

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Ligue Internationale de Femmes pour la Paix et la Liberté

Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la Paz y la Libertad

Consultative Status with UN ECOSOC, UNCTAD and UNESCO; Special Consultative Relations with FAO, ILO, and UNICEF.



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Statement to the Human Rights Council Regarding the Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Sept. 9, 2008

Geneva

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Council on urgent issues concerning the use of Children in Armed Conflict.

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) concurs with paragraphs 4 and 5 of the report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict affirming the desirability of mainstreaming the rights of children affected by armed conflict throughout the work of the Council and commending the Council for its commitment to ending the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The Special Representative's report appropriately focuses almost exclusively on grave violations. However, we urge the Council to consider the role that empowerment of children and youth can play in preventing further abuses. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are two instruments that speak eloquently to the empowerment of children.

As part of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's (CRC) review of U.S. compliance with the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, WILPF, in cooperation with over 30 other U.S. based national and local grassroots groups, prepared an alternative report documenting various and widespread efforts by the U.S. military to recruit children under the age of 18, and even under the age of 16, into the U.S. armed forces. Supported by the concluding observations of the CRC, WILPF has been working with members of the U.S. congress to build support for establishing 18 as the minimum age for recruitment and instituting criminal penalties for the recruitment of children.

In our report to the CRC, we noted that public acceptance of the recruitment of children into the U.S. armed forces is promoted through an extensive and ubiquitous advertising program utilizing diverse media such as movie trailers, glossy magazines, video games, in addition to bill boards, direct mail and television advertising—all of which combined costs the federal government \$1.6 billion a year.

The acceptance of military recruitment of children is also promoted through the militarization of public schools. As part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, contact information for all students enrolled in public schools is routinely funneled to military recruiters, and military recruiters are in turn given free access to schools themselves. We gathered evidence of military recruiters roaming school cafeterias during lunch hour, holding private meetings with students in the offices of school guidance counselors and participating in "college fairs." In these ways, among others including the use of e-mail and instant messaging, military recruiters are able to develop relationships with children without parental knowledge or consent.

The recruitment of children is also normalized through the Junior Reserve Officer Training Program, a three year course in military education¹ that has been adopted by at least 1645 civilian middle and high schools in the U.S. and which was funded through the Department of Defense at a level of 337 million dollars in 2007. This budget is supplemented by “in-kind” contributions of uniforms, rifles, physical training equipment and salary subsidies for the non-commissioned or retired officers hired to teach these classes.

Many schools are financially dependent on military funded programs. Military style programs dominate in low-income neighborhoods, where often high percentages of historically disadvantaged groups reside. As a result, about 54% of participants in the JROTC school military program nationwide are students of color. Public funds spent for military programs in schools are diverted from educational programs run by trained, certified, and accountable teachers. In the absence of other viable funding sources, poorly-funded schools nationwide must rely on government-funded military programs to fill out the curriculum while no similar additional funding is available for course offerings promoting peace values and peaceful resolution of conflicts, such as those this Council has urged states to implement.

At the same time, the U.S. has not developed a national action plan for implementing the World Programme on Human Rights Education, which focuses on school curriculum. While curriculum in the U.S. does not typically flow from the national level of the Department of Education down to local school systems, every level of government plays a role in shaping the educational priorities and practices in the actual classroom. The federal government, for example, uses incentives such as the cooperative funding arrangements in place to cover the costs of offering a JROTC course of study, as well as other particular curricula. However, there is no federal funding available in the United States to subsidize courses in conflict resolution, peace studies or human rights. As a result, very few high school graduates know anything at all about the human rights treaties in force or their monitoring mechanisms.

The special representative’s report highlights the “blurring of the traditional line between armed conflict and criminal violence.” Although the military’s efforts in outreach and recruitment of youth are better funded and coordinated, the tactics and strategies utilized by criminal gangs are not dissimilar. In addition, both sets of recruiters bring small arms and light weapons into U.S. communities, creating conditions ripe for armed conflict. Therefore, we would welcome further development the linkages between the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and the treaty on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

Through its continuing efforts to integrate and mainstream the concerns addressed by the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict into its work and the work of reporting State parties, the Council could specifically develop mechanisms that would empower those children most at risk of exploitation in situations of armed conflict.

Thank you.

¹ The Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program is described as “military education” in its enabling legislation, Title 10, Subtitle A, Part III, Chapter 102, §2031. Accessed 9.6.08 at <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/10/2031.html>