

New York City Bar Association Hosts Panel Discussion on the Global Child Soldiers Crisis

On May 24, 2012 the New York City Bar Association convened noted local and global experts on the issue of child soldiers for a discussion entitled “The Child Soldier Crisis: Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation.” The distinguished panelists explored the use of children in conflict as a violation of international law and proposed strategies for their prevention and rehabilitation.

The panel, moderated by International Law and Gender Consultant Elizabeth Barad, was an extremely timely event given the recent decisions of the International Criminal Court (ICC) finding Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga guilty of recruiting child soldiers and of the Special Court for Sierra Leone finding former Liberian President Charles Taylor guilty of conscripting children under 15 years of age. After a brief informational video, panelists spoke about their experiences and shared their perspectives on the issues of child recruitment, the importance of adequate legal frameworks to prevent and punish the use of children in combat, and the efforts to rehabilitate and provide remedies for former child soldiers in conflict and post-conflict settings.

First, Grace Akallo, Founder and Executive Director of United Africans for Women and Children Rights and former child soldier, opened the panel with her personal experience as a child soldier who was abducted by members of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda in 1996. Today, she is a successful author and tireless advocate on the issue. She discussed the importance of painting a more accurate picture of who a child soldier is, what she or he goes through during and after conflict, and the need for comprehensive rehabilitation for survivors.

Next, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy shared the definition of a child soldier as interpreted broadly by the ICC. She then explained some of the root causes of the child soldier crisis as well as the ever-changing nature of armed conflict that gives rise to new models of the use of children in combat. Finally, her presentation briefly covered the Security Council involvement and monitoring system responding to allegations or evidence of parties’ use of children in conflict situations.

Panelist Pernille Ironside, UNICEF’s Senior Advisor on Child Protection in Emergencies, then spoke about rehabilitation programs and reparations for child soldiers from a field perspective globally. She stressed the need to: (1) convince leaders to stop conscripting children, and (2) offer better alternatives, including education, vocational training and other income generating activities, as well as provide counseling, therapy and empowerment activities, to former child soldiers. As for the complex issue of reparations, UNICEF has filed amicus curiae in particular cases to advocate for inclusive reparations that avoid to the extent possible exacerbating existing community tensions among local groups.

Advocacy Director of the Children’s Rights Division at Human Rights Watch Jo Becker concluded the presentations by outlining successes and challenges in efforts made by the United States to prevent and adequately respond to the global child soldier crisis. In her concluding remarks, she urged the Association to weigh in on the issue and to use its influence to stop the forced conscription of children in combat.

The Association has a long history of advocating against the use of child soldiers. In 1999, the Committee on Military Affairs and Justice authored an influential report on the minimum age of military service in connection with the then-proposed Optional Protocol on the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The African Affairs Committee is currently considering advocacy to strengthen implementation of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act.

Sponsors of the panel included the African Affairs Committee, Christina T. Holder, Chair; the International Human Rights Committee, Stephen L. Kass, Chair; the Children and Law Committee, Randall Carmel, Chair; and the Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice, Alexander Papachristou, Executive Director.