



Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

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Statement to the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding U.S. Compliance with CRC OPAC Feb. 7, 2008 OHCHR, Geneva

Thank you for this opportunity to give voice to the experiences and concerns of members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the U.S. and their allies in 30 US-based national and local grass roots organizations who are similarly engaged in peace education and advocacy on behalf of the human rights of children.

In its report to this committee, the U.S. Government fails to define what constitutes "recruitment", and even suggests that recruitment is limited to the act of a person signing the enlistment contract. The report ignores the concerted, targeted actions taken by military recruiters, including unchecked aggressive advertising, extravagant gift giving, and false promises of benefits and harassment of pre teens and teenagers that had to take place in order to achieve this result. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Defense spent 1.5 billion dollars on military recruitment, with half of this sum used for advertising alone. Military recruitment is a process that starts long before the contract is actually signed.

As our report documents, it starts in movie theaters, shopping malls and in public middle and high schools, often undermining a community's own norms or subverting the wishes of parents. The militarization of community life affects not only the life prospects of those young people who actually enlist for military service but the educational and employment opportunities available to all youth. It affects family life, and inevitably changes the norms of civil society.

Our alternative report and presentation highlight the pervasive improper, abusive and coercive recruitment tactics employed by the U.S. armed forces to draw children into military service, disregarding their best interests and the particular safeguards and protections mandated by this Committee and the CRC OPAC. We agree with the findings of a report on recruiter misconduct filed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2006 that the "recruiting process [is] from a recruiter's **initial contact with a prospective applicant.**"

Number of enlisted 17 year olds¹

In its report to this committee, the United States government underplays the participation of children in the U.S. armed forces. According to the latest available statistics from the Under Secretary of Defense, in 2005, 17-year olds constituted 15% of all new reserve recruits and 4.5% of new active recruits to the armed forces.

The nearly 14,000 boys and girls who actually sign up for military service represent only a tiny fraction of the youths targeted annually by military recruiters who have become an ominous presence in elementary schools, junior and high schools across the country where students as young as 11 can participate in Cadet and Training Corps. These are

military funded school programs in which military instructors teach students about uniform inspection and drills (including ones using wooden guns or real firearms for the high school kids). Even younger children are also allowed to attend the programs because they have older siblings in the program and they would otherwise have to walk home alone.

Recruiters resort to improper & abusive recruitment tactics

In the face of mounting U.S. military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan and dwindling public support for those missions, military recruiters pressed to fulfill the demand for new recruits have stepped up efforts to target children who are younger, come from low income families and economically depressed neighborhoods, including historically disadvantaged communities of color and immigrants.

Recruiters must **fulfill set quotas of recruits** – i.e., get a minimum number of kids to enlist every month – if they wish to keep their lucrative jobs and receive bonuses for any extra “recruits.” This perverse system provides incentives for recruiters anxious to fulfill their quotas to lie, make unrealistic promises to recruits, offer them cash or nonexistent incentives to enlist, and at times threaten and harass underage potential recruits.

The Government Accountability Office report documented a jump of more than half—from 400 to 630—in the number of substantiated cases of improper recruitment tactics, such as coercion and making false promises, and more than a doubling—from 30-70 cases—of criminal violations, such as sexual harassment and falsifying documents.

Activists and the Pentagon have singled out recruiters’ persistent sexual abuse of young women, who desire to join the armed services for purposes employment and economic advancement, as an issue of concern. An investigation in 2005, found that at least 80 male recruiters had been disciplined for abusing female potential recruits under the age of 18. More than 100 young women had come forward to actually file formal reports about recruiters who had victimized them. The abuse included rape on couches in recruiting offices, assaults in government cars, and groping en route to military entrance exams.

U.S. law requirements

Under U.S. law, the five branches of the all-volunteer military enlist males and females who are “qualified, effective and able-bodied who are not less than seventeen years of age.” Those under eighteen must have the written consent of a parent or guardian to formally enlist. However, there is NO requirement for parental consent or oversight over outreach and contacts between children, some as we mentioned are as young as eleven, and the more than 22,000 military recruiters.

In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, authorizing access by military recruiters to secondary school campuses and students, and specifically to the names, addresses and telephone listings of all junior and senior high-school students. The act allows recruiters to contact students – without the consent of parents or guardians –at home by telephone calls, mail, and personal visits. Schools that fail to comply with this policy risk losing federal funding. Faced with the potential loss of much needed federal educational funding, many cash-strapped schools make only feeble, if any, effort to notify students and parents of their right to “opt-out” of having this information released to military authorities.

Many schools are financially dependent on military funded programs. Public funds spent for military programs in schools are “diverted from educational programs run by trained, certified, and accountable teachers and other social programs run by youth-focused personnel.” 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 Committee has urged states to implement.

Military style programs dominate in low-income neighborhoods, where often high percentages of historically disadvantaged groups reside. For example, in predominantly African American Roxbury, Massachusetts, a school counselor explained to us that “the school couldn’t make financial ends meet without the money from ROTC [military funded training program].”

Although the military accepts both male and female recruits from all backgrounds, statistics reflect targeted recruitment of racial and ethnic minorities, and of youths from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds.

Recruiters target schools in low income neighborhoods where college may not be seen as an attainable option, while investing far less effort in recruiting youths in affluent areas where students are most likely to enroll in universities. In a Maryland working class neighborhood high school, “recruiters chaperon dances...and every prospect gets called at least six times by the Army alone.”

The intersection of poverty and race provides fertile opportunities for aggressive recruitment. About 54% of participants in the JROTC school military program nationwide are students of color. The military has specifically targeted Latino youth through its Spanish-language advertisements and campaigns. Community activists with Latinos Against the War noted that recruiters have been targeting low income Latino youths “because the Latino community is growing and it’s a very poor and working class community.”

Recruiters sometimes offer hip, expensive gifts to lend a desirable “cool” to the military and to lure young persons to enlist. In some locations, if a young person meets and talks with a local recruiter he can get an iPod (electronic device used to play music and movies valued at \$250).

The U.S. fails to provide the safeguards for voluntary recruitment specified by article 3 of the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict.

There can be no voluntary enlistment when recruiters: use aggressive and coercive tactics, including sexual harassment or make false promises of educational funding and career opportunities.

In addition, as our report documents, recruiters typically do not provide a comprehensive briefing or discussion of the risks and duties involved in military service to allow for informed consent. Instead, they spend inordinate amounts of time cautioning young recruits about serious consequences of engaging or having the propensity to engage in homosexual conduct—an approach that legitimizes homophobic violence and intimidation against young persons who are or are perceived to be gay or bisexual.

Recommendations

Consistent with this Committee's recognition of the "fundamental importance of raising the age of all forms of recruitment of children into the armed forces to eighteen years," national and local organizations promoting peace education and providing counter recruitment services in the U.S. strongly support a straight 18 standard for recruitment and deployment.

They are also unified in their attempts to curtail the military's heavy and often ingenious advertising targeting teens and pre-teens. In line with previous recommendations by the committee, these groups call on the U.S. to pass specific legislation to uniformly define and punish improper and abusive recruitment tactics, and to phase out military style programs in schools. As this Committee has previously commented, school activities for children that have military elements are not in conformity with the spirit of the protocol.

Pages 26-28 of our report suggests some recommendations this Committee might make to effectively address these and other issues raised in this report. We hope you will find this information useful. We look forward to additional dialogue with committee members.

Thank You.