

Rights of the Child

So many people from so many professions now talk about child, rather child labour, that the issue of child's right is a hot topic everywhere. And yet more and more children are being subjected to inhuman conditions across the globe. 'Children without childhood' is a popular theme in the media and yet the syndrome is aggravating with every passing day.

Twenty years ago, on 20 November 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child which regards children as independent human beings, who are not simply subjected to their parents' control, but rather have fundamental rights of their own. The convention urged families, governments and society at large to consider the interest of children in all decision-making. Reality, depressingly, often tells a different story.

With the exception of the USA and Somalia, all members of the UN have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. No other human-rights agreement has so many signatories. Every five years, the parties to the Convention must account to the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child in Geneva. In many cases, a national coalition of civil-society organisations is monitoring governments' compliance with the obligations spelled out in the Convention. The shadow reports of such coalitions often expand and comment on official data.

No doubt there has been significant progress since the Convention was adopted: child mortality has decreased by 28% worldwide since 1990, and the proportion of boys and girls enrolled in primary school has risen from 81% in 1999 to 85% in 2006. Between 2001 and 2006, more than 95,000 former child soldiers were demobilised. Female genital mutilation is prohibited by law almost everywhere, and approximately half of the countries have banned corporal punishment in schools.

Nonetheless, much remains to be done. Everyday, some 25,000 children below the age of five die. Most of them fall victim to illnesses which are preventable or easy to treat, such as diarrhoea, pneumonia or measles. This year, moreover, some 1.8 million children and adolescents under the age of 18 are likely to be sexually exploited for prostitution and pornography. Approximately a million people under 18 are being held in custody throughout the world. Despite bans on genital mutilation, 8000 girls are circumcised everyday, a practice still carried out in many African countries and in Yemen. There are many shortcomings in Germany too. Around 300,000 child refugees live in unacceptable conditions and in constant fear of being deported, for example. Children living in conflict zones, particularly in Afghanistan, have never heard of rights they are supposed to enjoy. □□□