

CHILDREN'S VOTING COLLOQUIUM

November 12, 2023

Dear Special Rapporteur Ms. Mary Lawler,

My name is Charlotte Anderson. I am 12 years old, and I live in Oklahoma, in the United States of America. Thank you for founding Front Line Defenders and thank you for writing a report on children and youth who are human rights defenders.

I served for two terms as the Kid Governor of Oklahoma, from 2021-2022. I was chosen in a competition when I used kids' health as my platform, because it was the start of the pandemic and Oklahoma ranked 49th out of 50 states for the health of kids. I was 9. But as I started reading the newspaper, giving speeches to different groups, and meeting with lawmakers, my interests expanded a lot, and I realized that grown ups were doing a terrible, awful, horrible job in taking care of kids—with climate change, gun violence, health care, education, criminal justice, and other issues.

I realized that no one was truly listening to me about these issues. They took pictures with me and acted like I was cute, but they didn't take to heart what I was saying. When it comes to doing their jobs, the people in charge turn to adults—the people who can vote for them or against them. People listen to others when they think they are their equals. We kids aren't equals and we aren't treated seriously without being able to vote. We don't have real power. And I won't be able to vote for another 5 years. Getting kids the right to vote became the most important issue to me.

The members of the UN Human Rights Council need to hear that children like me are demanding the right to vote, but we don't have good opportunities to be heard or to advocate for ourselves. I am now serving on the advisory board for the International Children's Voting Colloquium, and I was the keynote speaker at Amnesty International UK's annual conference on children and youth in London in December 2022. I also was a distinguished pulpit series speaker at Mayflower Congregational UCC in July 2023. But my actual government doesn't give me any ability to have my voice heard.

I'd like to share with you why I think kids voting is so important.

First, it is an issue of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that you are celebrating says that a fundamental human right is the right to vote. Are kids not humans? I think kids are people too, and I want to live in a democracy where I get to participate and my voice is heard. It's supposed to be one person, one vote. Am I not a person? When I tell people I think kids should be able to vote, their first reaction is to laugh. It's insulting. We are treated like we're less than everyone else and like we aren't humans.

Second, it's silly to not let kids vote. There isn't some magical time when people start making good

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choices. Grown ups make the opposite of good choices all the time, like wars. I don't remember any wars started by a kid, do you?

Third, laws apply to us too, and we have to follow them, or we can go to jail. But we can't vote on the laws?!? It seems really unfair that we could lose our freedom and our entire lives by being put in jail without us having any way to help decide what kids should go to jail for.

Fourth, if we work or spend money, we have to pay taxes, but we don't get to decide where those taxes go. It's taxation without representation.

Fifth, if kids could vote as they are growing up, it would be part of their lives. Kids would be more involved in their communities. Kids would get in the habit of it, and when they are grown ups it would be routine. It would tell humans (when they are kids) that their voices matter. That, by itself, would change the world.

Sixth, families would have more power and we would get better laws for families and kids. It would be 1 person 1 vote. A family of 5 would have more power than a family of 2. But they should! In the United States, the Supreme Court has decided that kids can be counted when states make voting districts and decide how many representatives each state or area gets. But then when it comes time to vote, only the adults get to vote. That doesn't make any sense at all. They are saying kids are humans for drawing lines on maps but not humans for voting. They are using kids to get power, without giving the kids actual representation of their interests.

As far as I know, we don't have any special laws or programs to protect young human rights defenders. In Oklahoma there is not a way for kids to give input on any bills in the legislature—even adults cannot submit testimony or information when laws are being considered. Young defenders do not have a chance to participate in decision making. Human rights are not taught in schools, and kids are not encouraged to participate in human rights movements. In fact, in Oklahoma, the state legislature passed a law restricting teachers from being able to teach issues involving human rights because they are afraid that we will find out that America is not as perfect as people want it to seem.

You can help young human rights defenders like me by using the 75th anniversary of the UDHR to show that kids are being deprived of rights guaranteed by that declaration. People need to know that voting is a human right, and that kids are humans. Our interests cannot be fully protected without giving us the right to vote.

Thank you,

Charlotte Anderson