Stories From the Human Rights Reports

**By** [**Catherine Russell**](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/catherine-russell)

The release of the [State Department’s annual human rights reports](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper) show that we have a long way to go before the human rights of women and girls everywhere are protected. More voices are needed to stand up and declare that atrocities committed against girls and women — indeed, against anyone — cannot be tolerated.

The existence of atrocities is well-documented in the reports, which describe shocking human rights violations and abuses, as well as the societal conditions that make them possible.

But the reports are more than catalogues of abuse. They are tools in our work for justice, helping governments, civil society, the media, and human rights defenders make the case for change.

Many of the headlines in the reports are familiar — like the brutal acts committed by ISIL or the repressive tactics of North Korea. But within each report are many stories that never make the evening news.

In **Nepal**, a mother may be denied the ability to transfer her Nepali citizenship to her children if the father’s identity is unknown or he is not Nepali. This is not uncommon: 27 countries discriminate against women in their ability to pass citizenship on to their children. Too often this results in a child who is stateless, meaning he or she may not be able to access basic services like health care and education.

In **Afghanistan**, a survey found that 39 percent of Afghan women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18 — making them part of a global trend where one in three girls in the developing world is married as a child — and Afghan women who marry later in life often don’t have a choice in their marriage. These stories and statistics exist despite laws against early and forced marriage.

The reports also highlight specific incidences of human rights violations and abuses that ruined individual lives. A story in the **Nigerian** report highlights the case of a college student who reported that a soldier lured her to a police station and raped her repeatedly. The soldier was reportedly “disciplined” for leaving his post, but as of December nothing else had happened.

This kind of story illustrates how a stunning disregard for human rights affects people’s lives — and this young woman’s life in particular. She is not alone. For too many, respect for their basic human rights is far from a reality.

In **Burma**, for example, there is an effort underway to enact legislation that would mandate that women can’t have children more than once every three years. There are obvious questions as to how such a law would be enforced. Many are concerned that it would only be enforced in areas where many members of minority groups live. And it’s clear that such legislation has little regard for reproductive rights, women’s rights, and religious freedom.

Fortunately, the news is not all bad. The reports also shine a much-deserved light on how governments, civil society groups, and individuals are working to advance human rights.

In **Afghanistan**, the national electoral commission’s gender unit focused on women’s political participation in the 2014 election, and increased the number of women who helped determine their country’s future.

In **Brazil**, the federal government operates a toll-free nationwide hotline for women to report intimate partner violence, while in **India**, a partnership between state government and civil society led to the launch of a crisis center for survivors of rape, dowry harassment, and domestic violence.

But we need more partners and more progress if we’re going to eradicate the challenges we see across reports: discriminatory laws, domestic violence, rape, early and forced marriage, and so on. We need to continue to press for change, with no tolerance for human rights abuses, until these reports are no longer necessary.

**Annual full-day meeting on the rights of the child “Protecting the Rights of the Child in Humanitarian Situations”**  
**37th session of the Human Rights Council**  
Monday 5 March 2018

Mr. President, Excellencies  
The urgency of our need to step-up protection of children in crisis settings is measured not only in the harsh metric of our failure to do so, it is evidenced further by sheer scale.

In 2016 alone, **43 million children across 63 countries** required humanitarian assistance.   And, today, **357 million children** live in conflict zones - up by some 75 per cent since last century’s last decade and accounting for one in six children globally. From floods in **Bangladesh**, **India**, **Nepal** and **Sierra Leone**, to the **Mexico** earthquake and the hurricane battering of the **Caribbean** and **US coastlines** – to man-made political and economic instability and outright armed conflict between and among State and non-State parties - in **every region** of the world, the costs of adult misconduct, and the consequences of adult misbehavior as their political, social and economic guardians, have let down millions of children.

**Alan Kurdi** washed up on a shore;  **Omran Daqneesh** huddled in an ambulance; countless unknown children who have lost their lives in terrified transit on the Mediterranean sea; thousands violated under deliberate attack in **Myanmar’s** Rakhine state; girls subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation by Blue-helmeted troops; children violated at the hands of unknown numbers of religious and secular aid-workers - the tragedy of these all too adult failings are borne by children, but the shame is surely not children’s to bear.

Excellencies, the vast majority of the populations of countries most affected by conflict, most afflicted by abject poverty, most exposed to climate change - are children. Crises claim the cruelest of costs - separating children from their families to face abduction by combatants; recruitment and exploitation by armed forces.

In **flight**, children face additional sexual abuse and exploitation, child labour and trafficking. In **transit**, they meet further abuse, neglect and deprivation of essential services.  At **reception**, they more often meet unlawful detention, xenophobia and an absence of care for the physical and mental trauma to which they have been subjected.

Children make up **half of the world’s displaced people** and **over half of all the world’s refugees**. No matter where they are, nor the status of their movement within or across borders - irregular as that may be - a child’s rights never abandons them.  However, it seems duty bearers frequently do.  Yet by demography alone, this year’s global compacts on migration and on refugees will be predominately compacts we make with our children, for our children, even if without our children.  Whether or not we notice it to be so. It appears that adult tolerance for the abuse of children is so high that no matter what we learn of its scale, breadth, the variety of its sources, or the deep and long-lasting damage of its cruel affliction, still we struggle to put our responsibilities to children front and centre.

In our cathedrals of conflict, culture and commerce; in our places of worship; our halls of power; in our sports’ clubs; incredibly, even at the hands of humanitarians - across sectors and settings - by commission and omission - our cruelty to children exacts harsh costs in currencies none of us can afford – least of all children - and that should shame us all. And here, the UN must own its shame.   Why in 2018 should it be necessary for the Secretary General to confirm there is zero tolerance in the UN for **sexual exploitation and abuse of children and adults?**To remind the UN of our duties to put the rights of victims of sexual exploitation first; to ensure that all humanitarian support and assistance efforts are victim-centred, are gender- and child-sensitive?

International human rights law applies at all times, in all settings for all peoples of all ages.  In this, the seventh decade of UDHR - which set *all rights for all* as the very foundation of the UN - we must strongly affirm that human rights hold and human rights persist, even in humanitarian settings and specifically for children.  Children’s rights are human rights.  The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by each and every State, bar one.  It must be upheld - no matter the circumstances, no matter the setting, without discrimination, no matter the adult. The **best interests of the child** must be put the forefront of all decision-making processes – always, everywhere.  And for that to be true, we must bring children in – bring children to sit at the tables of decision making and participation and specifically so for the design, implementation and monitoring of our humanitarian assistance activities.  
  
**VISIT WEBSITE https://www.hrw.org/**