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HUMAN  
RIGHTS

# SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS WHO  
ARE CHANGING  
OUR WORLD

ABUBACAR SULTAN: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS  
AND CHILD SOLDIERS ON THE FRONT



# ABUBACAR SULTAN

(HE/HIM/HIS)

**“THE STRUGGLE IS FAR FROM BEING OVER, AND DESPITE THE END OF THE WAR, THERE IS AN ONGOING WAR TO IMPROVE CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND WELFARE.”**

Abubacar Sultan was just 24 years old when he began his work on behalf of children in his home country of Mozambique, in southeastern Africa. He was a teacher at the start of the country’s brutal civil war (1985–1992), which left 2 million children dead. Numerous others were drafted into the fighting. Sultan left his profession to travel the country, rescuing these children who had witnessed the worst of humanity.

In 1988, Sultan started the Children and War Project, aimed at saving thousands of traumatized youths. He trained over 500 people in community-based therapy centers, teaching them how to remove child soldiers from the front, provide them with psychological support, and return them to their homes. The project ultimately reunited 4,000 children with their families. After the war, Sultan developed a children’s rights initiative called Wona Sanana, the first attempt in Mozambique to gather postwar information regarding the health and social conditions of children.

Abubacar Sultan has worked with UNICEF in Angola and continues to support UNICEF’s child protection programs. In 2001, he received the World of Children humanitarian award in recognition of his extraordinary commitment to improving the lives of others.

# INTERVIEW WITH ABUBACAR SULTAN

## INTERVIEW FROM KERRY KENNEDY'S BOOK *SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER*, 2000.

When the war started in Mozambique, I was finishing my teacher training at the university. Neighbors, relatives, friends of those who were kidnapped, and people who fled from war zones brought back news of the war and the suffering.

By the end of 1987, UNICEF estimated that 250,000 children had been orphaned or separated from their families. A high percentage were involved in the war as active combatants, forcibly trained and forcibly engaged in fighting. I was shocked by pictures of child soldiers who had been captured by government forces and others who were shot in combat. Something wrong was going on. I couldn't keep going to my classes and teaching students while all these things were happening in my country. I decided to do something.

Around that time, a local orphanage took in 35 kids captured in combat. A psychiatrist and a social worker interviewed these children, and what they heard was truly horrifying: entire families kidnapped, taken into the bush, forced to carry heavy loads to military base camps, and subjected to all kinds of abuse. Children were beaten, sexually violated, and compelled to witness killings and beatings, pressed into combat and urged to commit murder. These were common practices. Many of these children had been physically injured, and most of them were traumatized.

One particular 7-year-old boy who had been kidnapped changed my life. When I arrived at this orphanage, he was completely withdrawn from the world. He would be calm one day and cry continuously the next. Finally he started speaking. He said he was living with his family when a group of rebel soldiers woke him up at night, beat him, and forced him to set fire to the hut where his parents were living. And when his family tried to escape from the hut, they were shot in front of him and then cut into pieces. I will never forget his feelings, because I kind of went inside him and he shared with me the worst moments of his life. The images, the bad images I hold from my childhood of small

things that hurt me, all come alive. And sometimes I tried to put myself into his position and tried to live his experience. His was just one story among many others.

In conjunction with Save the Children (U.S.), we developed a program to gather information about children who had been separated from their families by the war. While the point of this program was to provide the victims with psychological and social help, it soon became obvious that we did not have the necessary resources. We were mostly left with the mission of helping the children leave the war areas and return to their families. We went into the war zones every day, documented as many children as possible, and tried to trace them to communities of displaced people inside the country, and to refugee camps in neighboring countries. Whenever possible, we took children to safer environments.

Most of these kids were on the front, so that's where we went. In some cases we didn't have permission from the government to go there, and furthermore, we never had permission from the rebels, since we didn't have any contact with them. Among the most basic needs we wanted to provide for the kids was access to water, food, and to simple medicine in order to fight the spread of malnutrition, malaria, cholera, and other diseases. But if a kid was injured with bullets in his body, or had been maimed by landmines, you had to address that before you could start doing your real work. Our lives were thus in permanent danger, too.

There were no safe roads in the country then, and the only way to reach those areas was by plane. On several occasions, we were almost shot down. We landed on airstrips that had been heavily mined. We had several plane accidents. Whenever we got too frightened, we tried to remember how lucky we were even to be alive.

The conflict in Mozambique was unique in the sense that it targeted only civilian populations. Direct combat between the government and rebel

forces was very, very rare. In most cases, they would just go into the villages and into the huts and loot everything and kill everybody, or kidnap people and steal everything. In this process girls and boys were taken and indoctrinated as soldiers. At the end of the war we had evidence that many girls were used as maids and as sexual partners to the soldiers. After a few years of indoctrination, these kids became perfect killing machines. They would do exactly what their perpetrators had done to them: cold-blooded killing.

Everyone who promoted this war was to blame. There was a real psychology of terror. People risked being killed if they dissented from whatever they were forced to do. Either you killed or you were killed. That's what made people do what they did. Even life in the rebel camps was so bad and so difficult that the only people who had access to food or to the basic necessities were the soldiers. Being a soldier, in that context, meant that you would survive. It was as simple as that.

The camps no longer exist today. They were dismantled as part of the peace agreement. But the problem is that many of the kids were left behind as part of the demobilization process. The United Nations provided resettlement to adult soldiers, but since the former fighting armies denied they had children in their forces, resettlement was not available to them. We tried to follow up but we were only able to provide support for something like 800 kids. We don't know what happened to the majority of them. They just went to a place where they felt safe, and often the only place that they considered home was the place where they lived during the war. Many times I asked myself why I chose this work. I had two kids and until they reached the age of 4 or 5, I didn't spend more than two or three days a month with them. I finally came to realize that I was hurting my own family. They were always worried about my safety. And yet, there was something strong within myself that I responded to saying I was a human being and there were other human beings out there in danger.

And if those who are close to you are in a better position than those who suffer, you need to sacrifice some of your own privileges. It's hard to explain. It's perhaps a kind of gift that you have inside

yourself. Part of the explanation lies in religion (I am a practicing Muslim) and part in education. Yet, there are many other people like myself who never considered doing what I did. Hence, it must be something deeper, something inside.

And though our program succeeded in reuniting about 20,000 children with their families, when you consider that over a quarter million children were orphaned or lost during the war, our efforts seemed almost insignificant. We had the constant feeling that we were spending too much money to help only a few hundred children, even though I had worked as hard as I could.

Now that the war is over, the country is finally recovering and slowly making its transition into economic development and democracy. It's become clear to me that those who were suffering at the time of the war were the same as those who were most affected when the war was over: the ones who still lack basic resources. They are the ones who continue to be maimed by landmines in the country. The girls in the rural areas are the ones who have limited access to education and who are still subjected to all kinds of abuse. It also became apparent to me that programs of education and health continue to focus on urban areas, where people are mostly safe, whereas in all those former frontline territories, there is nothing going on. Children continue to die of diseases that in other parts of the country can be easily treated. The struggle is far from over, and despite the end of the war, there is an ongoing war to improve children's rights and welfare.

I hope that someday we will have a world in which children can be treated like children again and in which they can be given all the opportunities they deserve as human beings. I imagine a world in which "humanness" would be the guiding principle behind rules and laws. I hope that someday we will reach this ideal.

You see, once you give people the opportunity to express their potential, many problems can be solved. My country is an example in which people were able to use their own resources in the most extreme and difficult circumstances. People really are resilient, and in countries like mine, that has an important meaning. And in that you must believe.

# DEFENDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS/CHILD SOLDIERS

## LESSON GRADE LEVELS 9 TO 12

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **ARTICLE 4:** Freedom from slavery
- **ARTICLE 24:** Right to rest and leisure
- **ARTICLE 25:** Right to adequate living standard
- **ARTICLE 26:** Right to education

### TIME REQUIREMENT

80 minutes

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What are the causes and effects of forcing children to take part in combat?

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- be able to describe why children are targeted for combat.
- be able to assess the effects of child soldiers on communities.
- be able to identify effective measures for defending the rights of children using the story of Abubacar Sultan.
- become defenders of children's rights by participating in a social justice advocacy project.

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

### CONCEPTS

- Change
- Human rights Justice
- Empathy
- Childhood rights Social activism

### VOCABULARY

- Child
- Empathy
- United Nations
- UNICEF
- War
- Ratify
- Convention
- Defender

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED

- Projection system for photos and PowerPoint
- DVD player

### MATERIALS

- Computer with internet and projection.
- Printed interviews with Abubacar Sultan.
- Sheet with reflection prompts for video.  
(Questions listed below in Activity 3.)
- Biography of Abubacar Sultan, an interview with him, and information on child soldiers: [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org).
- Source for facts on child soldiers:  
<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/children-forced-go-war>.
- Source for excellent teacher/student resources about child soldiers, including readings, maps, photos, and video clips:  
<https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers>.
- “Life of a Child Soldier” video:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPWLiZ29KVI>.
- Child soldier photo gallery:  
<http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/features/somalia-s-child-soldiers/>.

### SUGGESTED PLACEMENT OF THIS LESSON WITHIN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM:

- Global history and geography.
- A lesson on social justice advocacy in participation in government.
- An elective course involving civic involvement.

# ANTICIPATORY SET

- Instruct students to take 30 seconds to picture their childhoods in their minds. Encourage them to think of as many different activities as they can remember from the ages of 6 to 13. Ask students to write a list of eight to 10 specific activities that they pictured.
- Using images found on YouTube, “Life of a Child Soldier,” first two minutes. For each photo, ask the class if anyone has something resembling this on their own list and solicit responses.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPWIiZ29KVI&t=1s>

- After showing the YouTube video, show photos of child soldiers from the photo gallery at:

<http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/features/somalia-s-child-soldiers/#>

- Discuss: What accounts for the differences in activities between the pictures of your childhood and the photos shown?

## TEACHER TIP

The 2006 movie *Blood Diamond* has scenes of child soldiers. However, these scenes are graphically violent. It is highly recommended that you review the movie prior to showing it in class. Given the violent nature of the child soldiers scenes, it is advisable to have parental permission for students to view the movie.

# STUDENT ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY 1

- Now that students clearly see that not everyone’s childhood looks the same, discuss the following questions. Depending on your class/pacing, you may choose to discuss these using partners or with the class as a whole:
  - What is a child?
  - At what age can a young person no longer be called a child? At what age or event were you not a child anymore?
  - What are the basic needs of children? What happens if these needs are not met?
  - What rights do you have as a child?
  - Should there be a universal childhood experience? What would it look like?
  - Should there be a minimum age before someone joins the armed forces? What should it be?

## ACTIVITY 2

- Show students the map of countries that have child soldiers: <https://childsoldiersworldindex.org/>
- Ask students why children are specifically recruited into combat.
- Record student comments on the chalkboard or interactive whiteboard.
- Ask students what the consequences are of children taking part in war—for the child, for the family, and for society.

## ACTIVITY 3

- Before showing the clip in which abducted children train to be child soldiers, read some or all of the reflection prompts below. This will allow students to more accurately reflect on what they see. Show the clip from YouTube, “Life of a

Child Soldier," minutes three to seven. (Caution: The clip shows graphic violence.) After they watch the clip, have students reflect, in writing, on one or more of the following:

- What senses the child is experiencing (touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight)?
- What were your feelings as you watched this child?
- Can you relate to any of his/her experiences/feelings?
- What do you think happened to this child after the clip you saw?
- Guide a classroom discussion based on these prompts. Depending on time, this can be done as a class or with partners who then report back to the larger group.

- Distribute to the students the interview with Abubacar Sultan, a defender of children's rights, at: [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org).
- Instruct students to read the interview individually.
- Distribute copies of these focus points for students' written responses:
  - Write at least three of your reactions to the interview.
  - Highlight the steps Abubacar Sultan took to address the problem of children in combat.
  - Select one sentence that struck you as particularly powerful and explain why.
- Facilitate a classroom discussion on students' findings, questions, and reflections.

## ACTIVITY 4

- Ask students to brainstorm ways to stop recruitment of child soldiers. Record answers on the board or interactive whiteboard.

### TEACHER TIP

Abubacar Sultan's actions are the essence of this lesson. Teachers should stress the significance of the actions of one person in the face of injustice as a motivation for becoming a defender.



# INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

## THE CONVENTION OF THE RIGHTS OF A CHILD

<http://www.unicef.org/crc>

This convention is a universally agreed-upon set of non-negotiable standards for the basic human rights of all children.

## UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

This is one of the most important modern documents creating an international standard of human rights.

## BECOMING A DEFENDER

Now that students see how the actions of one man helped ease the suffering of so many children, ask what they as individuals can do, using one of the following ideas or one of their own.

- Write a letter to your local, state, and national representatives and/or to the editor of your local newspaper regarding the failure of the U.S. to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In your letter, request specific action on the issue of the universal rights of children. Share any response you may receive with the class: <http://www.childrightscampaign.org/>
- Organize a “Change for Change” fundraiser to support a rehabilitation center for child soldiers: <http://www.changeforchange.org/what-we-do/>
- Collect change from community members during lunch and after school. Be sure to promote the event with informational posters, display cases, video clips and/or school-wide announcements. Also be sure to thank the school population and publicize any feedback you get from the organization.
- Participate in Human Rights Watch’s Red Hand Day Campaign. Organize school participation in the Red Hand Day Campaign to promote awareness of child soldiers: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/01/29/red-hand-day-campaign>

- Create a Facebook group advocating efforts to end the involvement of children in combat. Invite several people into the group and encourage them to get informed on the issue. Encourage them to invite others.
- Create a multimedia presentation about child soldiers to show to your class and/or a community group (such as Rotary International). Be sure to include facts about the problem and highlight defenders such as Abubacar Sultan.
- Hold a teach-in about child soldiers during lunch. This may be combined with HRW’s Red Hand Day Campaign and watching the multimedia presentation created.

## EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Find a photo of a child soldier and write a letter/journal entry/song/rap/poem from the perspective of that child.
- Write a paper about today’s child soldiers. Pick a country or conflict and research facts and statistics about the issue and ongoing efforts by individuals and/or groups defending the protection of children. Be sure to include your personal reflection on how investigating this issue has affected your thinking and action.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation or a poster on the theme/word “childhood.”

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **YOUTH FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

<http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/>

This site provides excellent 30-second videos and additional information about many human rights issues.

## **A CHILD'S CENTURY OF WAR**

Film available at

<http://www.icarusfilms.com/new2002/cent.html>.

## **CRIMES OF WAR 2.0**

Edited by Roy Gutman, David Rieff, and Anthony Dworkin (W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2007). This book is a guide to all wartime atrocities, presented in a straightforward manner by more than 140 expert contributors. Key terms and legal issues are explained and augmented with 150 photographs.

## **CHILDREN AT WAR**

By P.W. Singer (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006).

This book discusses the recruitment process of the modern child soldier and examines how and why wars fought with child soldiers are considered beneficial to their political patrons. Based on interviews with child soldiers, international groups including the UN, and others involved in the conflicts.

## **GIRL SOLDIER: A STORY OF HOPE FOR NORTHERN UGANDA'S CHILDREN**

By Faith J.H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo (Chosen, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007).

More than 30,000 children have been abducted over the last twenty years in Uganda by rebel armies and forced to commit unspeakable crimes. Grace Akallo was one of these. Her story, which is the story of many Ugandan children, recounts her terrifying experience.

## **WAR CHILD: A CHILD SOLDIER'S STORY**

By Emmanuel Jal and Megan Lloyd Davies (St. Martin's Press, 2009).

Emmanuel Jal, one of the "lost boys of Sudan," tells his personal story of being a child soldier and his eventual escape with the help of foreign aid workers.