

Independent Child Migration: Introducing Children's Perspectives

Overview

Since its establishment in 2003, the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty (Migration DRC) has undertaken research on independent child migrants in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Bangladesh and India. In the course of this research, the Migration DRC has identified a significant gap between how children see their own experiences of migration and the way that child migrants are often represented. In response to this, the Migration DRC has sought to highlight the views of migrant children in its work, in order to gain a better understanding of why children migrate and what difficulties they face in relation to their migrant status. This has informed a number of research-based policy recommendations designed to take into account the risks faced by child migrants.

Re-thinking children's mobility

Much of the recent research on child migration has focused on children who face particularly dire situations, including those who are coerced into migration and face highly exploitative conditions of labour at their destinations. However, while these adverse situations undoubtedly exist, the intensifying focus on trafficked children has increasingly obscured other forms of child migration which may bring some benefits to the children involved. Indeed, the Migration DRC's research on child migrants in South Asia and West Africa has shown that many of these children see migration as a way to access significantly better opportunities. Our research has focused on children who migrate 'independently' without their parents or guardians, although the decision to migrate may or may not be an autonomous one. These children migrate either within their home country or to a neighbouring country that is effectively part of the same labour market. While our research has occasionally dealt with the most vulnerable migrants, including street children, we have also deliberately sought out an under-researched sub-set of child migrants who have not permanently severed ties with their families and home communities.

The findings of the Migration DRC's studies have revealed a complex picture of independent child migration. A number of important aspects of children's migration have proven to be largely case-specific, including factors which 'trigger' child migration; the extent to which children play an active role in taking decisions to migrate; and whether children's migration is ultimately successful in improving their socio-economic status. It is inaccurate to simply conflate children's migration with child trafficking, and so a more nuanced understanding of children's migration is needed in order to develop policies which benefit all child migrants – not just those who face particularly exploitative situations.



A child selling fruit in the Ivory Coast. Many children in the Migration DRC's studies viewed migration for work as an opportunity to significantly improve their situations. Photo © ILO 1999.

The need to add children's voices to the debate

Children who leave home to work in villages, towns or cities often figure very negatively in national and international discourses. Street youth, in particular, are often portrayed by politicians and the media in developing countries as miscreants or petty criminals who lack proper adult supervision. Children who migrate in search of work may also be affected by the growing influence of Western-centric ideals

of childhood, which largely view children's employment as inappropriate. Intentionally or not, such ideals are frequently echoed by advocacy and programmes to eliminate child labour both at the national and international level, which often equate children's work and migration with the worst forms of child labour (defined in ILO Convention No. 182, adopted June 1991) or with trafficking (addressed in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted November 2002). Yet the voices of child migrants that have emerged in the Migration DRC's research have produced a more ambivalent picture of child migration which indicates that migration is often a self-betterment strategy for poor children in developing countries who lack other viable opportunities to improve their situations. These narratives suggest that efforts to simply prevent children's mobility do little to eliminate the root causes of child migration and risk further disadvantaging children from poor areas who migrate by choice.

Accounting for why children migrate

The vast majority of the child migrants in the Migration DRC's studies were adolescents who were aged 13 to 17 years of age at the time they first migrated. Many of these children were from poor rural areas with high rates of adult migration, where moving to find work was a common means of supplementing family incomes. While the migration experiences of children in the Migration DRC's studies ranged from good to very bad, children's perceptions of migration were found to be mostly positive. Indeed, migration was often viewed by children as a way to begin taking more responsibility for their own material needs. Many children interviewed in the Migration DRC's West African case studies, for example, saw migration as a vehicle to gain independence or to become more eligible for marriage. A number of the boys who migrated eventually took up apprenticeships after one or two years of working in the informal sector. These arrangements, while not particularly lucrative in the short-term, allowed some boys to learn trades which they could potentially use to make a living later on.

The 'pull' factors which made migration destinations attractive to children sometimes interacted in complex ways with 'push' factors that existed in their home communities. A Migration DRC study in Bangladesh, for example, indicated that poverty was the most prominent reason why children opted to leave home. However, this was at times compounded by other factors, such as maltreatment by parents or a general lack of opportunities in their home communities. A Migration DRC study in India's Udipi district, meanwhile, showed that quarrels between fathers and sons sometimes resulted in sons leaving home to find work, usually in hotels or restaurants in neighbouring districts. In most cases, these quarrels did not

mark a permanent rupture in the family, but constituted a temporary disagreement that was later resolved, although many of these boys continued to pursue migration for work. This contrasts with other research findings on migrant children who have permanently severed ties with their family's 'safety net'. Whether it was push or pull factors that prompted children to migrate, however, the majority of the children in the Migration DRC's studies indicated that they had played a major part in making the decision to migrate. This is a significant point which challenges the idea that children are simply passive in the face of adult decisions about their migration.

Children's views of their migration¹

Bakary, 18, left home at 13. When he was interviewed he was working as a shoe-shiner in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso:

'...when we walk around in search of customers, we see lots of things that we'd never seen in the village and we also get a better understanding of how life is. If you're hungry back home, you can make some tô [millet porridge] but here you'll need to get out your money, otherwise you won't eat. In my opinion, this is why migrant life in the city is a way to mature, because you'll know that without sweat you won't eat.'

Habiba, 13, was working as a kayayoo, or porter, at a market in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, when she was interviewed:

I developed the desire to come to Accra after observing those who have returned to my hometown [in Northern Ghana] from Accra. They have nice clothes, straightened hair and a lot of things like utensils and sewing machines. In our area also, when you are getting married and you have ever been to Accra to work, you are expected to have some things to show like three sets of utensils and basins. If you don't have these, you will be a laughing stock. I realised that those who come to Accra get access to a lot of things, particularly money, so I decided to come.'

Fatima, 13, was working as a domestic maid in Dhaka, Bangladesh, when she was interviewed:

I am the oldest in a family of six children. My father was afflicted by various diseases. He soon became disabled and could not support us. It was impossible for my mother to manage the family on her own. When I was ten years old, my mother sent me to Dhaka with a woman. This woman's business was to take women and children from the village and place them in people's homes as domestic help...I work from 6 a.m. in the morning until 11 p.m. at night...My main chores include cooking, washing clothes and cleaning the house....I am given sufficient food. I earn Taka 600 per month. I send the money to my mother...I miss home and I am lonely'.

Constraints, risks and coping strategies

Even in cases where children view migration as a positive opportunity, the fulfilment of their expectations of migration is often constrained by a number of factors. Indeed, when stressing the positive side of children's migration, it is important to not lose sight of the structural inequalities that affect many migrant children and their families. In rural areas, the quality of schooling is usually of a comparatively poor standard, and children from poor families typically do not possess the financial resources to access better educational opportunities. A lack of educational qualifications can limit the types of jobs children seek when they migrate from the countryside to cities – and often leads to them finding low-skilled work in the informal sector. Prescribed gender roles can shape children's migration experiences as well. In both South Asia and West Africa, girls and boys largely work in very different types of jobs, and opportunities for girls tend to be much more restricted, with domestic work being common. In addition to these constraints, children often lack a nuanced understanding of their migration destinations, making them unprepared for risks they may face, especially when moving from rural areas to cities. These challenges are compounded by negative discourses surrounding child migrants, which may make migrant children a target of local law enforcement at their destinations.

A Migration DRC study of child migrants who move from rural areas in northern Ghana to the cities of Accra and Kumasi to work informally as porters in large markets showed that such children face a number of risks. The children earn money from shoppers by carrying their purchases at market, but their earnings are usually not enough to cover accommodation, food and health needs. These young girls and boys typically lack proper lodging, often sleeping in groups in front of businesses for a small nightly fee. They are sometimes poorly paid by customers and may face harassment from police and night watchmen at markets. Many children do not earn enough

Child migration in National Surveys:

The Migration DRC is in the process of adding a child migration component to its Migration in National Surveys catalogue — which provides information on migration through access to censuses, and nationally representative data such as Living Standards Measurement Surveys and Demographic and Health Surveys. The new child migration component includes an outline of what information is available in each country's dataset about migrant children, including what ages of children are covered and what types of children's movements are captured. The Migration in National Surveys catalogue can be accessed at this web address: http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/resource_guides/Migration_Nationalsurveys/index.html.

to eat more than one or two meals a day and sometimes face health risks related to unsanitary living conditions. In response to these risks, many child migrants establish informal safety nets by forming bonds with other children from their home region, which allows them to collectively pay for food and medicine. Some child migrants have siblings or other relatives living in the city that they can occasionally call on in times of need. These support networks are limited in their scope, however, and underscore the need for more robust forms of protection for child migrants.

Pathways for policy

The Migration DRC's research on independent child migration suggests a number of policy areas that must be addressed:

- programmes and policies that alleviate the regional and rural poverty and inequality that contribute to high levels of adult and child migration are urgently needed. Potential areas for programmes to address include support of income-generating activities in under-developed regions, increased funding of formal and vocational education for poor youth, improving the quality of education in poor rural areas and campaigns in rural areas that improve the status of children and highlight the universal right to education;
- there is also a need to mobilise discussions about young people's working conditions and rights. Support should be given to children's working organisations, and efforts should be made to establish trade union support of legal child workers. Better coordination between government agencies, NGOs and civil society groups is needed to provide protection measures for child migrants, including health care, food and shelter;
- advocacy work and policies are needed which challenge the widespread stigmatisation of migrant children. Open and sensitive national and regional debates should be encouraged in order to establish what constitutes locally acceptable forms of children's work. In addition to this, information campaigns on children's migration are needed to communicate a more balanced understanding of child migration to the general public;
- there is a need for a re-assessment of international definitions of trafficking and the dominance of this category in the debates about and the interventions around child migration. Systems of support and recourse need to be built for *all* working children in hardship, not simply those who have been trafficked.

¹Children's views of their migration in this policy briefing are taken from the Migration DRC publication, *Voices of Child Migrants: "A Better Understanding of How Life Is"*, which features the personal stories of child migrants from Ghana, Burkina Faso, India, and Bangladesh. It is available for download online at: http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/other_publications/Voices_of_Children.pdf.

Key Readings

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Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

The Migration DRC aims to promote policy approaches that will help to maximize the potential benefits of migration for poor people, whilst minimising its risks and costs. Since 2003, the Migration DRC has undertaken a programme of research, capacity-building, training and promotion of dialogue to provide the strong evidential and conceptual base needed for such policy approaches. This knowledge base has also been shared with poor migrants, with the aim of contributing both directly and indirectly to the elimination of poverty. The Migration DRC is funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development, although the views expressed in this policy briefing do not necessarily express DFID's official policy.

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