

A young girl with dark skin and hair, wearing a pink sleeveless dress with a small checkered pattern, stands in the center of the frame. She is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful or hopeful expression. Her hands are clasped together in front of her chest. The background is a wall with large, abstract red and white shapes, possibly murals or graffiti. A framed picture hangs on the wall in the upper left corner.

When Children Are Put in Harm's Way

By Jen Banbury

It's 6 A.M. at the bus station in Agadez, Niger, and the members of the town's Child Protection Committee are keeping a close watch on the crowd of people waiting for the bus to the northern town of Dirkou. Dirkou is the last stop in Niger for illegal migrant workers headed to neighboring Libya to find work, and — as the Child Protection Committee knows well — the bus is bound to carry children lured by false promises of a better future.

"You can easily figure out fathers from

traffickers," says committee Vice President Bilal Afournounouk. "Traffickers are constantly checking on the children and have a rather brutal behavior toward them. It is also easy to identify children aiming for illegal migration: they look scared and are afraid to move around."

Worldwide, an estimated 1.2 million children are victims of trafficking each year. In the course of being trafficked, they are often robbed, mistreated, and yoked into oppressive jobs that require toiling

long hours for very little money. And those children may be considered lucky compared to the ones who find themselves cruelly enslaved in prostitution.

In Agadez, the Child Protection Committee quickly identifies a fourteen-year-old boy and a trafficker. They apprehend them and take the man to the police station. The child is interviewed and taken to a UNICEF-supported transit center run by Action Against the Use of Child Workers. There, he'll get food, shelter, and counsel-

ing — including a primer on the brutal realities of human trafficking. And he'll be given help to return to his family.

Millions of children worldwide are subjected to all kinds of violence, exploitation, and abuse by adults — including sexual slavery, child labor, child marriage, and forced soldiering. UNICEF works to protect these children, fighting for their rights and providing them with safe havens, a chance at education, and the knowledge that they are not alone.

“Child protection” is a facet of UNICEF’s work that has grown exponentially over the years, and it covers a huge range of issues. From working to reunite children and parents separated in the chaos of Haiti’s earthquake to pushing legislation that would curb child marriage in Yemen; from demobilizing child soldiers in Colombia to creating safe havens for those orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Swaziland; from halting the exploitation of child laborers in Sierra Leone to supporting a center that takes in street children in Kyrgyzstan — UNICEF is doing whatever it takes to protect children around the globe.

It’s all part of UNICEF’s comprehensive approach to ensuring both the well-being and welfare of children. So while UNICEF works to provide children with the vaccines, health care, safe water and sanitation, and therapeutic foods to keep them alive and well, it also stands up for children when others seem to have turned their back on them.

After the earthquake in Haiti, UNICEF immediately sent child protection officers into the streets of Port-au-Prince to identify children who had been separated from their families. The earthquake happened

just before 5 P.M. — many children had been out playing, or visiting friends. Suddenly, the earth shook, buildings slammed to the ground, their world was turned upside down, and they were left in shock and alone.

UNICEF has created safe spaces for these children — places where they can get food, water, medical attention, and trauma counseling. They can also be protected from possible abuse and trafficking while UNICEF and its partners work to reunite them with family. UNICEF does this for

children in the wake of all major disasters, both natural and manmade. But protecting children in emergencies is just a part of UNICEF’s worldwide efforts to stand up for children.

Child Protection Facts

Child Trafficking: An estimated 1.2 million children are trafficked every year.

Child Soldiers: At any given time, over 300,000 child soldiers — some as young as eight — are exploited in armed conflicts in more than 30 countries around the world.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: An estimated 70 million women and girls living today have been subjected to some form of genital mutilation/cutting.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: As many as 2 million children are believed to be exploited through prostitution and pornography.

Violence Against Children: Some 40 million children below the age of fifteen suffer from abuse and neglect and require health and social care.

For instance, UNICEF works with governments to change laws that impact the way children are treated. To put an end to forced child marriages, UNICEF’s strong advocacy has helped encourage countries such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia to pass laws that make marriage before age eighteen illegal. But UNICEF knows that legislation isn’t always enough. Even in countries with minimum-age marriage laws, girls as young as seven may find themselves wed to much older men.

“The best way to create the kinds of change that UNICEF is committed to is to work within the community, and bring change from the inside out,” says UNICEF’s Chief of Child Protection, Susan Bissell. Bissell has seen this firsthand — she spent years working in the field, including as UNICEF’s Chief of Child Protection in India from 2001 to 2007.

Changing customs and attitudes that can harm children takes time and tenacity. But it can have a huge impact. In countries like India, where child marriage is common,

“ I saw terrible things...my friends being killed.”

When Children Are Put in Harm's Way, *continued from page 15*

UNICEF supports a wide variety of grassroots programs that are making families reconsider marrying off their underage children. And UNICEF fosters school groups that give girls the support they need to say no to child marriage, stay in school, and choose their own path in life.

Child marriage is just one example of deeply rooted traditions that UNICEF and its partners must sometimes counter in the quest to protect children's rights. In countries including Sudan, for example, girls are routinely subjected to female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C) — a long-standing custom that can cause infection,

chronic pain, complications during pregnancy and delivery, and increased rates of neonatal mortality. But by working with religious leaders and primarily women within communities, and using a mass education campaign that counters the tradition's acceptance, the UNICEF-supported organization Saleema is helping Sudanese villages halt FGM/C. Slowly but surely, a movement is building. With UNICEF's help, girls in Sudan and other countries are gaining the chance to live free of this painful and debilitating procedure.

"It doesn't take much of a conversation for people's eyes to get opened up a little

bit," says Bissell. "And again, it's all about harnessing the power of the community and its desire. Most communities want to do the best thing for their kids."

But while some adults may inadvertently harm children by perpetuating traditions they grew up with, others harm children for overtly self-serving reasons. In conflict zones around the globe, militant groups forcibly recruit children, making them fight and even kill. At any given time, over 300,000 child soldiers — some as young as eight — are exploited in armed conflicts in more than 30 countries around the world.

In the course of Sri Lanka's dead-

The Convention on the Rights of the Child Turns 20

In November 2009, the world celebrated the 20th anniversary of the most widely endorsed human rights treaty in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). When the UN General Assembly adopted the CRC in 1989, the document represented a profound change in the way children are defined and viewed: not as possessions, but as human beings with fundamental rights; as important and respected members of communities and families; and as vulnerable individuals who must be protected, cherished, and encouraged to develop their full potential.

Ratified by 193 countries, the Convention builds a universal framework for the proper care, treatment, protection, and civic participation of all children, and makes governments report publicly on their progress toward meeting these standards.

Twenty years after its adoption, this document and the reporting mechanisms it established have made a major impact



throughout the world. Seventy countries have enacted laws protecting children from labor abuses, human trafficking, and active combat. South Africa and Russia have developed separate juvenile justice systems for trying and sentencing minors. Burkina Faso and Georgia have established Children's Parliaments so children can review and participate in new legislation.

The CRC has also laid a foundation that

has enabled international aid agencies like UNICEF to actively promote and protect the needs and legal rights of children worldwide.

But much remains to be done to make the promise of the CRC a reality for young people around the globe. Alarming numbers of them are still denied health care and education, abandoned and forgotten in times of war and natural disaster, and subjected to abuse and neglect.

Although the U.S. Government has yet to ratify the treaty, President Obama has expressed a strong desire to revisit the issue during his term. The U.S. Fund for UNICEF believes that U.S. ratification of the CRC would reinforce our nation's leadership in supporting UNICEF's work for children around the world.

To learn more about the CRC and how you can become involved in advocating for its ratification in the U.S., please visit unicefusa.org/crc.

ly 25-year conflict between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, UNICEF estimates that nearly 7,000 Sri Lankan children were recruited into armed groups. Sitha was just twelve when a group abducted him. They took him and other children to a camp where they forced them to train with weapons and showed them how to plant landmines. "Then they sent me to the battlefield," says Sitha. "I saw terrible things...my friends being killed."

In 2009, UNICEF and the President of Sri Lanka launched a "Bring Back the Child"

“It doesn't take much of a conversation for people's eyes to get opened up a little bit.”

campaign to prevent child recruitment and promote the release of all recruited children. Eventually, Sitha was freed from the armed group and was able to join a UNICEF rehabilitation program. In Sri Lanka, as in so many countries where children are press-ganged into fighting, UNICEF rehabilitation programs help former child soldiers recover from the trauma they've endured and give them the education and

skills they need to move on with their lives.

By creating and supporting programs that both stop abuse before it starts and help abused children cope with all they've been through, UNICEF is tackling all aspects of child protection. "I say this very humbly – I think UNICEF is very good at this," says Bissell. "People look to us – both within the UN system and globally – as the leader in child protection." And at this moment around the world, UNICEF Child Protection Officers are helping keep scores of vulnerable children safe from harm.

