



# It Is Easier to Build Strong Children than to Repair Broken Men

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It is likely that in every society, there are quotes by persons of vision and significance regarding the importance of caring well for our children as they hold our futures. One such quote in the USA is by the abolitionist leader and author Frederick Douglass who in 1855, in dialogue with white-slave owners about the immortality of slavery, wrote, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

Although societies recognize that the future lies in our children, far too many children have their rights denied every single day. In an effort to address this, the world came together in 1989 at the United Nations and made a promise to every child to protect and fulfill their rights, by adopting an international legal framework—the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC makes clear that children are not just objects who belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made, nor are children merely adults in training. Rather, the CRC reminds the world that children are human beings with their own rights and it recognizes childhood as a separate stage in life from adulthood during which all children should be protected, allowed to grow, learn, play, develop, and flourish with dignity. It is the most widely ratified treaty—all UN member states except for the USA have ratified it.

The ratification of the CRC, the adoption of the Millennial Development Goals, and now the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals have all helped to make the lives better for some of our children by supporting governments to enact laws and implement policies that protect and invest in children, such as making education, health care services, child protection services, income, and nutritional supplements accessible to children, and teaching the public about the ways in which children are exploited. In many areas, the voices of

children are now being heard and children are participating in decision-making in their societies.

Despite this progress, we have allowed many children to fall further behind. This is true of children living in developed and developing countries (UNICEF Office of Research 2017). At least 280 million children around the world, or one in eight, are dramatically better off today than at any time in the past two decades according to Save the Children’s Global Childhood Report (2019). However, according to this same report, about twice as many or *one in four* children are still denied the right to a safe and healthy childhood. Regardless of whether a country has ratified the CRC, millions of children continue to suffer violations of their rights when they are denied adequate health care, nutrition, education, and protection from violence, or when they are alienated from society because of how they identify themselves. Childhoods continue to be truncated when children are forced to separate from their parents, leave school, perform hazardous work, get married, and fight in wars, or are locked up in adult prisons. Racial and ethnic prejudices continue to divide how children and individuals are treated in societies. The articles in this issue address different aspects of these topics affecting children and adults from albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, transgender and gender-expansive children, physical punishment of children in Barbados and Canada, the separation of children from their parents at the US border and its consequences, child labor in Bangladesh, as well as going beyond to explore stereotypes of African American males.

Once a right is ratified, it holds legal standing in a country. To knowingly violate children’s rights is a crime against children and childhood. And yet:

- In 2017, an estimated 6.3 million children and young adolescents died, mostly from preventable causes, according to UNICEF (UNICEF 2018).
- Over three million children continue to die each year or 15,000 every day from food insecurity or malnutrition. One in five children in the UK and the USA face food insecurity every day (UN IGME 2018).
- Every 2 min, a child dies from a water-related disease and 160 million children across the globe from Flint,

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Michigan, to sub-Saharan Africa are suffering from stunting and chronic malnutrition linked to water and sanitation (according to [water.org](http://water.org) n.d.).

- While the number of children exploited in child labor has dropped more than a third since the year 2000 from an estimated 245 million, 152 million continue to be exploited (Save the Children 2019).
- Children are increasingly experiencing mental health issues. In rich countries, one in four adolescents reports two or more mental health issues more than once a week (UNICEF Office of Research 2018).
- While children's enrollment in education has dramatically increased, even in the best-performing countries, around one-fifth of 15-year olds do not reach minimum proficiency levels in reading, mathematics, and science (UNICEF Office of Research 2018).
- Despite growing rates of girls attending school, there continues to be a strong preference for boys, and not girls, to continue their education into secondary school and college (UNICEF 2018).

Even before we can address these violations against children, we will be challenged by the accelerating integration of digital technology into our lives, environmental change, prolonged conflict, and mass migration in the coming years. These challenges will widen the proportion of children experiencing stress and hardships and probably change childhood. Rather than solely focus on the potentially negative consequences of these threats, we should also be poised to seize new opportunities to realize children's rights. Threats and the uncertainty of the future are an opening for new solutions to emerge and by educating ourselves about the reasons our policies and programs have resulted in growing disparities and disrespect, we can prepare ourselves to direct future programs and policies toward the recognition and realization of

children's rights. Oftentimes, it appears that our caring societies are being dismantled, but we should use this time to ready ourselves for the opportunities to allow the light and justice to shine once again. As Leonard Cohen, songwriter and performer, wrote, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in" (Cohen 1992).

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