in different societies all over the world. Human rights were officially recognised as universal values by the world when the United Nations (UN) was set up.

WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER TO CHILDREN IN THE UK? Human rights matter to us all, even if we sometimes feel that they are only important to people in other countries. There are plenty of children in the UK whose rights are not being respected: one child in three lives in poverty, one child in four is physically abused, and one child in seven does not have a proper home. Children may not know that their rights are being ignored or how they can change their situation. All young people should know their rights and understand how they can use their rights to protect themselves. All adults have a responsibility to uphold the rights of all children.

WHAT IS THE UNITED NATIONS? The UN is an international organisation made up of 192 countries known as 'member states'. It was created in 1945 as the world emerged from the Second World War. Its founders were shocked by the destruction of the war and the horrors of the Holocaust. They wanted to create an international organisation that they hoped would be able to prevent such catastrophes from happening in the future. So promoting human rights, along with maintaining international peace and reducing poverty, became an aim of the UN.

"We have lost a part of our life, and it will never come back." 18-year-old, Burundi

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Children – and women – tend to suffer the most during armed conflict. Their human rights are often limited or denied. Children can be left orphaned (this affects the **right to a family and care**), homeless (**right to shelter**) and without means to support themselves (**right to food**). If they have younger siblings or elderly relatives, they might have to take care of them (**right to rest and play**). Their schooling will most likely be interrupted (**right to education**). They could be forced to fight by the government or other armed groups (**right to security and freedom**). Or they could be injured or killed (**right to life**). In the worst cases, they might experience all of those things. Armed conflict can affect every human right and every aspect of a child's life.

SPOTLIGHT ON CHILD SOLDIERS

One of the most worrying ways in which children can become caught up in conflict is as soldiers. Many do not choose to fight. They are pressured with threats against them or their families. Sometimes, children are kidnapped and forced to fight. Other children want to fight. They even have the support of their parents who believe that they will be better off as soldiers by having regular meals, free clothing, wages, medical care and, in some cases, education. Some children want to join a political movement. They want to fight for a cause that they think will help them – like freedom from a cruel government. Others want respect. They want to improve their status in the community or feel safer by protecting themselves with weapons. Not all children are used as soldiers; they can also act as guards, look-outs, scouts, messengers, cooks, cleaners and – most worryingly – as slaves to the adult soldiers.



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Selvamani is a Tamil girl from Sri Lanka. The country has two main ethnic groups – Sinhalese (the majority) and Tamils (the minority). For much of the last three decades, there has been fighting between the armed forces of the mainly Sinhalese government and the 'Tamil Tiger' rebels who want a homeland in the north and east of the country. When Selvamani was just 15, she was kidnapped while walking to class and forced to join the rebels. "First they sent letters, then they began visiting my house... They told my family, 'Each house has to turn over one child. If you don't agree, we will take a child anyway'." She participated in about seven months of training, waking up every day at 4am to assemble weapons, practise shooting, dig bunkers and study war tactics. "If you get too tired and can't continue, they will beat you. Once when I first joined, I was dizzy. I couldn't continue and asked for a rest. They said, 'You can't take a rest.' They hit me four or five times." Girls as young as nine were given the same training and the entire group would be punished if they couldn't keep up. Selvamani said she was not allowed to write to her parents and only saw them twice in her two and a half years with the group. She thought about escaping but said that those who "tried to escape...ran to their homes, so [the group] was able to recapture them. They were tied and beaten". Repeat attempts at escaping were sometimes punished with death. **To read more, visit www.hrw.org/reports/2004/srilanka1104**

your notes



CAN THE UN HELP CHILDREN LIKE SELVAMANI?

Selvamani is one of the lucky ones – she eventually managed to escape at great risk to herself and her family. How does the United Nations protect children like her? The UN aims to protect people from war and to uphold human rights. In 1989, it adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the first set of human rights laws dedicated to young people. The CRC spells out the human rights of all children in the world. These rights relate to survival, development, protection and participation. Many of the rights in the CRC are intended to help children living with armed conflict. For example, governments must protect children against exploitation and torture, ensure they can see their families while they are in the army, and give them the opportunity to go to school. In order to help children like Selvamani, an optional set of laws on armed conflict was added to the CRC. This **'optional protocol'** says that 18 is the minimum age at which children can be asked to join the army and participate in fighting. It also asks governments to raise the minimum age at which children can choose to join the army to 18. The UK has signed both the CRC and the optional protocol. The UK government allows voluntary recruits to enter the regular army at 16 and the territorial army at 17 but has pledged to do its best to make sure that soldiers under 18 do not participate directly in fighting unless there is a real military need.

The UN does not only protect children through law. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been working hard to offer children like Selvamani direct and practical help.

In Sri Lanka, UNICEF has worked closely with both the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers to offer educational, recreational and counselling services to 150,000 children. Its 'Back to School' campaign enabled 4,500 children to return to education. UNICEF trained over 1,150 teachers on how to work with children suffering from the consequences of violence. Because it tried hard to reach out to the Tamil Tigers, UNICEF was able to enter conflict zones that are usually out of bounds and give job and skills training to 3,600 children, of which 1,327 were former child soldiers. UNICEF has also ensured that children's voices are being heard and that they understand their rights. One 18-year-old Sri Lankan said: "We heard about the CRC...and when somebody is breaking the CRC we can tell them to stop because we know we have rights."

