



ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION

**IBA 2026** COPENHAGEN  
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Saleh, 15, using crutches and holding a Choose Love drawing, Syria

Credit: Hand in Hand / Save The Children

# The International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)



## Showcase Session Save The Children

**5 October 2026**

**IBA Annual Conference 2026 Copenhagen**

Supported by



# Opening remarks



Dear colleagues and friends,

Long before we became lawyers, before we understood rights or obligations, someone chose to protect us. That same act of care is the debt we owe to the next generation. Today, for millions of children across the world, that debt is going unpaid.

Children are being trafficked, recruited into armed groups, forced into marriage, and subjected to sexual violence. They are fleeing wars they did not start, denied the classroom and the clinic that every child deserves. These are no abstractions, and the session will dive into these lived realities of girls and boys who need more than sympathy. They need action.

This session asks us a direct question: Is the international legal framework doing enough? The honest answer is that it is not, not yet. But that is precisely why we are here. We are architects of rules and guardians of rights. If anyone can narrow the gap between what the law promises a child and what it delivers – in Sudan, in Gaza, on the roads out of Ukraine – it is us.

As Honorary Life President of the IBA, I can tell you that our Association is at its finest when it joins forces with institutions such as Save the Children and lends its collective weight to causes that transcend our individual practices and jurisdictions. We do not stand alone. This session, and your presence here today, are proof that real progress is within reach.

Today, we will learn from world-class experts. We will also learn from a young boy and a young girl from Ukraine, whose voices carry more authority on this subject than any treaty commentary ever could. Listen to them.

I leave you with one thought. There is a word we hesitate to use in legal circles: utopia. Let's apply it now. We can think of the best imaginable way for interacting with others to build a world more worthy of its youngest inhabitants. This is not naïve, it is essential. And if enough of us treat it as a present obligation rather than a distant dream, we will see it happen.

The children of this world are not someone else's responsibility. They are ours; yours and mine. Let this conference be the moment we each decide to act.

Almudena Arpón de Mendivil

*IBA Honorary Life President; IBA President, 2023–2024*

*Partner, Gómez-Acebo & Pombo, Spain.*

# Session overview and running order

This session will look into a wide range of issues faced by children around the world – particularly in the context of conflict, fragility, violence and poverty – which currently affect more than one in five children. It will also consider whether individual legal jurisdictions are responsive in protecting children, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child.

## ■ Welcome

Almudena Arpón de Mendivil

*IBA Honorary Life President; IBA President, 2023–2024*

## ■ Keynote

Steve Crawshaw

## ■ Interview with Ukrainian Children

## ■ PANEL 1 Children in Conflict: Protection, Accountability and the Reality on the Ground

*Moderator*

Baroness Helena Kennedy KC

*Speakers*

Judge Theodor Meron CMG

Hamza Al-Kateab

Shahbad Sabir

Richard Bennett

## ■ PANEL 2 Strengthening the Legal Framework: Child Rights, Gender, Technology and Accountability

*Moderator*

Baroness Helena Kennedy KC

*Speakers*

Rangita de Silva de Alwis

Dr Grace Agcaoili Esq

Mariya Gabriel

Flávia Piovesan

# Speaker and contributor credentials

## *Moderator*

**Baroness Helena Kennedy KC** is one of the UK's leading human rights lawyers and a member of the House of Lords, with decades of experience advancing justice, human rights and the rule of law internationally.

## *Speakers*

**Dr Grace Agcaoili Esq.**, UNICEF's Global Technical Lead on Justice for Children, is a global expert on child rights, justice systems and policy reforms aimed at strengthening protection and access to justice for children worldwide.

**Richard Bennett** is a UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, with extensive experience in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries.

**Steve Crawshaw**, author of 'Prosecuting the Powerful', has written and worked on the themes of human rights and justice for more than 30 years. He is also former UK Director of Human Rights Watch.

**Mariya Gabriel** is the Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information at UNESCO. A former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, she previously served as European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, as well as Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society. With extensive experience in international policy, digital transformation, education and innovation, she is a leading advocate for inclusive knowledge societies and global cooperation.

**Hamza Al-Kateab** is a Syrian lived-experience advocate and internationally recognised speaker whose personal story provides a powerful perspective on the impact of conflict, displacement and the importance of protecting children affected by war.

**Judge Theodor Meron CMG** is a Holocaust survivor and former President of international war crimes tribunals and is one of the world's foremost authorities on international humanitarian law, human rights and accountability for atrocities.

**Flávia Piovesan** is Professor of Constitutional Law and Human Rights at the Catholic University of São Paulo and holds a PhD in Constitutional Law. She has been a visiting fellow at Harvard Law School, the University of Oxford and the Max Planck Institute. A São Paulo State Attorney since 1991, she was appointed Brazil's Special Secretary for Human Rights in 2016. Internationally, she has served on UN and OAS human rights bodies, with particular expertise in human rights, equality and social, economic and cultural rights.

**Shahd Sabir**, Child Protection Specialist with Save the Children Sudan, brings frontline humanitarian experience and direct insight into the challenges facing children and families affected by the conflict in Sudan.

**Rangita de Silva de Alwis**, a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), is an internationally recognised expert on human rights, gender equality and the rights of women and children.

# Ukrainian youth

Hanna (18 years old) is a youth advocate and advisor at the Office for Children and Youth under Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy. Having experienced displacement herself, she is committed to strengthening support for vulnerable children and young people, particularly those affected by conflict, institutional care and social exclusion. Alongside her policy work, Hanna has led humanitarian initiatives supporting communities affected by crises and has collaborated with youth movements and international organisations, including Save the Children. She is also a member of Save the Children Ukraine's Child Rights Champions and Youth Ambassadors group. Hanna brings both lived experience and professional expertise to discussions on child rights, inclusion and ensuring that children's voices are heard in decisions that affect their lives.

Denys (16 years old) is a youth leader from Ukraine who continues to live in a frontline-affected area. He actively participates in youth councils and initiatives at both local and national levels, advocating for meaningful youth participation in decision-making. As a member of the National Youth Council under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, he advocates for meaningful youth participation in decision-making and works to ensure that young people's voices are reflected in education and public policy. Through his volunteer work, training initiatives and community engagement, Denys brings a first-hand perspective on the realities facing children and young people growing up amid conflict, and on the importance of protecting their rights to safety, education and participation. He is also a member of Save the Children Ukraine's Child Rights Champions and Youth Ambassadors group.

# An open letter to world leaders from the children and youth of Ukraine

Dear World Leaders,

A country cannot lose if its children believe in it. And we believe. We are the children and youth of Ukraine. And we have already lived through three different lives. We remember peace. We live in war. And we are already thinking about recovery. Because we are the ones who will live here. We will dream here. We will build the future here. And we want you to hear us.

We want to give you a glimpse into our daily lives. We have studied by candlelight. We sat in bomb shelters instead of classrooms. Some of us took exams right after a night interrupted by air raid sirens. Some have fled their homes and still do not know whether they will ever return. Some of us have disabilities, and for them, every single day has been twice as hard. Sometimes it is very difficult to find the strength to keep going. Sometimes you just want someone next to you to say, "Everything will be fine." But we do not stop. We keep going. Because we do not give up.

We know that you, adults, are now deciding what our country will look like. But if these decisions are made without us, many of us will simply leave. Not because we do not love Ukraine. But because we will not feel that this country is ours too. And then, there will be no one left to build a new society. Those who fight against us think they will win. But they have already lost. Because we are here. We are writing this letter. And we do not give up.

We did not choose this war. But children suffer the most from it. We did not choose to learn in bomb shelters, sleep through air-raid sirens, leave our homes, or grow up too fast. Who will pay reparations for a lost childhood?

Everyone says that the voice of children matters. But being heard is not enough. We need real action. Ask children what they need. Allow us to participate in decisions regarding our rights, safety, and future. Create mechanisms through which children can truly influence the decisions that affect their lives—with the opportunity to be heard, receive an answer, and see results.

Help bring Ukrainian children back to their families. Children who were taken to Russia and children living in occupied territories must not be forgotten. Help find them, protect them, and return them to their families. Help us document what happened to them.

We also ask you to protect our right to education. We have adapted, but willpower cannot replace childhood. We need safe and accessible schools, stable access to learning, and support for teachers.

And psychological support shouldn't only begin after trauma. It should be free, ongoing, and accessible to every child.

Children's rights have no borders. What is happening to children in Ukraine today must become a lesson and a responsibility for the whole world. Childhood cannot be brought back—protect it right now.

A country cannot lose if its children believe in it. We believe. Deeply. Take us with you, and together, we will make it happen.

With love and hope,

Network of Child Champions and Youth Ambassadors,

Save the Children Ukraine

# The IBAHRI's work

The International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) is an autonomous and financially independent entity within the International Bar Association, working with the global legal community to promote and protect human rights and the independence of the legal profession worldwide. Its mission is to advance human rights and an independent legal profession under a just rule of law, with a global portfolio spanning regions and continents.

The IBAHRI works to address threats to law, policy, institutions and practice that challenge human rights and the rule of law, providing recommendations for legal and policy reform at national, regional and international levels. Its work includes human rights training and technical assistance, international fact-finding and expert reporting, advocacy and trial monitoring, and support for lawyers and judges facing harassment, intimidation or arbitrary arrest. Its thematic work also focuses on key human rights issues, including equality, non-discrimination and the independence of the legal profession.

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# Save The Children's work

Save the Children is a global humanitarian organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children around the world. Founded in 1919, the organisation supports children affected by poverty, conflict, natural disasters and health emergencies. In 2025, Save the Children directly supported 37.8 million children in 92 countries around the world. They work hand in hand with children and young people, as well as many partners and supporters worldwide.

Save the Children's Emergency Fund exists to ensure teams around the world are prepared to help families be ready, respond and recover from emergencies. Thanks to its Emergency Fund, Save the Children responds rapidly when a crisis hits, getting children the basics – food, water, medicine and temporary shelters – and works with families to restore education and livelihoods.

To find out more about how your business can support children through crisis and make change that lasts generations, contact Hannah Wilson: [h.wilson@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:h.wilson@savethechildren.org.uk)

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# Closing remarks from Baroness Kennedy

Dear colleagues and friends,

Armed conflict, displacement, poverty, exploitation and violence are affecting children on an unprecedented scale. It is now reported that more than one in six children are living in conflict zones, highlighting the immense challenges facing a generation of children whose rights should be protected under international law.

The international community has established a strong legal framework for the protection of children, most notably through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, as we see conflicts persist and humanitarian crises deepen, we must ask whether these legal protections are being adequately upheld and enforced. The challenge is not simply the absence of international standards, but the gap between the rights that children are guaranteed in law and the reality of their lives.



Our Showcase Forum, 'The World and Its Children: The Grave Legal Challenges to Protecting the Wellbeing and Rights of the Child', brings together leading voices from the legal, humanitarian and human rights communities to examine these challenges. We will consider the particular impact of conflict on children, including in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, and explore how international and domestic legal frameworks can do more to protect children and hold those responsible for violations to account.

I am delighted that the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute is presenting this Forum in partnership with Save the Children. I hope it will provide an opportunity not only to reflect on the grave challenges facing children today, but also to identify practical steps that we, as members of the international legal community, can take to strengthen their protection.

The rights of children cannot be treated as optional or aspirational. They are fundamental human rights and protecting them is a shared responsibility. I look forward to welcoming you to this important discussion in Copenhagen.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Helena A. Kennedy".

Baroness Helena Kennedy KC

# Thank you

Thank you to the IBA, Save The Children and the IBAHRI team.

Many thanks to our endorsing IBA committees: the Women Lawyers' Committee, the Latin American Regional Forum, the North American Regional Forum, the Human Rights Law Committee, the Arab Regional Forum, the Family Law Committee, the Rule Of Law Forum and the European Regional Forum.

Rama, 3, holds up a drawing, Syria



Credit: Save The Children

A montage created by Shehab, 16, in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan.

Below text translation: 'Women of the world, unite!'

Credit: Kate Stanworth / Shehab\* / Save the Children



A montage created by Alva, 13, in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

Below text translation: 'We want to have our voices heard too'

Credit: Kate Stanworth / Alva\* / Save the Children



Credit: Hamid Abdulsalam / Save the Children



Musa, 15, looking at the armoured vehicle that he drew

Credit: Anwar Adam / Save the Children



A letter by Heba\* - Korean and Sudanese children exchange letters and drawings as part of an initiative to connect with children in war-impacted countries. The letter says: 'Hi, I want to say thank you to the children of Korea for this exchange. I wish to go back to Khartoum, where I am from, and for the conflict there to end. I really want to continue my education and go back to school. I hope all children can return to school too. I love praying, especially Friday prayers. One day, I dream of becoming a doctor.'

Credit: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



Saleem, 14, lost everyone in his family apart from his mother during the war in Gaza

Credit: Esther Mbabazi / Save the Children



Eva, 10, holds up her drawing that she made when in class while at the Child Friendly Space after fleeing the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo



## Human Rights Institute

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