

# Opinion: Understanding the rights of children

By Human Rights Watch, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.12.17

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Children sit in a school in Bamozai, Afghanistan. The school has no building. Classes are held outdoors in the shade of an orchard. Photo by: Captain John Severns/Wikimedia

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty. It was adopted by the United Nations, or U.N., on November 20, 1989. The treaty establishes global standards to ensure the protection, survival and development of all children, without discrimination.

Countries that sign the treaty pledge to protect children from exploitation, violence and other forms of abuse. They also pledge to advance the rights of children to education, health care and a decent standard of living.

## How many countries have ratified the convention?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most rapidly and widely approved human rights treaty in history. It has been signed by 194 countries.

The only countries that have not signed the treaty are Somalia, South Sudan and the United States.

## **How has the convention improved the lives of children?**

Many countries have used the treaty to strengthen their national laws and improve the lives of children. Children are now better off in many ways than they were 25 years ago.

The treaty has encouraged greater attention to children's right to health; those born today are more than twice as likely to reach their fifth birthday than a child born 25 years ago. The obligation of countries to provide free primary education has meant that children are much more likely to attend school. In 1990, only 53 percent of children in the least developed countries were enrolled in school; today it's 81 percent.

With greater restrictions placed on employing children, child labor rates have dropped. In the 1990s, nearly 1 in 4 children under 15 were working. Today, it is fewer than 1 in 8. Now, 42 countries prohibit all forms of physical punishment against children, compared with only four in 1989 when the treaty was adopted.

## **How are governments failing to implement the convention?**

Many children have been left out of the progress of the last 25 years. Although many countries have adopted new laws protecting children, they often fail to enforce them. At least 58 million children are not in school — particularly girls, children from poor families and children with disabilities. Many children suffer and die from diseases that can be easily prevented.

The International Labor Organization is an agency in the U.N. that studies labor, or work, in member countries. It estimates that 168 million children are doing labor. Every day, about 38,000 girls around the globe are married before they turn 18.

## **How is the convention enforced?**

Countries that sign the treaty must submit reports every five years to a U.N. committee of independent experts. The committee examines the reports along with other information to identify areas of progress and concern. It recommends steps that the country should take to improve the lives of children.

The U.N. also allows individuals to submit complaints to the committee if their rights are violated. The committee may then investigate the complaints and make recommendations to the country responsible for the violation.

## **Why hasn't the United States signed the treaty?**

Of the three countries that have not signed the treaty, only the United States has not stated an intention to do so. U.S. officials, as well as some organizations, have made various arguments against signing the treaty. Some claim that since U.S. laws are already in compliance with most elements of the treaty, there is no need to sign it. However, U.S. laws and practices go against the treaty in important ways.

For instance, people in the U.S. who have committed crimes before the age of 18 can still be sentenced to life in prison. They can be sentenced without the possibility of being released again, even on good behavior. In certain cases, U.S. child labor laws allow kids to be put to work in agriculture. They can do so even if they are as young as 12.

Others have argued that the treaty is “anti-family.” They claim that signing it would undermine the freedom of parents to raise and educate their children themselves. In fact, the treaty refers repeatedly to the rights and responsibilities of parents to raise and provide instruction for their children.

### **What should governments do to better fulfill the rights of children?**

The rights of millions of children are still violated on a daily basis. Governments should take several key steps to carry out their international obligations to children.

First, they should review national laws to make sure that they are in compliance with the treaty. For example, governments should ensure that child labor, child marriage and all forms of violence against children are strictly prohibited. They should also ensure accountability for violations of children's rights. Complaint and investigation procedures should be in place to ensure that abusers are held responsible.

Governments should also expand practices with proven track records for increasing school enrollment and improving children's health. They should identify children who are being excluded from school, health and other services. In many cases, these are girls, children with disabilities and minorities. Governments should adopt plans and policies to ensure that these children have access to services. They should also abandon policies that are proven ineffective and damaging to children.

## Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the idea that the U.N. recognizes the need to monitor the progress countries have made in improving the lives of children?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
  - (B) "How has the convention improved the lives of children?"
  - (C) "How are governments failing to implement the convention?"
  - (D) "How is the convention enforced?"

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "How has the convention improved the lives of children?"

*The treaty has encouraged greater attention to children's right to health; those born today are more than twice as likely to reach their fifth birthday than a child born 25 years ago. The obligation of countries to provide free primary education has meant that children are much more likely to attend school. In 1990, only 53 percent of children in the least developed countries were enrolled in school; today it's 81 percent.*

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) The treaty requires countries to provide free medical care to their young children.
  - (B) The treaty requires countries to enroll their young children in primary school.
  - (C) The treaty requires countries to offer free primary education to their young children.
  - (D) The treaty requires countries to provide medical care to students who attend primary school.
- 3 Which of the following influenced the United States' decision to not sign the treaty?
- (A) the feeling that the goals of the treaty are too limited
  - (B) the belief that the treaty's rules are exactly the same as U.S. laws
  - (C) the realization that the rules of the treaty are difficult to enforce
  - (D) the perception that the treaty would take away the rights of parents

- 4 Why was the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child significant?
- (A) It was the first human rights treaty in history.
  - (B) More countries have signed it than any other human rights treaty.
  - (C) The United States refrained from signing the treaty.
  - (D) The treaty was adopted by the United Nations.