



Quaker Peace
& Social Witness

Peaceworker journal letter from London

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CHILD SOLDIERS INTERNATIONAL

Dear Friends,

I am working at Child Soldiers International (CSI) in London. The organisation began as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in the 1990s and was at first run by representatives from existing organisations (with Quakers strongly represented!). It's great working at an organisation with such an incredible history; the Coalition was a significant force in the development of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, on Children and Armed Conflict – or OPAC, as it is more simply known. The treaty banned the use of children under the age of 18 in active hostilities and committed states to not recruit children under the age of 16 into their armed forces. A lot of the work CSI does now, in its new form as an independent organisation, is focused on translating these legal commitments into real change for children around the world.

Most of this work relates to conflict-affected countries where we might commonly think of 'child soldiers' being located. However, as my colleague said in a recent speech, we

shouldn't think of children in the military as a problem limited to the global south. While there are important differences in context, there are also many minors recruited in the armed forces of prosperous states. This brings me to my area of work; I work on the campaign for the UK to raise the age of recruitment to 18. The UK has a regrettable record on this issue. It was one of the states which pushed for a minimum age of enlistment of 16 rather than 18 for states in the negotiation of the OPAC treaty. Today around a quarter of the British Army's new recruits each year are under-18, which is an unusually high proportion. At 16, many of them are younger than any other recruits in Europe.

Before starting my placement I hadn't thought very deeply about the British military beyond its role in international politics, and so there has been a great deal to learn. It has been fascinating learning about the workings of the armed forces and experiencing the very constricted nature of the political debate that takes place around them. I have been particularly moved by the testimony of veterans who speak out against injustices, often with the weight of stigma and secrecy against them, and it is these

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testimonies that spur me on the most when the wider discourse feels frustrating. It has also been interesting learning about the relevant human rights and children's rights laws and the mechanisms for implementing them. Very early on in my placement I was lucky enough to witness this first-hand, as I went on a trip to the United Nations in Geneva for the Human Rights Council. However, another big realisation I have had about human rights has been they are not the whole story! There are many rights that we believe are violated by the military recruitment of under-18s, but it is not enough simply to point this out; advocacy and campaigning work is necessary to make policymakers take notice and commit to change.

My day-to-day work involves trying to build this kind of momentum. We carry out research into the recruitment and training process for under-18s and into the impact of military service on those young people that do enlist. We try to get media coverage for the issue whenever we can. We ask for the support of influential organisations. And we try to start conversations with politicians to persuade them that the enlistment age should be raised to 18. As I am the only full-time member of staff dedicated to our UK program, the peacemaker scheme has brought a lot of extra capacity to the campaign. For me, this work has been a really useful introduction to campaign strategy, political lobbying and advocacy. I have already learnt a wide range of tools and tactics that will serve me well in any movement for change. I feel that I have been given responsibilities and opportunities to learn that I would have struggled to access without the peacemaker scheme!

One particular piece of the work that is close to my heart is a project to try and engage with audiences beyond major political institutions. The current political turmoil makes advocacy with parliament difficult and of limited use for the time being, which has given us an opportunity to think about shifting gears. I have been exploring ways of connecting the campaign to people who are more closely affected by it; by working with young people, and by campaigning more locally in area that is targeted for army recruitment. There are many challenges in trying to think about how to do this effectively and conscientiously, and I am not sure yet where this project will lead, but I hope the journey will be valuable.

It has been a busy and thought-provoking three months, and I know that I will get so much out of the year as a whole. Thank you to everyone who makes the scheme possible and to all the inspiring people who have been involved in setting us off on our year so far.

In peace,

Charlotte Cooper