

# What Lies Beneath

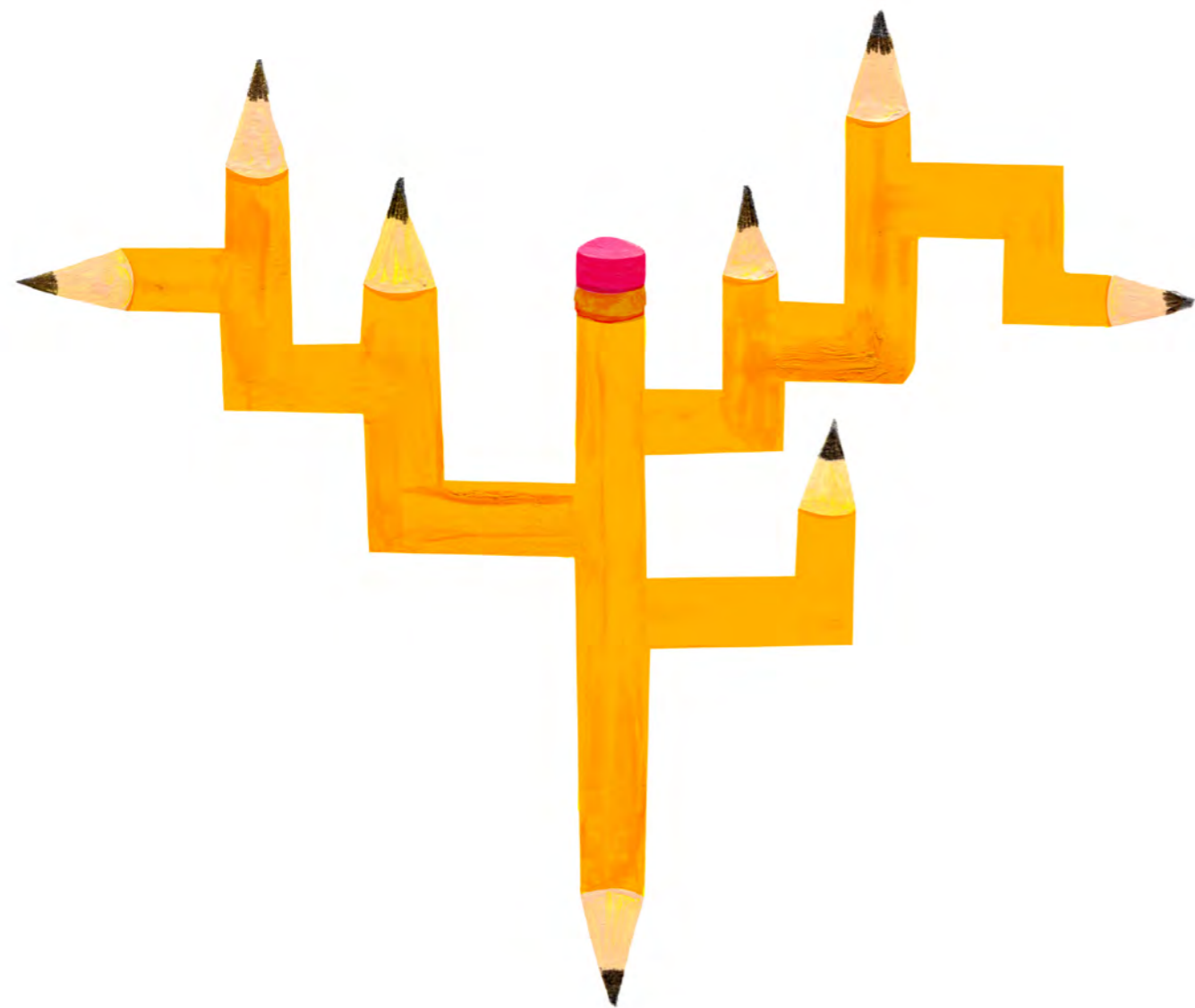
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a CRIN report - 2018 edition



“Action without vision is only passing time, vision without action is merely day dreaming, but vision with action can change the world.”

*Nelson Mandela*



# To whom it may concern,

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This is not an annual report. So forget the summary of what we've been up to or the impact assessment showing how great we are. None of this changes the world we live in for the better, so why continue doing it? Don't get us wrong, this isn't defeatism; it's a new vision.

It has often felt like our role as NGOs, and in particular as CRIN, has been to complain about what's wrong with the world, fuelling people's despair about the total lack of respect for or recognition of children as rights holders. But stories of despair make us feel powerless, and this approach to children's rights makes it easy to fall into a comfortable hopelessness. But this has to change, otherwise we will come to struggle to justify our existence.

And the change has to start within ourselves. That every year the global picture of children's rights violations grows darker should make us question if what we're doing is what's actually necessary. This is something we've asked ourselves at CRIN. And it's something that we're inviting you to question too. We want to take a critical look at our victories and our failures both as CRIN, but more broadly as a children's rights community.

So to repeat: this is not an annual report; it's an invitation. One that invites you into our current thinking, probing how we approach children's rights. This might lead us to change what we do, how we do it and who we do it with. And in a world where pragmatism reins back actions and where we do things simply because it's what others in the sector do, we feel there are two key elements missing in our approach: idealism and critical thinking.

Fighting for a more just world for children, however, is not just the job of NGOs; it's a collective responsibility. And as with any movement, the power is precisely in the collective.

In sum, we want to better define what it is we're fighting for, rather than just repeating what it is we're fighting against.

So let's put our despair to one side, think outside the box and ask: if you could change one thing to make a perfect, rights-respecting world, what would it be?

This report is our take on this question.

The CRIN Team

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“Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It’s the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. ... History is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.”

*Rebecca Solnit*

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Let's begin with a quick mental exercise: think about a handful of children's rights.

Now picture a family tree, and position those rights in order of importance, with those you think are most important at the base of the trunk, and work your way up to the branches with the others.

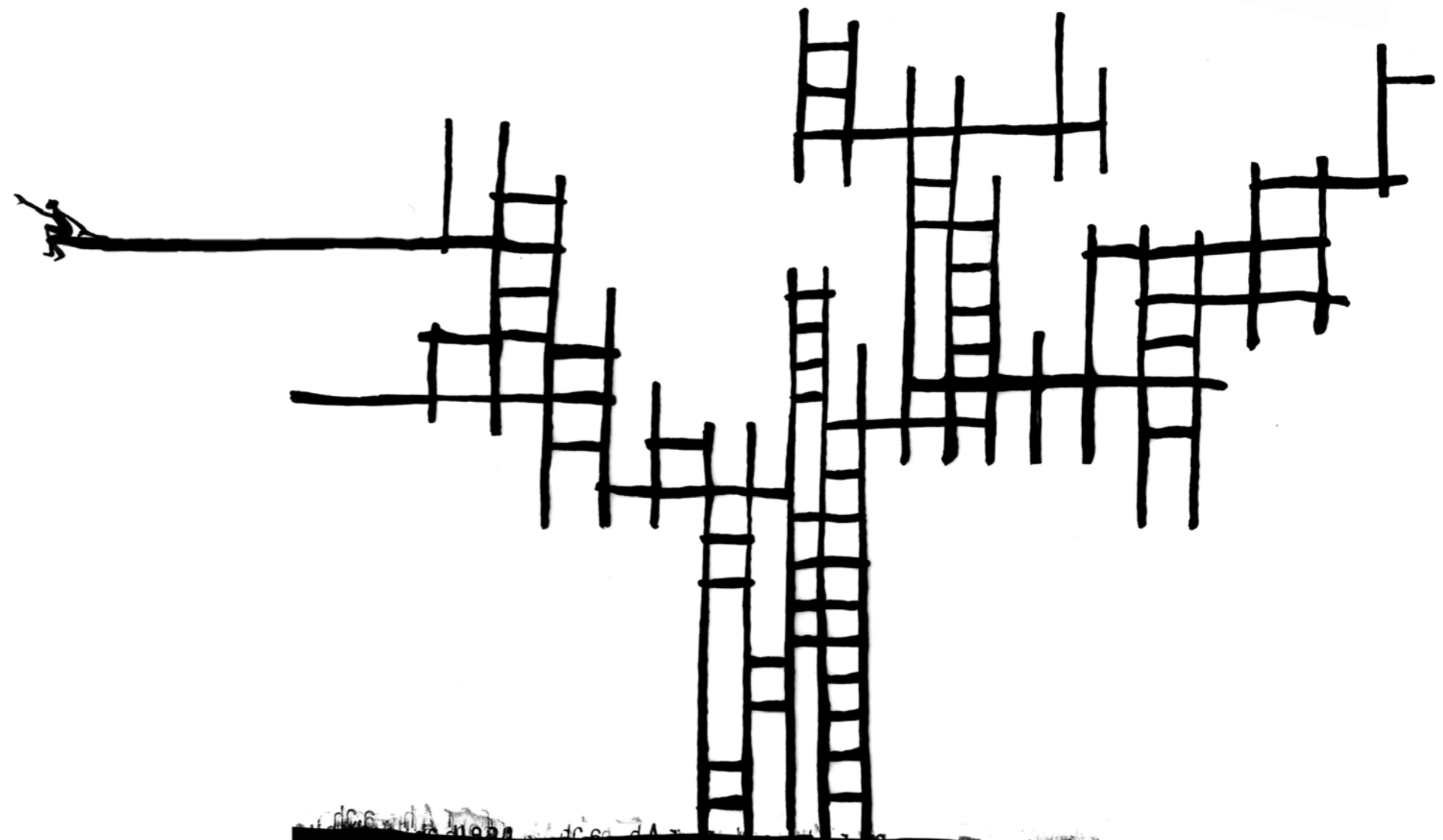
Depending on which rights came to mind, you may have grouped them together, in which case you've assigned them with equal or similar importance. Alternatively, you may have spread them out, which indicates that you consider some to be more important than others. Either way, what you've just done is assign importance to the rights that came to mind.

The point of the exercise is this: while it may be fair to say that, in principle, there is no hierarchy of rights - indeed this is something we advocates routinely profess - there are undeniably some rights which are so fundamental that we can't imagine other rights without them.

For instance, if a rights violation causes a child to die, develop a lifelong illness or become severely disabled, then the child's enjoyment of all their other rights is compromised. Note that the impact of a single human rights violation can have irreversible, lifelong or even transgenerational consequences. But this doesn't just concern the right to survival, health, and development; the full scope of children's rights can potentially be affected. What good is the right to education or leisure and play if a child's right to life has been violated. Or what's the point in children's right to an opinion and freedom of expression and association if their political rights aren't recognised from the outset?

The point of these examples is a simple one: no single right exists in isolation; they all exist because of each other.

With this in mind, we'll now look at two areas of children's rights which, despite determining the enjoyment of many other rights, are largely absent from children's rights advocacy: political rights and bodily integrity.



# Righting a Political Wrong



Children hold a vast array of rights, but there's one set that's conspicuous by its absence: political rights. Best represented by the right to vote, political rights are a defining characteristic of any democracy, and one of their key purposes is to give voice to all citizens, including those who might otherwise not be heard. Without a vote, people wouldn't be able to press their political representatives on issues that govern their lives and are important to them, including those affecting their human rights and those of others.

So where does that leave children? If there's one population group that's routinely excluded from this entitlement all over the world, it's children. Why? Because apparently Every - Single - Child, making up almost a third of the global population, is irrational, incompetent, and too young. And much like the arguments used historically to deny women the vote, this generalisation appears to require little justification.

If we take a look around the world, we'll see that no country allows under-16s to vote in national elections and only a minority allow suffrage to children aged between 16 and 18 in national or municipal elections. While children do, of course, have freedom of expression and association and the right to be heard enshrined in international law, the occasions on which they can voice their opinions and have these carry weight in political decision-making are rare. In practice, children have very little say in the decisions that govern their lives. And what rubs salt into the wound is that they can't even challenge the conditions that exclude them from decision-making precisely because they're not legally entitled to.

In this context, how are children involved in standing up for their rights? Participation to this end exists for children in different forms and to different degrees, with some examples of participation being described as meaningful (vs meaningless ones?). Some are exclusively child-led in the form of student committees, municipal

youth parliaments, peaceful protests, and even child workers unions like those in Bolivia and Peru which have significant political traction. There are also adult-led initiatives which depend exclusively on children's participation, such as research in the form of consultations or reports on children's issues.

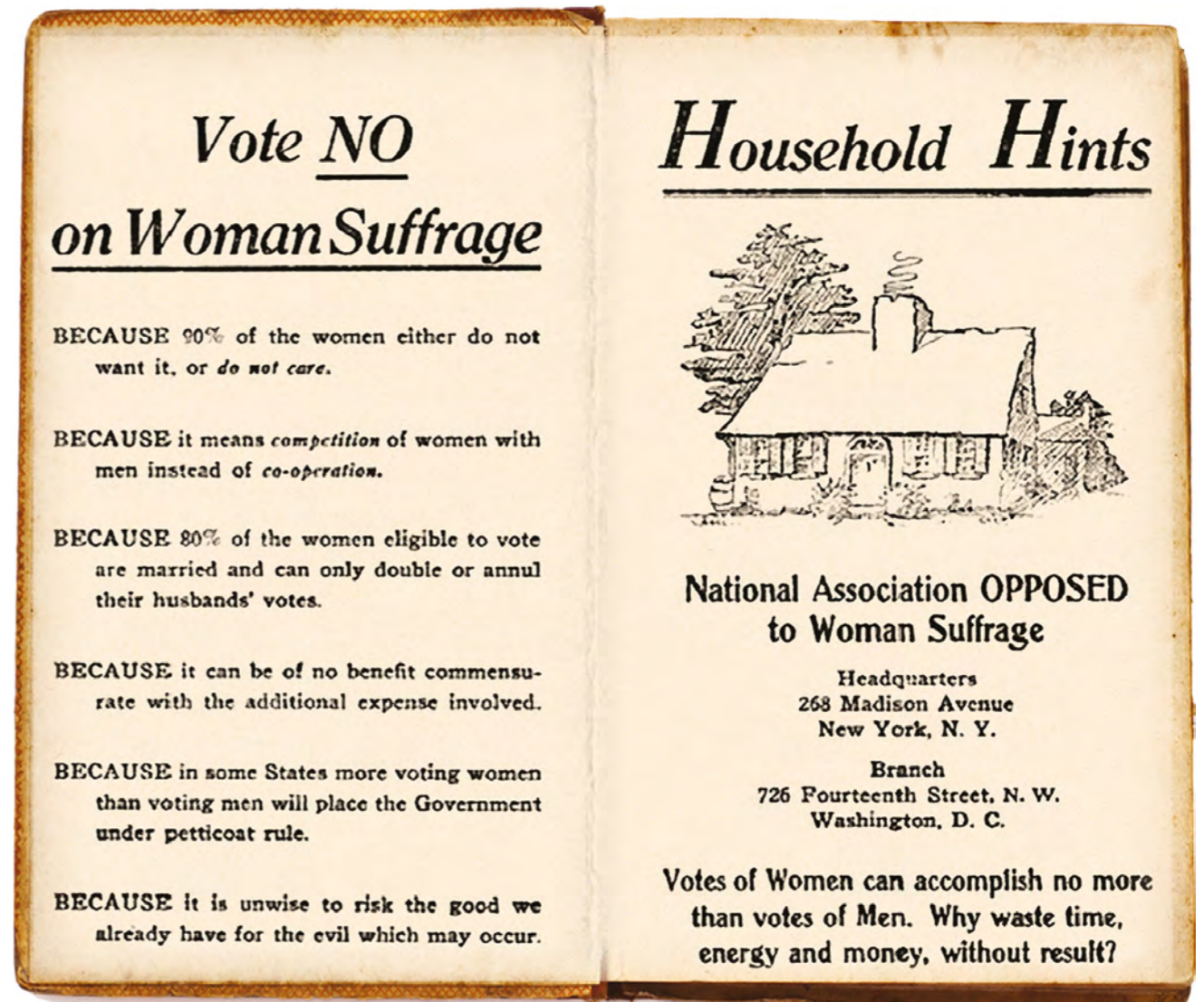
These forms of participation all undoubtedly have value (though some more than others) and situate children in a position of influence (to varying degrees). But do they measure up to suffrage as a form of participation? If we put ourselves in children's shoes, how many of us would tolerate being able to participate in all these different ways, except through voting? Most likely none of us. Probably because we like having our political rights, and the prospect of not having them is an affront to our conscience and democratic values. The same applies to children's suffrage. No variant of political participation should distract from the fact that almost a third of the world's population is disenfranchised. The sheer size of this injustice speaks for itself, yet it's an issue which barely gets addressed in children's rights advocacy.

So what do NGOs think about all this? How do they understand children's participation and how best to achieve it? The answers are generally not encouraging. There are, of course, organisations that explicitly campaign for a lower voting age in their countries. But most organisations that involve children in some capacity in their work do so only in symbolic ways. These are defined as *tokenism* and *decoration*. The first typically involves having a child give a short speech at the launch of a campaign or report developed by adults, but with little understanding of the issues addressed or how their presence adds value to the project. While the child in this case might appear to have been given a voice, there's no assurance - or indeed any indication - that it will amount to anything more than a photo opportunity. Meanwhile decoration recedes further into

pretence, for it describes when the sole purpose of children's involvement is to elicit an emotional response from audiences, as is the case with TV advertisements which use images of sickly children to encourage donations.

That these practices might be done with the best intentions is irrelevant; NGOs working on children's rights issues should be more critical of children's 'participation' when it has no real effect in the advancement of their rights. This is after all the ultimate objective: changing things from how they are to how things ought to be. And as defenders of children's rights working to this end, wouldn't it make more sense if the NGO community collectively recognised and advocated for a type of participation that would

give children a real stake in their society? Political rights are an avenue through which children can exercise their rights with the aim of improving other rights. Giving children the vote would empower them to stand up for their own rights, rather than continue to leave this responsibility in the hands of well-intentioned but potentially paternalistic adults. Of course, child suffrage would not fix children's rights issues or stop rights violations; but it would allow children to use their vote to complement their participation in other settings and maximise their presence and influence. Children's automatic exclusion from the electorate not only fundamentally undermines their political rights and engagement, it's also an enormous waste of human potential.





## World map of children's voting rights

- **Over-16s:** Argentina, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina (*only if employed*), Brazil, Croatia (*only if employed*), Cuba, Dominican Republic (*only if married*), Ecuador, Estonia (*only in local elections*), Germany (*only in some local and state elections*), Hungary (*only if married*), Malta (*only in local elections*), Nicaragua, Philippines (*only in local elections and only if married*), Serbia (*only if employed*), Slovenia (*only if employed*), Switzerland (*only in local and regional elections in the canton of Glarus*), United Kingdom (*only in Scotland in local and Parliament elections, and only in local elections in the self-governing British Crown Dependencies of the Isle of Man, Guernsey, and Jersey*).
- **Over-17s:** Greece (*only if they turn 18 in the year of the election*), Indonesia (*but no threshold if married*), Israel (*only in local elections*), North Korea, Norway (*only if they turn 18 in the year of the election*), Timor-Leste.

Sources available at [www.crin.org/node/23662](http://www.crin.org/node/23662)

# Excluding children from voting

rests on a series of arguments which we've listed below. To determine whether these reasons carry any real substance, we're seeing how adults measure up in comparison, as well as scrutinising the logic - or the lack of it.

## Children

**Children don't understand politics**

**Children would vote frivolously for politicians or for the wrong reasons**

**Children aren't mature or competent enough to vote**

## Adults

Neither do many adults - hello ignorance! However, if knowledge of political affairs were actually a requirement for voting, we'd be given aptitude tests when we come of age, which isn't the case anywhere. What's more, if awareness were the issue, then the ignorant can always become more knowledgeable.

Adults make poor judgements too. Prejudice, nationalism, propaganda and misinformation can all lead to questionable electoral choices. Nonetheless, the perceived rightness or wrongness of voting behaviour isn't a requirement for voting because democracies consider the right to vote as belonging to citizens regardless of how they might use it. It's important not to confuse doing something right with the right to do it in the first place.

Many adults, despite their older age, are pretty immature. Plus, if the argument were really about maturity and competence rather than age, then it's not children who should be excluded from voting, but the immature and incompetent, regardless of their age.

**Children can't handle the responsibility of voting**

**Children shouldn't worry about politics; let children be children**

**Children have other priorities besides politics**

**Parents might unduly influence their child's electoral choices**

This argument suggests that voting is a sort of burden that only adults can handle. But suffrage isn't a burden, it's a right. Enfranchising children doesn't place a strain or impose adult responsibilities on them prematurely. Child suffrage creates an opportunity for children to participate where they were previously unfairly excluded. What's more, in most democracies, no voter is forced to vote if they don't want to.

Let children be children is a cliché of political discourse. It assumes that children should behave a certain way because of their age. But this argument is simplistic, patronising, filled with preconceptions, and out of touch with reality. The ages to 18 encompass an enormous range of skills, competencies, needs and rights. A 16-year-old is likely to have more in common with a 19-year-old than a three-year-old, but according to conventional accounts, all under-18s fall into the same uniform political category. Presuming what's best for entire population groups without first hearing from the groups themselves is a classic case of paternalism.

Yes, this argument is as stupid as it sounds. If having competing priorities is honestly a factor determining a person's entitlement to vote, then adults have many more competing priorities. This argument is also another patronising case of paternalism.

Adults are also influenced by their family's electoral preferences. And this influence persists whether we are 15, 25, 55 or 85 years old. What's more, pressuring someone to vote a certain way is illegal anyway, yet the argument is being used unfairly to essentially punish children instead of the perpetrators.



## Children don't need authority anywhere else in life

Fear not, dear adults, enfranchising children won't mean that they will take over the world. But it would democratise the electorate which would serve to benefit the community as a whole. Note that democracy proclaims that all citizens are equal with equal rights and opportunities, so picking and choosing which groups should have which rights flies in the face of this principle and is therefore undemocratic.

## Children are too young to vote

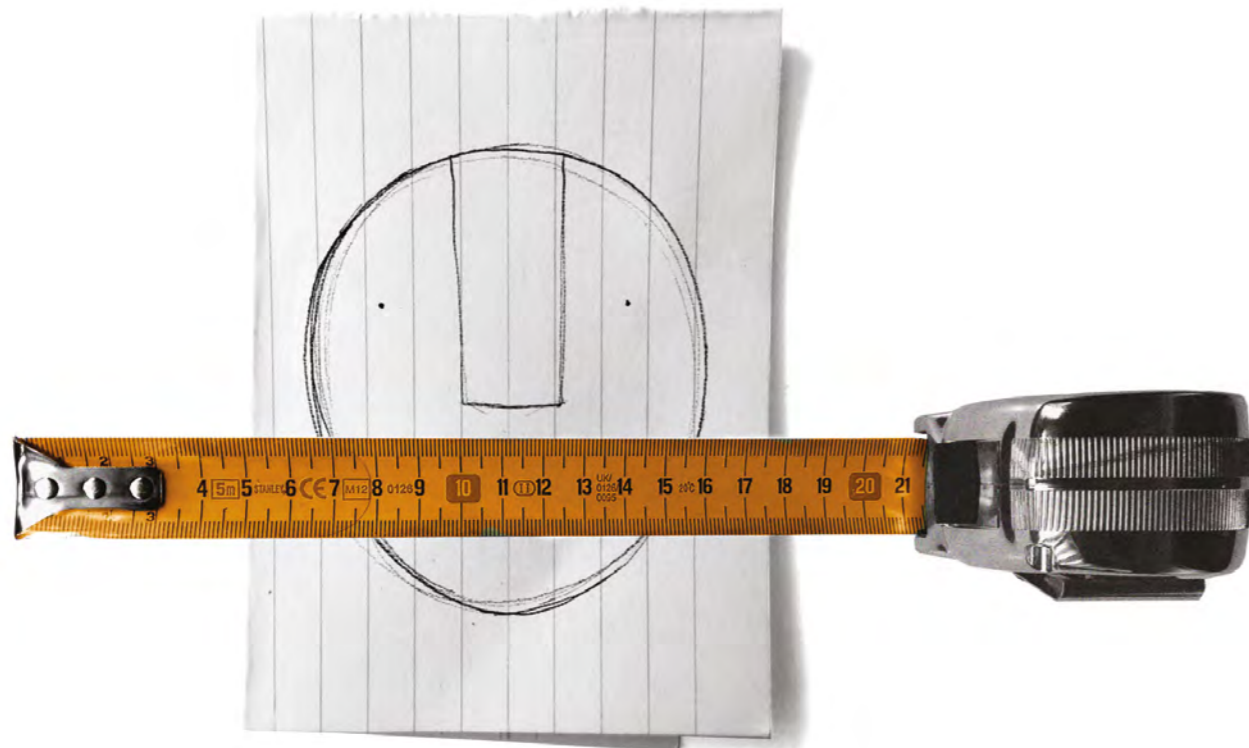
On similar age-based grounds, imagine removing the right to vote for people older than, say, 65 years old. Does the argument now feel and sound any different? The truth is, everyone, regardless of age, should be allowed to vote if their interest, knowledge and involvement motivates them to do so and they're able to register.

## Children probably wouldn't vote anyway

Many adults already don't. Many abstain or are apathetic. But this argument is beside the point, as the right to vote isn't obtained based on one's likelihood to vote. In most democracies voting isn't compulsory, so only those motivated to vote will do so. While it's granted that babies and toddlers are unlikely to register to vote, older children and adolescents might, depending on their circumstances, experience and interest.

## How would children even register to vote?

In the same way adults do. It isn't rocket science. Aside from registering to vote by post, many countries also allow people to register online, which actually puts children at a distinct advantage as they're more technologically savvy than many adults. And should a first-time voter require any guidance in the process, then the adults in their lives (parent, guardian, teacher, older sibling) or polling station staff could lend them a hand. As for election day itself, voting usually takes place in public buildings, often schools, libraries, halls etc - all places children regularly visit, so finding it shouldn't require a map.



# MANIFESTO

Why adults should be denied the vote

**Because** adults' political choices have led to world problems like ethnic cleansing, the death penalty, anti-gay laws, disenfranchisement, unequal salaries based on gender, to name just four;

**Because** history shows us that adults resort to force and wars to solve their issues, which always - always - leads to widespread suffering;

**Because** adults created weapons of mass destruction;

**Because** dictators are always adults;

**Because** children aren't born racist, sexist or homophobic - these are things passed down by adults;

**Because** despite being children's guardians, they make up laws that are deeply harmful to children, such as life imprisonment of young offenders, legalising child marriage, or supporting corporal punishment;

**Because** adults are largely to blame for one of the world's largest problems: overpopulation and unsustainable consumption of resources;

**Because** adults are to blame for the news being so depressing;

**Because** the adults in power made choices that led to climate change, and now systematically refuse to address it effectively;

**Because** adults have had the vote for years, but continue to elect plutocrats, nationalists, and manifesto-breakers into power;

**Because** adults' refusal to enfranchise children shows that they don't uphold the principles of democracy;

**Because** a global survey found that half of all children do not trust adults and world leaders to make good decisions on their behalf.

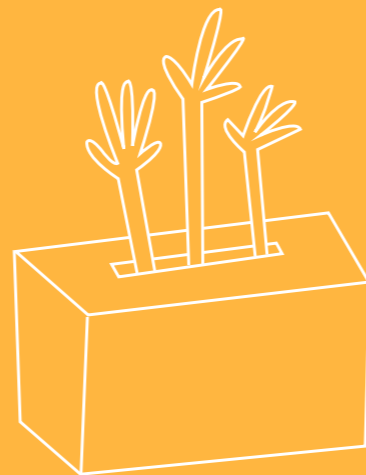
*(Disclaimer: this is not a real manifesto, but the points don't lie)*

## In a world where children could vote...

Children would press their representatives on the issues that matter most to them.

According to a number of youth surveys, these are:

- climate change
- terrorism
- poverty
- treatment of refugee and migrant children
- war and armed conflict
- economic instability
- violence against children
- poor quality education or lack of access
- feeling disenfranchised
- distrust in adults and world leaders to make good decisions for children



Sources: Unicef, WISERD

# MANIFESTO

Why children should have the right to vote

**Because** anyone should be able to vote if they are interested in doing so, regardless of their age;

**Because** the principle of equality declares that all citizens should have equal rights and opportunities;

**Because** denying the right to vote to groups who might not otherwise be heard, including children, is undemocratic;

**Because** blanket bans on voting based on age amounts to age discrimination;

**Because** the objections against child suffrage are based on preconceptions, not reason or facts;

**Because** children abide by the law as much as adults, yet they have no say in choosing who makes the law;

**Because** laws directly affecting children are passed without their consultation;

**Because** child suffrage would challenge dated and paternalistic assumptions held by adults about children and their abilities;

**Because** child suffrage would enlighten lawmakers about children's lives, experiences, and opinions and enable them to make better-informed decisions;

**Because** political equality would require politicians to take children seriously, and give their views equal consideration and respect as citizens;

**Because** studies show that the younger a person is when they cast their first vote, the more likely they are to vote in subsequent years, contributing to greater civic participation of the citizenry.

# Legal Participation



The dominant attitudes that undermine children's political engagement are also present in other arenas that are key for citizens to effectively protect their rights, namely the courtroom. Children's legal participation involves using the justice system to challenge a rights violation, usually by bringing a legal complaint. But in the same way that recognising a child's right to participate in politics is futile without the right to vote, recognising children's right to be heard in court is similarly absurd if they're not allowed to bring a complaint. Indeed there's a similar attitude in both cases that people are fine with child participation as long as it doesn't actually give children any power.

The reality is that the majority of children around the world won't be in a position to bring legal complaints themselves for several reasons based on their age: they may lack capacity, legal standing (the right to bring a case to court), or the resources to cover expenses including legal representation.

But these barriers have a remedy (pun intended).

Rules about **standing**, which are based on strict age limits, can instead incorporate capacity-based tests to determine if a child is able to instruct a lawyer or representative. This strikes a balance between the fact that there is no arbitrary age at which children are willing and able to act on their own initiative, and that many children will, regardless of age, need and want support. Indeed, navigating the legal system can seem like an impenetrable maze for any adult let alone a child, so **legal representation** by a lawyer or other legal expert is crucial for accessing justice. But this can also depend on one's ability to fund the legal process, and on

account of their age, children across the board lack financial **resources** to bring a complaint in the first place, which may determine if the complaint even goes ahead. To overcome this financial barrier, legal aid and assistance are vital. Some countries explicitly waive all costs for children who bring judicial proceedings, exclude parental income from decisions on whether children can access legal aid, or guarantee all children free legal assistance.



## Mutilating Children's Rights

### What is bodily integrity? Do children have it? And why is it important for protecting their rights?

The principle of bodily integrity sums up the right of each human being, including children, to autonomy and self-determination over their own body. In other words, the only person with the right to make a decision about their body is oneself, no one else. Practices which violate a person's bodily integrity are wide-ranging, from seemingly innocuous acts like piercing a baby girl's ears to corporal punishment or forced medical treatment. Invasive procedures performed without a patient's consent and for no medical reason are also violations of bodily integrity, and include practices such as female genital mutilation, forced sex assignment, forced or coerced sterilisation, and routine male circumcision.

Children are disproportionately affected by such violations of their bodily integrity, as the practices are usually performed on people at a very young age when they are unable to speak up for and defend themselves, or give - or refuse - consent.

Such practices can severely affect children's enjoyment of their rights. They can have health-related consequences, such as infection, scarring, disfigurement, amputation, and even death - not to mention psychological trauma. The impact also goes beyond the physical, as the practices infringe children's civil rights as well, including their right to express their views and opinions freely and for them to be given due weight in the form of consent or its refusal. In cases where a practice is carried out to conform to social expectations or based on adults' - not the child's - religion, culture or tradition, it too amounts to a violation of children's civil rights.

Of particular concern are the practices that enjoy majority support or indifference within the countries in which they're practiced. Indeed, these are the hardest to root out and expose as harmful to children because it would entail disturbing the status quo. Some of the most abhorrent violations of bodily integrity of our time, which are still widely performed and accepted, are those carried out on the most sensitive and private part of the human body: the genitals.

With the exception of female genital mutilation, which is rightly one of the most widely recognised and challenged harmful traditional practices, there are a number of other procedures that involve irreversibly altering children's

genitals through surgery for no justifiable medical reason. These are: sex assignment of intersex children, forced sterilisation of children with learning disabilities, and routine male circumcision, all three of which remain legal in most countries around the world when performed on children. Another relevant practice is virginity testing which, while not involving mutilation like the aforementioned practices, is nonetheless an invasive procedure performed on girls' genitalia for no medical reason, and which enjoys majority support in practicing communities. To challenge this status quo, the following section makes clear why these four practices amount to a violation of children's bodily integrity.

## Routine male circumcision

Male circumcision is an irreversible procedure to surgically remove the foreskin from the human penis. It's routinely carried out on newborns and adolescents within Jewish and Muslim communities, respectively; on infants out of social convention among non-religious communities in some Western countries, most notably the United States; and on teenage boys as a rite of passage within some ethnic groups in parts of Africa. When performed for religious or cultural - not medical - reasons, it flatly designates routine circumcision as medically unjustifiable. In fact, there's growing support within the medical community against male circumcision as a routine practice since its non-therapeutic basis means it does not comply with medical ethics. In sum, routine male circumcision involves the removal of healthy tissue for no medical reason from one of the most sensitive body parts, unnecessarily exposing a child to the risks of surgery, and usually at an age when they lack the capacity to consent or refuse consent. Recorded complications include bleeding, panic attacks, infection, disfigurement, necrosis and amputation, and even death. Exposing a child to such risks without curative or rehabilitative justification goes against medical ethics, as well as parental responsibilities to protect a child from injury and harm.

*Advocates say the decision to circumcise should not rest with anyone except a boy himself when he's old enough to give his free and informed consent, or refuse it.*

## Sex assignment of intersex children

Intersex persons are born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads, chromosome patterns) that don't match what's typically considered male or female. Surgery is sometimes performed on intersex babies to modify their genitals so they appear more male or female. This irreversible procedure, which is done without the patient's consent, isn't based on medical necessity, but on the paternalistic assumption that it's better - and easier - for a child to be raised from birth either as a girl or boy. This practice disregards the possibility that the 'assigned' sex may not correspond with a child's gender identity as they get older. Besides this, the procedure also unnecessarily exposes an intersex child to the risks of surgery and possible permanent consequences, including scarring, incontinence, lack of sexual sensation and infertility. When testes or ovaries are removed, the surgery amounts to forced sterilisation. Psychological trauma and PTSD have also been recorded, with intersex adults saying they feel they were mistreated and mutilated.

*Advocates insist the decision whether or not to have surgery should rest only with an intersex person themselves when they're old enough to make an informed choice. In 2015 Malta became the first country in the world to ban medically unnecessary sex assignment surgeries on intersex children before they can decide for themselves.*

### A glossary of bodily integrity

- My body, my choice
- Autonomy
- Self-determination
- Forced
- Injury and harm
- Consequences
- Dignity
- Privacy
- Protection
- Sexuality
- Gender
- Civil rights
- Human rights
- Children's rights
- Parental responsibilities

## Forced sterilisation of children with learning disabilities

Sterilisation involves surgery to leave a person permanently unable to reproduce. Forced sterilisation occurs when the procedure is done without the affected person's knowledge, in the absence of their informed consent, or against their express wishes not to be sterilised. People with learning disabilities, including autism and Down's syndrome, are forcibly sterilised all over the world based on doctors' recommendations and with the consent of parents or guardians. The practice isn't unique to children, but many are affected, especially girls. In Colombia, for example, at least 502 girls and 127 boys with learning disabilities were legally sterilised between 2009-2011, according to government figures. But the reasons routinely given by doctors and parents to justify the procedure are not based on medical necessity; instead it's a paternalistic measure considered 'for their own good'. Preventing menstruation and unwanted pregnancies are two common reasons, as is the misconception that people with learning disabilities are devoid of sexual feelings or the ability to have a relationship or children. Another claim is that sterilisation prevents sexual abuse, despite the fact that it actually hides the outcomes of the abuse, making the already vulnerable even more vulnerable.

*Advocates say forced sterilisation violates a person's right to make their own sexual and reproductive choices, and that sterilisation should only be performed strictly on medical grounds and with the informed consent of the patient.*



## Virginity testing

Virginity testing involves physically checking if a girl's or woman's hymen is intact to confirm whether she's a virgin - a practice widely discredited as scientifically invalid. It's performed in communities which assign honour to female chastity before marriage, and can be part of the conditions of wedlock, bride price or dowry. In South Africa, virginity tests are legal for over-16s providing the child has consented. In Afghanistan, virginity tests are often ordered by prosecutors where women and girls are accused of committing "moral crimes". In Pakistan, the two-finger test is thought to verify if a rape victim consented. And in Tajikistan, advocates report that virginity tests are performed on unaccompanied migrant girls detained in so-called transit centres. Generally, if a girl's hymen is not intact, the consequences can include being ostracised, imprisoned, forced to marry one's rapist, or killed in the name of 'honour'. Moreover, refusing to be 'tested' or to divulge the 'results' can be seen as tantamount to guilt in practicing communities.

*Advocates say virginity testing amounts to sexual abuse and ought to be banned, and that it's a degrading practice rooted in gender discrimination that aims to control girls' sexuality, infringing on their dignity and privacy.*

# All Wrongs Reversed

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Armed conflict, sexual abuse, migration, trafficking, child marriage and access to education - these are some of the most visible issues in children's rights advocacy thanks to the work of civil society worldwide and international and regional human rights mechanisms. But what about the issues that get less attention - is it because they're not as important or because we've simply chosen to focus on some rather than others?

The issues listed above are world problems that affect large groups of children, so on that basis their prominence in advocacy work is warranted. But they're also issues that are easy to denounce, the so-called low hanging fruits of advocacy. This is because blame is easily assigned, doing so doesn't challenge the status quo, and importantly, these issues attract funding.

But children's rights aren't just about a handful of top issues; children face a world of rights violations that have been left at the fringes of mainstream advocacy, hidden or unchallenged, or pushed aside because they're considered too controversial. In this situation, are the issues we continue to respond to the issues we ought to respond to?

This isn't necessarily a question of putting some issues above others or even dropping some. But it calls for a more critical approach to addressing the full array of children's rights, and asking some inconvenient questions. These should probe not only material violations, but also their underlying causes, which are of equal if not of greater importance, as violations will persist if their causes are left untreated.

For instance, why are children disproportionately the targets of sexual abuse? Why is it socially acceptable to hit a child in the name of discipline but not an adult? Are children's best interests always the primary consideration or do they get watered down when adults' interests are at stake? Why does parental consent always take precedence over children's wishes - do adults really always know what's best or is it just a political cliché to keep children in their place?

With these questions in mind, we'll now focus on one issue which societies don't readily recognise as a children's rights issue - or indeed relate to children at all - but which underlies so many ongoing rights violations and so represents one of the biggest unchallenged barriers to children's rights respect worldwide: age discrimination.

# Age Discrimination

Even though age discrimination is something we usually wouldn't associate with children - indeed even the Convention on the Rights of the Child doesn't list age as a ground of discrimination - they're actually the population group that's most affected by it. Children's lives around the world are governed by rules and laws that apply only to them - and we're not referring to laws enacted to protect children from harm, but ones that restrict their human rights simply because of their age.

For instance, hitting an adult would amount to assault in most legal systems around the world, but hitting a child in the name of discipline is legal in most countries. Seasonal youth curfews limit children's freedom of movement and association often in the summer months, yet no equivalent exists specifically for adults. Minimum ages are even used to prevent children from engaging in activities which represent no harm to them, as is the case with voting which, with a handful of country exceptions, almost all over-18s are allowed to do, but almost all under-18s are not.

The hypocrisy is glaring if we imagine applying such blanket rules to an ethnic or racial group, religious minority, gender, or the elderly - a public outcry and a barrage of lawsuits claiming discrimination would surely follow. And yet such rules, when they concern children, conversely require little justification. This reality flies in the face of human rights, as enjoying one's rights entails having no barriers to that enjoyment. But it's a no-win situation for children, as they can't prematurely grow old and outgrow these rules, and their lack of political standing means they may struggle to legally challenge them.

It should be self-evident that when age alone is used to justify rights restrictions (eg. minimum age thresholds on political rights) and even to bypass rights protections (eg. hitting a child in the name of discipline vs protecting them from harm), this practice plainly amounts to age discrimination. To shed light on this issue further, here are some of the main examples of age discrimination of our time.

## Violent exemptions

There's an instinctive awareness that violence is harmful to our wellbeing and that being able to lead a life free from all forms of violence determines whether we can fully enjoy our human rights. Despite this, more than 140 countries continue to sanction hitting children in the name of discipline - an action that may in fact amount to criminal assault if perpetrated against an adult. That legal systems around the world legalise a form of violence that would otherwise be illegal illustrates how violence against children is ingrained in societies and often accepted as the norm, whereas violence

against adults is not. Adding to this hypocrisy is the abuse of power implicit in fully-grown adults administering physical punishment against children, who are society's most vulnerable members on account of their age and size. Very young children in particular have a lack of knowledge of their own rights and an inability to speak up for and defend themselves. What's more, children have no say in the laws and policies which allow them to be hit, which makes corporal punishment a practice that exists only according to adults' terms, despite children being on the receiving end.



# Status offences

Status offences are activities punishable only when committed by certain groups of people, most commonly because of their religion, sexuality or age. Those that apply only to children include school truancy, running away, begging, loitering, possessing alcohol, sexting, curfew violations, gang association, and even disobedience. That these activities would be lawful if they were committed by adults, shows that a status offender's conduct is considered unacceptable not because it's harmful, but solely on the basis of the age of the 'offender'. The hypocrisy in the application of status offences is that they target what adults consider to be problematic behaviour in children but acceptable once above the age of majority. To be clear: status offences are discriminatory because they apply to children only because of their status as children, unfairly bounding them by rules that they cannot prematurely outgrow. Not only do status offences across the world curtail children's freedom of movement and association, they're also dangerous to their best interests by drawing them into the criminal justice system, as they transform activities that would be perfectly lawful for an adult into a criminal offence.

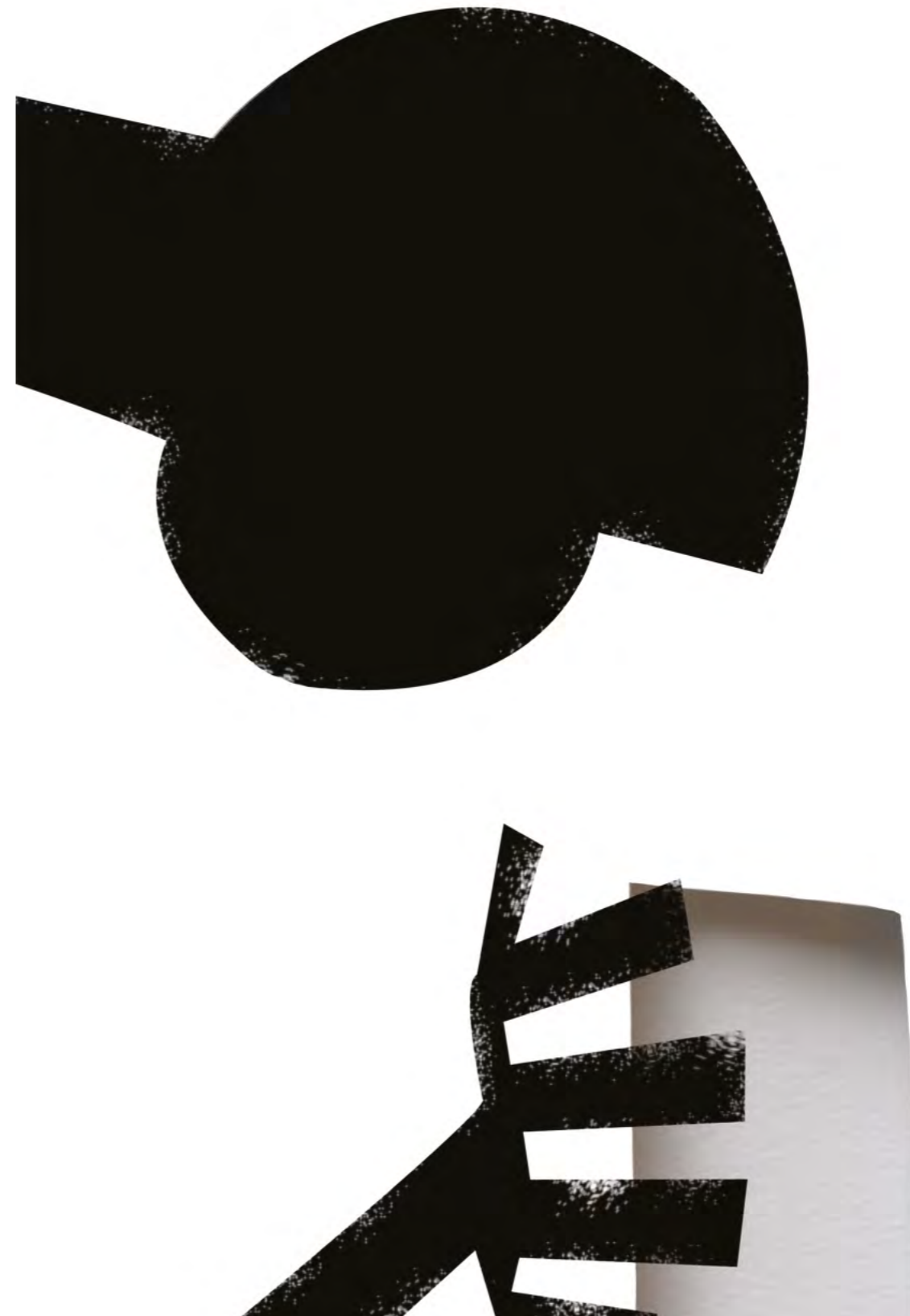
# Freedom of religion

Can children freely choose their own religion (or no religion) or formally convert without parental consent and without coercion from family, school or the State? In principle, yes, because international human rights law asserts that "everyone" has freedom of religion, and everyone includes children. But in practice, it's less common. Whether it be an official state religion, parents passing down their religious beliefs, or religion taught in school, children face the imposition of religious views more so and in more settings than any other population group. Exposure to a religion typically occurs in childhood because it's at an age when people are most impressionable because of a lack of critical ability on account of their maturity. But international children's rights law is clear: the

role and duty of adults, namely parents, is to provide "direction" to their children, meaning that parents can introduce them to their faith and involve them in religious activities, but the children must increasingly be given control over their own involvement in their parents' or any other religion. On this basis, indoctrination, forced conversion or any assumption that children will grow up to follow a given religion or belief system is incompatible with children's own independent freedom to decide their own beliefs and to choose a religion or no religion.

# Getting consent

Children usually don't have the legal authority as minors to make their own decisions because it's assumed that, on account of their age, they all lack the capacity to do so. As parents are responsible for the upbringing and development of a child, this by default includes making choices on their behalf, providing these are based on the child's best interests. Specifically in medical decisions this authority to act on behalf of a child is called proxy consent, otherwise it's known simply as parental consent. However, children's best interests aren't always at the heart of all decisions, particularly when they serve no protective role and/or undermine children's autonomy and other rights. Examples include: laws preventing children from bringing legal complaints by themselves, instead requiring an adult legal representative and sometimes explicit parental consent; children requiring parental permission to access sexual and reproductive health services (advice, contraception, abortion), even though securing consent can discourage them from seeking help; or parents arbitrarily deciding whether their child can attend certain school classes, such as sex education, which health experts say should actually be mandatory. In such cases where the requirement of parental consent can potentially run contrary to children's best interests, the blanket removal of children's autonomy is discriminatory, as it treats all people under a certain age differently, based purely on their age.



# Language Matters

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Us NGOs produce a great deal of written content (annual reports included!), but beyond making sure that our materials are well-written and typo-free, how often do we think about language itself as an issue in its own right in our line of work?

For instance, when a reader doesn't fully comprehend an issue we've written about - or even worse, misunderstands it - could the language used be to blame? In some cases, texts have misused or wrongly altered standard terminology, for example describing intersex people as "intersexual", which is not only misleading, but the word doesn't exist! Other offences include authors failing to grasp a new issue accurately and do it justice or even shamelessly watering down human rights language.

These are just some of the language-related issues we've encountered in our sector, which can all have an impact on how societies view and treat their citizens, including children. NGOs have a responsibility here: our role as producers of content aimed at raising awareness on human rights, demands that we think about language not just as a means of conveying our knowledge and information, but of conveying them with accuracy, clarity, and clear intent.

With this in mind, we'll now look at four language issues which plague the NGO and human rights sector: the need for language to be accessible, the pointlessness of some language, the importance of reading between the lines, and the danger of reinforcing stereotypes through our communications. While some of these issues may not relate exclusively to children, but to human rights generally, they're nonetheless all relevant because children's rights are human rights.

## **IMPOTENCE**

Human rights standards clearly set out what's right from wrong, yet when responding to rights violations it's not always clear if we condemn them or just feel bad about them - and it's all down to the language we use. For



instance, there's a clear difference between being *alarmed* by something and *denouncing* it, or adopting a *commitment* vs an *obligation*. Indeed our choice of words to describe, praise or denounce things is not only telling of how an author or speaker feels about something; it also affects how the audience then thinks and acts. This is the case with what's been coined the "grammar of impotence" - language so feeble and unassertive that it exacts no change at all.

There are two examples of this. The first fails to condemn human rights violations in an uncompromising way, and it takes place inside the global bastion of human rights that is the United Nations. In a study of the most commonly used words at the UN Security Council in recent years, examples were ranked from strong to weak, with strong-sounding *demands* and *warnings* found to be used less and less frequently, while the use of weak-sounding *requests* and *urges* for things to be done increased. State delegations were also often found to be *reiterating*, *reaffirming*, and *recalling* their points year after year, showing that change doesn't come about if, as the grammar of impotence suggests, we go soft on things like war crimes and protection of civilian populations. However, this trend is gaining traction, as our second example shows.

In the past few years, the act of enforcing human rights has increasingly been reworded as *transforming* or *translating* a target into a reality. Meanwhile human rights initiatives have been dotted with *pledges* and *commitments* to do a multitude of things, followed by friendly reminders to *honour* them. And we've even begun using self-congratulatory adjectives to describe our *noble goals*. But as one advocate recently put it, such language amounts to "warm words with little if any bite". This trend represents an apparent bid to soften rights-based language, perhaps to make it seem more appealing - or rather, less of an inconvenience - to decision-makers. Fundamentally, it also shows we're forgetting that human rights aren't made up of promises, but obligations.

So as a friendly reminder to ourselves: using the right language is our responsibility as advocates,

for if we choose to replicate or fail to challenge limp language lacking in conviction, we end up saying nothing much at all and failing in our role. In a bid to do justice to human rights, we should stick to describing them as what they are. That's noble in itself, but it should go without saying.

## CLARITY

Is using jargon in human rights always bad or can it ever be OK? At CRIN we always prelude our Jargon of the Week feature with the slogan: "*Promoting the use of clear language among children's rights advocates*", followed by a critique of NGO-speak or UN jargon for which we suggest plain English alternatives. Yet as much as we complain that jargon makes a report sound more technical or a charity sound more like a business, even those of us in the NGO world who are averse to jargon find it hard to weed it out entirely from our vocabulary. Take *mainstreaming*, for example. It hits the spot perfectly in defining the effort to popularise something, such as a rights issue, to the point that it becomes widely recognised and discussed. Now try to explain that process using just one or two words... In this respect, *mainstreaming* is useful because it's an economical term. And it's one we stop questioning once we're familiar with it.

However, the question arises of why we should become familiar with it in the first place. Should we use jargon just because everyone else does? The truth is, not everyone is familiar with jargon, and for those who aren't, such language can be exclusionary, confusing, and unnecessary. Jargon is well situated in fields like medicine, engineering, and law; but is its place in human rights appropriate? The work of some NGOs may well be technical and therefore require technical terminology. The same applies to human rights law in the courtroom. But in a report about human rights issues why do we talk about *frameworks* for understanding children's rights, or *leveraging* resources, or *synergy* with a partner organisation? Ultimately we're talking about ways of ensuring respect for human rights, which doesn't need to be made technical precisely because it's not. After all, our aim as advocates is to increase awareness, understanding of and respect for human rights, not to complicate it.

# Exercise

## Test your knowledge of jargon!

*Disclaimer: some answers are rhetorical, some tongue-in-cheek, others factual, therefore none should be taken seriously - not even the jargon itself.*

### Road maps

- a A plan or strategy for achieving a particular goal
- b The defunct marketing name of Google Street View
- c An actual map

### Critical strategy

- a A strategy that's about to explode
- b A plan of action that's considered very important
- c A fancier way of saying the above

### Bedrock of national planning

- a Subaquatic parliamentary meetings
- b A euphemism for expanding deepwater oil drilling
- c The fundamental principles on which domestic policies are based

### Building knowledge

- a AKA reading books
- b The name of the new Trump Tower
- c Contributing to public understanding, eg. by writing a report

### Enhancing awareness

- a Learning about things
- b A way to avoid writing 'raising awareness' too many times
- c A mutation which gives us telekinetic powers

### High impact employees

- a Staff members who can take a punch
- b Employees who perform in-office aerobics
- c No idea (we couldn't be bothered to look this one up)

### Girl child

- a A child
- b A girl
- c All of the above

### Good data

- a Well-behaved information
- b Bad data's better behaved sibling
- c Data that's well documented, verifiable and reliable

### Social budgeting

- a When state budgets allow for society's needs to be addressed
- b A nationalistic process for deciding which people are worth it
- c A tax initiative to save government spending on poor communities

### Catalyst for action

- a A chemical reaction that sends people running
- b Something that provokes or speeds up change, reform or development
- c The UN's favourite expression

## COERCION

Understanding language and how it's used isn't just about learning to read and write; it also concerns an undervalued ability: reading between the lines. Even if we live in a world where information and news are produced mostly by adults for adults, literacy skills that allow us to be critical of what we read and see isn't something that should be reserved only for grown-ups. Notably, more children and young people are using digital and social media as their main source of news than ever before, and some studies show that a sizeable number accept information at face value. This is concerning, seeing as we're living in an age in which fake news - a buzzword that covers misinformation, propaganda and clickbait - is rampant online.

It's not to say, however, that grown-ups are immune to this, for as mature and wise as we'd like to consider ourselves, many adults too lack critical thinking skills and buy into things like media manipulation, political propaganda, and marketing ploys (we only need to look at recent voting choices!). Such tactics are an assault on truth, distort our view of the world, and in turn exploit ignorance - a quality which, it's worth noting isn't age-specific. But when it comes to children, they're generally less equipped to tell fact from fiction. The answer to this? Make children more resilient. How? As is always the answer to ignorance: through education.

With digital technology embedded in all parts of children's lives, it's a no-brainer that they should learn to navigate information with a critical mind. Literacy organisations promote teaching children to understand and interpret information by making connections with what they already know. Simply asking questions is a start. How did you arrive onto this page? What reputation does the page have? What do you think of the headline? Is the text explicitly based on evidence? And if images are used, what impression do they give you?

These are basic media literacy questions, advocates say, which prompt children - and indeed anyone - to decode information. While

these tricks can benefit children and adults alike, it's children who are often left unaccounted for in discussions on the issue, based on the assumption that it isn't relevant to them. But the point of media and digital literacy is to encourage people to never stop asking questions and never accept quick assumptions. It's only by understanding our world better, in its current digital age, that we can form sound opinions of it. And equipping children with the knowledge to do this early on will mean they will grow into better informed adults. As a rehash of an old saying goes: start them young, sorted for life.

**When reading a news article, how many of us ask ourselves questions like: who is the target audience? What might be left out of the main message? Are there any negative biases? Is there a clear difference between statements based on evidence vs generalisations? On that note, here's a quick exercise to test your fake news filter!**

# Exercise

## 1. Which of these headlines is biased and why?

- a Gangs of masked youths attack local shops
- b Masked gangs attack local shops

## 2. What are the different messages between these two headlines?

- a Huge rise in reported child abuse
- b Huge rise in child abuse

## 3. What words in these alarmist headlines convey negative stereotypes and why?

- a Child migrants storming the border
- b Gov't faces €60 billion bill for accepting swarms of child migrants

## 4. On the question of trust, which of the following news providers is the odd one out in each list?

- a BuzzFeed, Economist, Huffington Post, Fox News, Breitbart, Facebook
- b South China Morning Post, The Local, An-Nahar, Sputnik, Africanews

## 5. Identify which of the statements is an opinion and which is a generalisation.

- a We are taught that abortion is always evil and can never be justified
- b Abortion is 'always evil and can never be justified,' says Catholic bishop

5. Answer B is clearly an opinion because the statement is presented within quotation marks and someone is cited as having said it, whereas answer A presents a broad statement with no reference, so we infer that it's a generalisation.

4. In answer A it's the Economist because it consistently ranks as the most trusted news provider, while the others in the list all score badly; in answer B it's Sputnik because, out of these regional news providers, it's the least reputed as a trusted news source, while the others all hold high credibility ratings.

3. In answer A it's "storming" because it's a dramatic word that connotes the use of force or violence to attack or capture an area; while in answer B, it's "swarms" because it's typically used to describe unpleasantly large groups eg. of insects or paparazzi. Both words over-exaggerate how migrants typically arrive in a foreign country, suggesting they invade territories by force, and inevitably create negative impressions of them to impressionable readers. Both headlines are alarmist, and fail to be neutral, fair and factual.

2. Answer A informs us that the number of complaints about child abuse has increased, whereas answer B informs that the incidence of child abuse - whether reported or unreported - has increased.

1. Answer A because it singles out young people as a homogeneous group (youth gangs) in a way that adults aren't. Such headlines vilify young people and amount to discriminatory reporting.

# Ignorance ...

Widely considered the most accessible and far-reaching form of communication, visual communication ranging from TV advertisements and bus stop posters to report covers, is widespread in the NGO sector. It offers audiences a visual language with the potential for us to interpret and understand an issue beyond just reading about it. However, existing practice in the way the sector visualises children's rights issues - and portrays children - is problematic. To use a cliché example, let's consider a TV spot picturing a skeletal child with a bloated belly and flies around their eyes, followed by a narrated message claiming that a tiny monthly donation could save this child's life - what does this ad tell us?

Does it inform viewers about why the child is in that situation in the first place or how it can be prevented from happening again? Does it make viewers think critically about how poverty and famine are caused, or how political corruption, war and drought can't be fixed by charity? And fundamentally, does the ad tell us anything at all about children's rights?

It's not that charity is necessarily wrong; but the way through which it's promoted, by treating children merely as objects of pity and passive sufferers, has ethical implications. First, that such images, which reduce children to their visible suffering, are used by a sector claiming to be working to advance children's rights and interests, is disturbing and confusing. Second, children's rights are not charitable or for-profit, yet the argument that such campaigns generate money which can then be poured into [branded] initiatives on the ground is still being used to validate their use. Emotive campaigns are effective at raising money, but this just means an NGO has more funds, not that the issue for

which the funds were raised in first place has been fixed. Lastly, if we consider that NGOs exist in response to government failures, using dated stereotypes is counterproductive to advancing the cause of greater rights respect for children, as it does nothing to change the status quo or rock the political boat.

Organisations working on behalf of children ought to be leaders in portraying them in an accurate, principled and respectful way that upholds their rights and dignity. This responsibility is all the more necessary seeing as children are rarely recognised explicitly for their independent human rights. Indeed, existing representations of children not only play a role in reinforcing the widely-held idea of children as small, defenceless, vulnerable beings and nothing more; they also contribute to the view that children's rights campaigning is not serious human rights advocacy. What's more, we also often seem to forget that despite being the focus of many organisations' work, children have no say in how they are portrayed, as their public image is curated exclusively by adults claiming to be acting in children's interests.

Having said all this, the issue raises one positive point: that NGO imagery has the potential to be educational. Continuing to visualise children - and children's rights issues - in a one-dimensional way will only spawn ignorance and further entrench misguided attitudes that keep children in a mould. It makes more sense to have visual communication that encourages us to reflect on and think critically about issues, rather than merely induce pity. After all, does pity fix anything?

No. But it might get you a Radi-Aid Award for the most offensive and stereotypical fundraising advert! [www.rustyradiator.com](http://www.rustyradiator.com)



# Words in the Spotlight

## ‘Family rights’

### Who?

Who indeed, because so-called ‘family rights’ don’t actually exist.

### What?

We said: ‘family rights’ don’t actually exist!

### Where?

Well they don’t exist anywhere except, it seems, at the UN, where numerous resolutions on the protection of the family have been passed.

### When?

Increasingly in the last few years.

### Why?

Among other things, to impose a conservative definition of what a family is, to stifle family diversity, and to shift rights protections away from individual family members into the family as a single unit.

### So what’s the problem?

That the push to protect the heteronormative family model - a measure to insidiously promote an anti-LGBT agenda - is being done in the name of children’s rights protection. Ethically, that children’s rights are being spuriously used to disguise discrimination, is wrong. And for it to happen at the bastion of human rights that is the UN, is concerning and disappointing. To be clear: the family unit does not have rights; individual members do. And when it comes to children’s, they’re not for sale, manipulation or pretence.

## ‘Radicalisation’

### Who?

Terrorists! Revolutionaries! Campaigners! Environmentalists! Freethinkers! Children!

### What?

What we’re saying is that there’s no uniform meaning of the word or who it refers to.

### Where?

Everywhere. Different regions and different circles will label different groups as radicals, extremists and/or terrorists. Indeed, descriptions for these terms are ever widening and continue to be conflated. Basically, whoever thinks so differently that they’re seen as a threat or danger to things like national security or corporate interests or the status quo or anything really.

### When?

Now. In the past. And probably in the future too.

### Why?

At the moment, it’s mostly because of national and public security fears, including the fear of children being ‘radicalised’, that is, indoctrinated by terrorist groups using terrorist propaganda inciting people to commit acts of terrorism. (Note the use of clear language in replacement of ill-defined terms.)

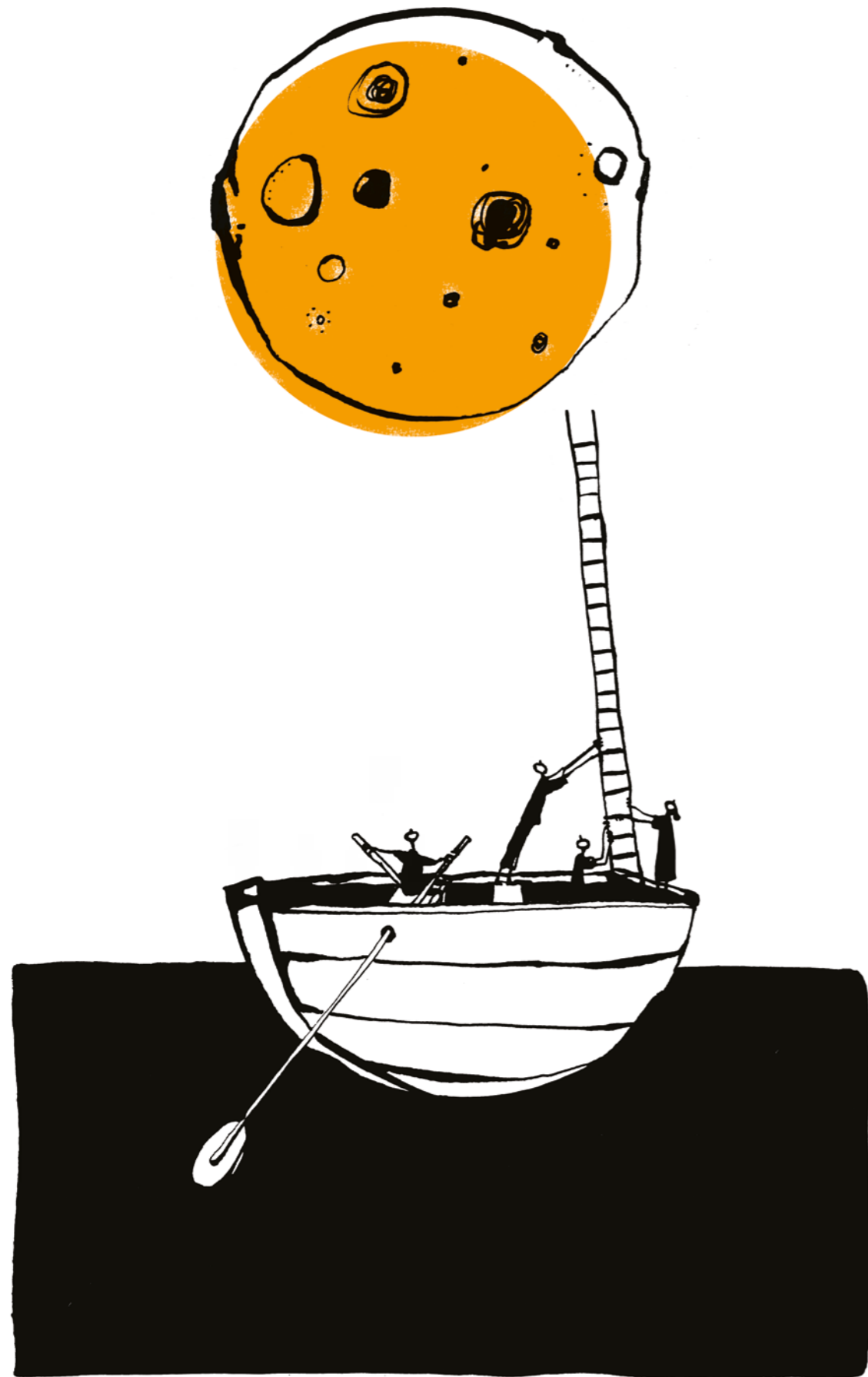
### So what’s the problem?

That, although based on legitimate concerns, this fear has resulted in extreme measures of its own, including against children’s privacy and other

freedoms. We’re seeing governments keeping tabs on children’s online activity at school and in the home, schools reporting “inappropriate references to terrorism” to the police, and even toddlers in nurseries being scrutinised for signs of thoughtcrime! But these measures - and the rhetoric behind them - are a classic case of good intentions going bad quickly, and all because of language. How many of us can explain the difference between terrorism, extremism and radicalism? The reality is that with no clear legal definition, and if left to work it out on our own, it risks feeding off people’s prejudices about what is ‘radical’ and ends up singling out individuals for the wrong reasons. We forget that the word used to reflect qualities associated with freedom of thought and expression and a drive to change the world for the better. Many great thinkers in history were called radicals at one point or another. But nowadays, it’s common for policies, programmes, rhetoric and opinions to conflate terrorism with radical thinking.



*CRIN, for one, will continue to be radical, challenging the unchallenged, disturbing the status quo, and not shying away from the things that need to be said.*



# Principles, Not Pragmatism

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Forget it. Get real. It will never happen. If your goal is the full realisation of children's rights - in any country or on any issue - you've heard this refrain before. Perfection is a tough standard to meet, and setting a goal based on what seems realistic rather than principled can have a seductive allure. Yet a trap lies in caving in to pragmatism and chasing short-term goals: if we lose sight of the ultimate change we want to see, how can we ensure our pragmatic steps will get us there?

## Clarity of vision

Keeping the principles clearly in focus is a start. For instance, advocacy to keep children out of institutional care has long focused on trying to switch the alternative care norm to family or family-type settings. That children living in institutions across the world experience staggering levels of abuse and neglect is well recorded, but the turn in the tide has been slow. In recent years, organisations working with children have begun to speak out unapologetically and unambiguously for an outright end to the institutionalisation of children. Advocacy groups have persuasively made the case that the institutionalisation of children is disabling even when carried out with the best of intentions and that it's possible to care for children without families in family-like settings. Such an ambitious goal is undeniably difficult to achieve, but if it's the aim to be pursued, then it dictates the strategy to be followed.

## Just off the mark

We can learn from this clarity of purpose and apply it to other children's rights campaigns. Advocacy on juvenile justice, for instance, has long been constrained by pragmatism - an area where we set our goals based on what we think might be possible, rather than how we would like justice systems to be. This is hardly surprising given that few issues sit quite so centrally in the eye of the political storm, where a single high-profile case can set law reform

back by decades. But here as much as anywhere we should be idealists.

In many ways, the issue of detention in the criminal justice system unites civil society. There has long been consensus among NGOs and juvenile justice experts that detention is harmful for children and counter-productive when it comes to reducing crime. We collectively recycle the international standards - that children should be detained only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time - like a catechism, attempting to reduce the number of children in detention without clearly identifying the situations where these standards might be met. So in an effort to be clearer, if we could resolve the issue of detention of children in the criminal justice system today, what is it that we want to see?

CRIN argues that, read holistically, children's rights require that the only justification for locking up a child in the criminal justice system is that they have been assessed as posing a serious risk to their own or others' safety and that the risk cannot be reduced to an acceptable level without their detention. In these exceptional circumstances, any necessary restriction of liberty must: be authorised by a legal process with the child independently represented, be frequently reviewed, and not be in a penal setting. Detention as a last resort means as a matter of protection, not punishment.

In another area of juvenile justice, the minimum age of criminal responsibility, we again see pragmatism rear its head. As NGOs and advocacy groups, we fight the latest attempts to lower the minimum age and we campaign for law reform that will lift it by a few years when the opportunity arises. Admittedly reform in this area is achingly slow and we must take our victories where we can find them. But if reform is to outlast the latest campaign, we must realign it within the broader picture. In setting the minimum age of criminal responsibility, CRIN has long argued that we need to separate responsibility from criminalisation and called for all children to be excluded from the criminal

justice system. By setting the minimum age of criminal responsibility at 18, we can design systems purely for the rehabilitation of children, rather than moderating and adapting punitive justice systems already in place for adults.

## Setting out the principles

Then there's the question of how to apply human rights principles to address emerging issues. Among the most current of these is the use of age determination techniques. So much so that, as this report is published, more than half of the complaints pending before the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child relate to the medical tests used to attempt to determine the age of children claiming asylum. As decisions are being made that could set the terms of the debate for years to come, what better time than now to set out the principled position on the issue.

We don't pretend to have all of the answers here, but non-negotiable human rights standards can help us set the borders of the debate. The prohibition on cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and the prohibition on violence must rule out the most egregious age assessment techniques, particularly genital exams. The emerging consensus that the detention of children on the basis of their immigration status is a rights violation must form a red-line on which we cannot compromise. And children's right to privacy must preclude the use of age determination techniques that are arbitrary, including all of those measures that cannot accurately determine age.

With the exception of universally verifiable birth registration, we must confront the fact that no age determination technique meets this standard.

## Always in the right direction

We all want a world that absolutely respects rights in every setting, but facing reality we accept that some things we'll be able to achieve this week, some next year, while others may take decades. While setting short-term goals is therefore necessary in human rights work, and even if the ultimate objective seems far off, we must not forget that the principled position must always guide our advocacy at every step along the way.

**At CRIN we may well be wrong about the principles we propose - we don't claim to have a monopoly on what's right. But we do know that vigorous debate about how to realise children's rights can only make the children's rights community stronger. We must have the debate. And the principles that emerge must shape our work. After all, if we can't describe the world as we want to see it, how can we make it a reality?**

# What's Next

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## The issues

CRIN works holistically on all areas of children's rights, particularly emerging or neglected issues. In 2018, the following are some of the main areas we'll be working on:

*Environment:* Environmental issues and climate change won't fade any time soon, and neither will their direct impact on children's human rights.

*Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs):* In a new style of consultation paper, we'll examine the implications of practices like surrogacy on children's rights, as well as considering children's own independent right to access ARTs.

*Political rights:* Children's exclusion from suffrage is a global scandal, and we can't continue to claim to defend children's rights without advocating for children's own right to be involved in the democratic process.

*Bodily integrity:* With Malta becoming the first-ever country to ban non-medical genital surgery on intersex children, and Iceland likely to be the first country to prohibit non-medical circumcision of boys, the pace for legally recognising children's bodily integrity is increasing.

*Excessive measures:* We'll continue to challenge policies that unfairly restrict children's rights and freedoms on the basis of national security fears. Separately, we'll develop work on children's deprivation of liberty. And finally, we'll expand our work on minimum ages, including in the area of digital rights

## The new ways of working

To repeat a goal we set out earlier in the report, we want to better define what it is we're fighting for, rather than just repeating what it is we're fighting against. It's all part of making sure what we do is necessary and rooted in the uncompromising aim of advancing children's rights. As CRIN is a member of a community, a movement of children's rights defenders, we hope we won't do this alone. And this doesn't mean banding together uncritically - on the contrary, we must question ourselves and each other to make us stronger. Here are some of the ways we'll be working in 2018:

### *New vision, new strategy*

By the end of the year, we'll have a new five-year strategy. It will see the disappearance of things we've been doing for years to make room for the birth of new activities.

### *Promoting advocacy*

There are organisations and activists all over the world whose accomplishments we know little about. We'll therefore be promoting pioneering examples of children's rights advocacy, spotlighting the victories and learning from the failures, by expanding our case studies project into all forms of advocacy, not just legal, and into different languages.

### *Standing firm on children's rights language*

We will not stand by while, under the guise of protecting children, certain actors misuse the language of children's rights to disguise xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist or nationalist attempts to curtail the rights of groups that face discrimination.

### *Asking hard[er] questions*

It's about time we address WHY children's rights are violated the world over. It's not enough to tackle material violations; we need to go deeper into the issues and uproot the factors that make the global picture of children's rights violations grow bleaker year after year.

### *Communication*

Assuming that all things must be put down in writing has led to what a fellow activist called "tyranny in the written word". NGOs, including CRIN, are especially prone to writing, but sometimes things are better communicated through art or satire or the spoken word. This year we'll be exploring how we can better reach audiences.

The End

Or rather, The Beginning

# About Us

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## *Our organisation*

Child Rights International Network - CRIN is a global research, policy and advocacy organisation. Our work is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **Our goal**

A world where children's rights are recognised, respected and enforced, and where every rights violation has a remedy.

### **Our beliefs**

All our work is based on five core beliefs:

- We believe in rights, not charity;
- We are stronger when we work together;
- Information is power and it should be free and accessible;
- Societies, organisations and institutions should be open, transparent and accountable; and
- We believe in promoting children's rights, not ourselves.

## *Our People*

CRIN is fundamentally about children's rights, less about the individuals. But we need people to make this happen. CRIN has a core team of staff, some based in London, some in the Middle East, and others elsewhere. We are governed by a Board called the CRIN Council. Importantly, much of our work would not happen without the many people who contribute their time and expertise for free.

### **The Team**

**Veronica Yates** | Director

**Sabine Saliba** | Advocacy Manager

**Leo Ratledge** | Legal Coordinator

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**Jenny Thomas** | Policy and Communications Manager (on leave)

**Isla Woodcock** | Executive Assistant (until February 2018)

**Gillian Harrow** | Operations (until May 2017)

## *Regional Team*

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**Suha Ziyada** | Programme Officer - MENA (Palestine)

**Larisa Abrickaja** | Regional Coordinator - EECA

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**Tenesha Myrie** | Regional Advisor - Caribbean (until December 2017)

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## *Legal Professionals*

A number of law firms have played an important role in CRIN's activities, including by contributing research based on their experience of legal practice within the countries in which they operate. Our thanks to White & Case LLP, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Latham & Watkins LLP for their support.

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“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything. Some men see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and ask why not.”

*George Bernard Shaw*

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