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Children's Rights

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Wednesday marks the 30th anniversary of the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), the most widely and rapidly ratified treaty in history. In the past five years, both Somalia and South Sudan, poor countries wracked by conflict, have managed to ratify the treaty, leaving the United States as the only country in the world that hasn't.

As ratification of the convention has become nearly universal, the U.S. opposition leaves other countries baffled and undermines U.S. global initiatives to support children.

Globally, children's lives have improved over the past 30 years. Child mortality worldwide has [dropped in half](#). More than [110 million more children](#) are in school. Child labor rates have dropped by more than [one-third](#).

In the United States, however, many children are faring worse by comparison. In 1990, the U.S. ranked sixth in the world in its levels of education and health care; [today it ranks 27th](#). Fifty-four countries have [lower infant mortality rates](#) than the U.S. While levels of extreme poverty worldwide have dropped [dramatically](#), one in five American children today are poor, about [the same rate](#) as 30 years ago.

Ratifying the treaty is no guarantee that children's lives will improve. But it demonstrates a clear commitment to helping children thrive, and obligates governments to evaluate their laws and policies and take action to improve them.

I've worked on children's rights for more than 20 years and am often asked why the United States hasn't ratified the treaty. The convention is hardly a radical document. It obligates governments to consider the best interests of the child, to provide children with access to education and health care, and to protect them from discrimination, sexual and economic exploitation, and other abuse.

The U.S. played a big role in shaping the convention. During negotiations in the 1980s, the Reagan administration proposed seven of the convention's articles, more than any other country. The U.S. proposals reflected values enshrined in America's [Bill of Rights](#), affirming children's rights to freedom of expression, religion, association and assembly.

U.S. law is largely in line with the convention with a couple of exceptions. For example, exemptions in U.S. child labor laws allow children as young as 12 to work in agriculture for long hours and under [dangerous conditions](#) in violation of the convention's prohibitions on the economic exploitation of children.

The U.S. also still allows courts to sentence people who have committed crimes before the age of 18 to life in prison with no possibility of parole. States are rapidly abandoning such sentences, however; the number of states prohibiting juvenile life-without-parole sentences has been growing, [from five to 21](#), since 2012. Although the U.S. should end these practices, they are not a barrier to ratifying the convention.

Some people believe that America's unwillingness to ratify the convention is because the U.S. military recruits 17-year-olds. That's not it, either. In fact, the U.S. [ratified](#) a related [treaty](#) in 2002 that prohibits the direct participation of children under 18 in hostilities. To comply with the treaty's requirements, the U.S. Armed Forces revised their practices to ensure that 17-year-old service members are not deployed outside the United States.

The main argument raised against ratifying the convention is that it is anti-family and a threat to parental authority. This is far from the truth. The convention instructs governments to respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and to support families in their efforts to raise and care for their children. References to the importance of the parent-child relationship appear throughout the text. Nevertheless, domestic opposition has left the convention with insufficient supporters in Washington.

After 30 years, the evidence is in: The convention has helped other countries improve the lives of children and provides important tools

for caring families. The U.S. should end its outlier status and join the rest of the world in committing to childrens rights.

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