

Children as Soldiers - 1999

A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone.
(Jeremiah 31: 15)

According to the Human Rights Watch, Children's Rights Division, more than 250,000 children, some of whom are as young as 8 years of age, are serving or being forced to serve in governmental armies or rebel forces in at least 30 countries around the world. In the last ten years over 2 million children have been killed in armed conflict and 6 million have been disabled or seriously injured. There have been recent efforts at the United Nations to amend the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child with an Optional Protocol which would raise the minimum age for recruitment and participation in armed conflict from 15 to 18 years. So far the United States is blocking the Optional Protocol because, at present, 17-year olds can join the U.S. armed forces with parental permission. Few individuals, however, take this option. Canada also allows 17-year-olds to enlist with parental permission.

Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, has, since its founding, been committed to the welfare of children. A 1997 resolution urged Sisterhood women to call for "legislation to protect children from child labor, forced labor and abusive conditions in North America and worldwide" (In Pursuit of Justice: Resolutions and Policy Statements, B-15). It also called on the United States Government to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (In Pursuit of Justice: Resolutions and Policy Statements, B-16).

The Board of Directors of Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods calls upon the United States to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child with the proposed Optional Protocol that would raise the minimum acceptable age to 18.

We commend Canada for early ratification of the Convention. We also urge the United States and Canada to limit participation in the armed forces to those who are a minimum of 18 years of age.

Further, we call upon WRJ affiliates to:

1. Become informed about the issue of child soldiers.
2. Participate in coalition activities on the issue.
3. Communicate with the Administration and legislators to ban recruitment and use in war of children under the age of 18.

For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit www.wrj.org/social-justice-home