



Influencer, gamer, soldier, spy: the online era of child recruitment and its implications in international law (Part II)

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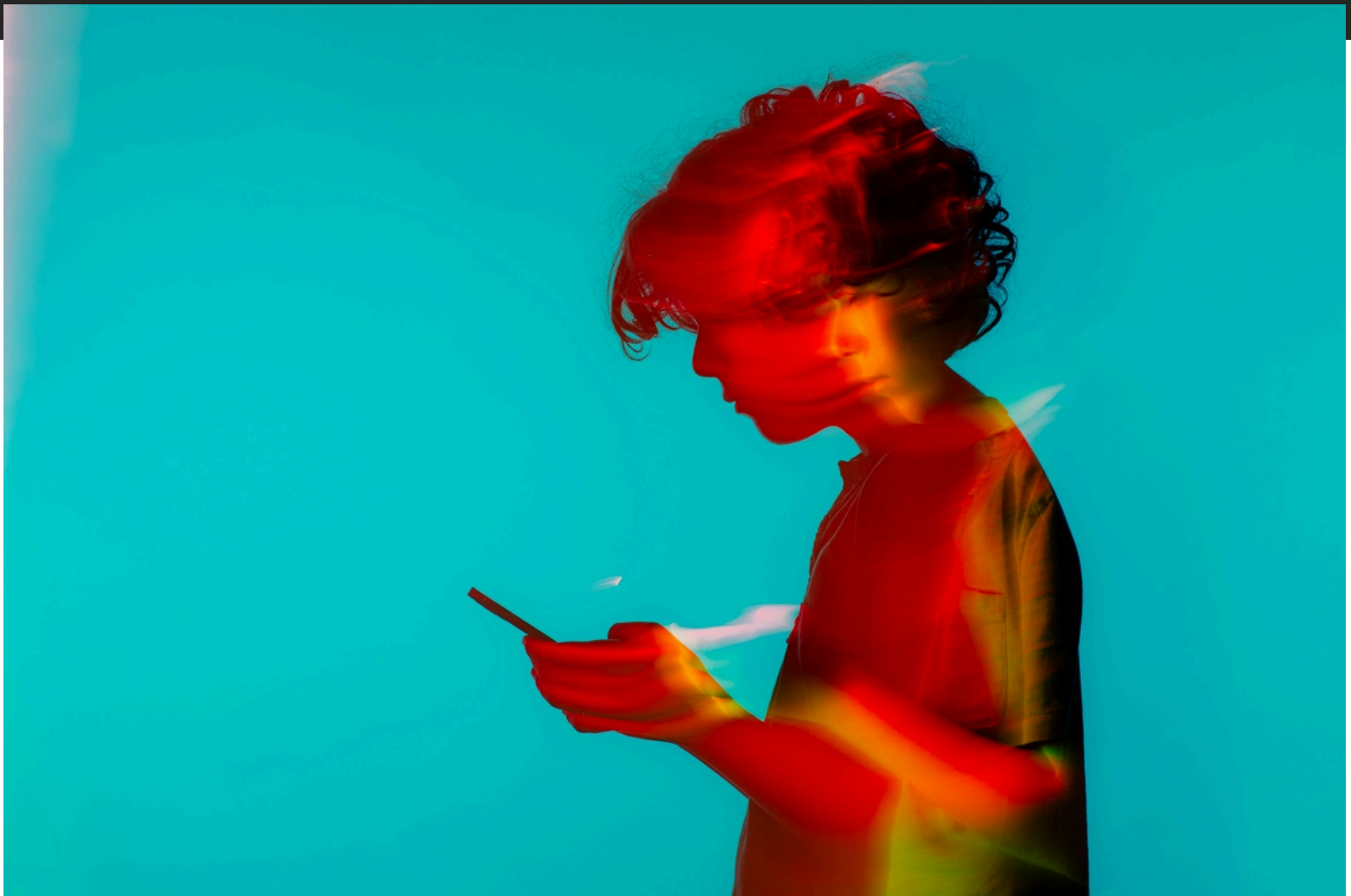


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As social media and gaming platforms create new interfaces between tech-savvy children and armed actors, new questions should be asked regarding how the law prohibiting child recruitment and use in hostilities can be promoted and enforced online.

In this two-part post, ICRC Advisers Vanessa Murphy, Siobhan Sparkes McNamara, and Tilman Rodenhäuser consider how the digital environment is transforming more traditional forms of child recruitment, give a rough typology of related trends in the information and communications (ICT) environment, identify the relevant international law, and propose recommendations to improve compliance with these laws in the digital age.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Influencer, gamer, soldier, spy: the online era of child recruitment and its implications in international law (Part II)

In recent years, states have expressed concern about the use of ICTs for the recruitment of children into armed forces and armed groups, and their use in hostilities. Such acts are subject to widely-applicable international legal obligations, and this law applies online as well as offline: today, there is [general agreement](#) that “IHL rules and principles ... serve to protect civilian populations and other protected persons and objects, including against the risks arising from ICT activities”, *and that* “children must not be allowed to take part in hostilities during armed conflict, including through ICT activities”.

But the intricacy of the rules governing child recruitment and use in hostilities is sometimes underestimated. In the second part of this post, we present some of the most relevant provisions and encourage states to take a range of measures to improve compliance with them.

Legal obligations regarding the recruitment and use of children online

Since the Geneva Conventions were adopted in 1949, international law has developed in bursts to advance the protection of children in armed conflict. Numerous treaties articulate in one way or another [the general rule](#) that these children are entitled to special respect and protection. This universal concern has birthed a more elaborate body of law to keep children away from the primary purveyors of violence in wartime – armed forces and armed groups.

Most states are bound by more than one of the following instruments governing child recruitment and use in hostilities, and all states are bound by at least one. When more than one norm applies to a given set of facts, the rules apply concurrently, meaning that the highest standard must be complied with. For example, many states are bound by prohibitions on child recruitment under the age of 15 ([API Art. 77.2](#), [APII Art. 4.3.c](#), [CRC Art. 38](#)) as well as the higher age of 18 ([OPAC Art. 2 and declaration under Art. 3.2](#), [ACRWC Art. 22.2](#)). In such cases, a state must abide by the age 18 standard.

[The Optional Protocol on the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict \(OPAC\)](#). The [173 States Parties](#) to OPAC are prohibited from unlawfully recruiting children to their own armed forces, including using online means, in line with the specifications in OPAC Articles 2 and 3. They must also “*take all feasible measures to prevent*” the recruitment or use in hostilities of persons under 18 by non-state armed groups, “*including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices*” (Art. 4.2). For their part, non-state armed groups are prohibited from recruiting or using in hostilities anyone under 18 (Art. 4.1). Finally, under Article 6.1 and 6.2, States Parties must take “*all necessary legal, administrative and other measures to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions of the present Protocol within its jurisdiction*”.

[Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions](#). For the 175 States Parties to Additional Protocol I (API), [Article 77\(2\)](#) requires that they take “*all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces.*” For the 170 States Parties to Additional Protocol II, [Article 4\(3\)\(c\)](#) provides that “*children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities*”. Importantly, this prohibits indirect use in hostilities (unlike the express reference to a “direct part in hostilities” in API).

[The Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#). All states worldwide except one are parties to the CRC, Article 38(2) of which provides that States Parties “*shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.*” This is verbatim from Article 77(2) of Additional Protocol I, but its added value is that it is more widely ratified – 196 as compared to 170 States Parties – plus it also applies in non-international armed conflicts. Article 38(3) prohibits recruitment under 15 to state armed forces.

[The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#). Under the ICC statute, “*conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into [the national armed forces]/[armed forces or groups] or using them to participate actively in hostilities*” is a war crime in international and non-international armed conflicts respectively (Arts 8(2)(b)(xxvi), 8(2)(e)(vii)).

The [International Labour Organisation Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#) prohibits the “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict” (Art. 3(a)) and establishes this protection for all persons under the age of 18 (Art. 2). The Convention is [universally ratified](#), thus all states are required to “*take all necessary measures to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions giving effect to this Convention including the provision and application of penal sanctions or, as appropriate, other sanctions*” within their jurisdiction (Art. 7).

[African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child \(ACRWC\)](#). States Parties to the ACRWC have adopted a higher, straight-18 standard: Article 2 of the Charter states that “[f]or the purposes of this Charter, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years”, and Article 22(2) provides that “*States Parties to the present Charter shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from recruiting any child*”. The Charter binds [51 African states](#).

For governments, the above boil down to the following:

- *Recruitment by armed forces*: States must never use online means to unlawfully recruit children to their own armed forces. For most states, this prohibits recruitment of persons under 18, though *some states* still have younger ages of lawful voluntary recruitment declared under OPAC Art. 3.
- *Recruitment by armed groups*: Most states (the *173 OPAC States Parties*) must put legal and administrative measures in place to prevent the online recruitment or use of persons under 18 in hostilities, including through ICT means, by non-state armed groups.
- *Use in hostilities by armed forces or armed groups*: All states have obligations that prohibit children under 15 from directly and/or indirectly participating in hostilities online. For the 51 African States Parties to the ACRWC, this age limit rises to 18 for direct participation in both IAC and NIAC. For the 173 parties to OPAC, this age limit rises to 18 for the use of children in direct and indirect participation in hostilities by non-state armed groups. The ICRC recommends that all states adopt this higher age limit of 18 for any use of children in hostilities by state or non-state armed groups.^[1]

The bottom line is that all states have an obligation to take measures to prevent recruitment and use of children in hostilities, including when related acts are committed through, or encouraged or facilitated by ICTs. Failure to take any such measures could result in a violation of the applicable rules outlined above. The next section considers what kind of measures states might take to fulfil these obligations.

Recommendations

International legal obligations prohibiting child recruitment and use in hostilities need more attention if they are to hold strong in the digital age. The gist is simple: kids can't be part of the fight. Numerous states and experts are working to bring compliance with that basic rule online. Below we sum up six related recommendations.

1. Warn, support and upskill kids and parents

Effective prevention will involve equipping children themselves, and their caregivers, with the knowledge and resources to recognize and resist online child recruitment and use in hostilities. Education is central to prevention (*Global IHL Initiative Outcome document on Workstream 6 regarding ICTs*, Outcomes 3 and 5 on p. 5 and 7; OP 17, *UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018)*; OP 9, *UN Human Rights Council Resolution 61/21 (2026)*).

For example, school-based digital literacy and prevention programmes could include awareness-raising on recruitment and use tactics used by armed actors online. Information should be child-friendly, as well as adapted to parents and caregivers who themselves may lack technological skills (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), *General Comment 25, paras 25, 32 and 84*; OHCHR, *para. 60*). There is some interesting emerging practice that engages at-risk children: for example, the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict has developed a series of social media materials for children intended to puncture social media myths fuelling recruitment and use (on *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*).

Prevention efforts could also make greater use of peer-to-peer approaches. Young people who understand the platforms and communication styles used by their peers could be supported to become peer educators or digital advocates, producing short-form content that explains recruitment tactics, challenges recruiters' narratives and directs children towards trusted sources of help. Young adults formerly associated with armed forces or groups could, where safe and appropriate, also contribute their perspectives on recruitment and its consequences. Such approaches should be carefully safeguarded and supported, particularly where participants have experienced violence or recruitment themselves.

But more is also needed at the level of multi-sectoral service provision. The complex reasons – among them financial duress – that push a child into the violence of war are best combatted by strengthening the structural safety net of caregivers, school, and healthcare resources to which a child can turn (*UNODC, p. 147-148*; 2024 *Bogotá Call to Action*, a commitment of over 100 states).

2. Revisit and apply national child recruitment law and policy to prevent and prosecute online violations

Most states have *national law* that prohibits the recruitment or use of children (albeit with gaps that *should be patched*). The ICRC, like the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, recommends that states should apply, or review, and if necessary, update this national legislation to take into account ICT-facilitated recruitment and use of children (UN CRC, *General Comment 25, paras 23, 83, 122*).

In tandem, national child protection laws, policies and capacities could be adapted to explicitly recognize online recruitment and use in hostilities as a distinct risk (*Global IHL Initiative Outcome document on Workstream 6 regarding ICTs*, p. 5 and 7; *Bogotá Call to Action*, Commitment 5). Given that digital technologies bring additional complexity to the investigation and prosecution of crimes against children, specialised training for relevant authorities as well as international exchange of good practices on the matter may help.

3. Address child recruitment and use when developing law and policy specific to the digital environment

Law and policy developed specifically to regulate the digital environment should also consider whether and how this threat to children's security might be addressed. This includes legislation, budgetary allocations and other administrative decisions relating to the digital environment (*Global IHL Initiative Outcome document on Workstream 6 regarding ICTs*, p. 5 and 7; UN CRC, *General Comment 25, paras 17 and 23*). Existing domestic offences related to online grooming, coercion, or manipulation of children may serve as complementary bases for accountability where such conduct forms part of the recruitment or use of children in hostilities.

4. Age restrictions and blocks on access – or not?

One of the potential responses to online risks for children is to implement age restrictions and blocks on access to digital tools that may facilitate direct participation in hostilities, such as apps that allow civilians to collect and share with authorities militarily-relevant information. Other measures that provide for age-appropriate child safety in digital applications have been outlined by the International Telecommunication Union (see [Guidelines for Policy-Makers on Child Online Protection, Geneva, 2020, p. 44](#) on tools, services and settings). Countries such as the UK, Australia and Ireland now require age verification measures to prevent children from accessing certain online content, with penalties for violations of the act including fines and potential criminal charges; Greece, Spain, France and Italy have [tested age-verification apps](#) for certain online content.

Caution and further research is needed on whether age restrictions on access are in children's interest: such measures have also [prompted concern](#) about their misuse for over-restriction on freedom of speech; their requirements to turn over personal data to link offline identity with online behaviour; and their efficacy, given the ubiquity of VPNs and other online loopholes available to tech-savvy Gen-Zers.

In view of this need for careful, context-specific assessment, the recent outcome of the [Global IHL Initiative ICT Workstream](#) features nuanced language. It recommends that states “consider” age restrictions “where appropriate”, with a narrow focus on “digital tools that could amount to direct participation in hostilities” rather than social media or gaming platforms more broadly. Among other things informing considerations of age-restriction policies, the best interests of affected children must be central.

5. We need to know more: fund research

6. Use global and regional multilateral fora to end online child recruitment and use

Global and regional fora seized of issues related to ICTs, armed conflict, or child protection are opportunities to build shared understandings among states on this new risk for children, and to develop concrete measures to address it. Several recent examples are notable and should be built on.

In 2024, outcome documents at the [Global Ministerial Conference to End Violence Against Children](#), and at the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent ([Resolution 2, notably PP9 and OP13](#)), raised concern about the online recruitment of children and outlined responsive action. In 2025, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), UNODC and the League of Arab States convened a [“Combating Online Exploitation, Abuse, and Recruitment of Children in Conflict Zones” workshop](#) of ten countries to strengthen national frameworks.

More recently in March 2026, the UN Human Rights Council adopted its first-ever resolution dedicated to child rights in armed conflict, including encouragement of “efforts to prevent and address the online recruitment and exploitation of children by armed actors” and identification of prevention measures ([UN HRC Res. A/HRC/RES/61/21](#), para. 9). More squarely dealing with the digital domain, in July 2026 the UN Global Mechanism on ICTs in International Security began its work. The [ICRC's working paper](#) highlighted online child recruitment as a key ICT threat.

Finally, between 2024 and 2026 the use of ICTs to commit, encourage or facilitate violations of IHL, including those related to the recruitment or use of children in hostilities, was addressed in five rounds of global consultations and other regional and multistakeholder engagements as part of the [Global IHL Initiative's ICT Workstream](#). The workstream's [Outcome Document](#) provides practical guidance on how to prevent and respond to child recruitment or use through ICT activities. Now there must be equal attention to implementing such measures.

In the context of these global processes, we encourage states to:

- Recall the prohibition of unlawful recruitment and use of children in hostilities, and affirm that they apply to acts committed through, encouraged or facilitated by ICTs;
- Identify measures to prevent child recruitment and use in hostilities through ICTs, and prosecute violations;
- Exchange knowledge and good practices – including with the tech sector and civil society – regarding the best measures to protect children from the specific risk of recruitment and use in hostilities posed by the use of ICTs in armed conflicts.

The ways in which children are drawn into armed conflict may be changing, but the obligations to protect them are not: ensuring that these protections are effective online must now become a priority for states, parties to armed conflict and the wider international community.

References

[1] Resolution 2 of the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1995 recommended that parties to conflict “take every feasible step to ensure that children under the age of 18 years do not take part in hostilities”.

Related articles

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