

Session Five: Independent Child Migration

Children Moving on Their Own in Developing Countries

Ann Whitehead, University of Sussex

Ann Whitehead started her presentation by explaining what was meant by 'independent child migration within developing countries' and explained the research carried out by the Migration DRC in this area in Bangladesh, Ghana, Burkina Faso and India. A brief report on the main findings of these studies was presented, supported by qualitative insights from interviews with child migrants which pointed out that the motives surrounding child migration are more than purely economic and include aspirations towards maturity and self-betterment. In the cases of both West Africa and South Asia, child migration was especially prevalent in areas with high rates of adult migration.

The main point that was made is that not all child migrants are 'victims' who are forced to move – indeed some actually choose to do so, even if they are often perceived by outsiders and researchers as not having other choices. This common misinterpretation is linked to an over representation of child migration as necessarily involving child trafficking. In the second part of the presentation an overview of the legal and human rights framework for the defence of children was presented and assessed in light of the Migration DRC's research findings, which highlighted the complexity of the decision-making processes among children. Whitehead noted that the current definitions of child trafficking can inadvertently make many child migrants more vulnerable, and she proposed a wider conceptualisation of child migration, which does not portray children as neither 'heroes' or 'victims' but which aims to promote a more realistic picture of child migrants, many of whom resourcefully migrate from underdeveloped rural areas in search of better opportunities.

Impact of Migration on Children Left Behind in Developing Countries

Andrea Rossi, Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government

Andrea Rossi's presentation began by stressing the importance of children in the decisions of their parents to migrate, reminding the audience that one of the most common reasons for people to migrate is to provide a better future for their children. Children are affected by their parents' decision to migrate in diverse ways: they may eventually move themselves, joining their parents or relatives in a new community or country; they may go for long periods without seeing one, or perhaps both, of their parents; and their lives may be shaped by a collective experience of coming from communities where migration is a common occurrence. Rossi stressed the importance of looking at the multiple dimensions of the impact of migration on the well-being of children by taking into consideration different aspects of their lives such as education, economic activities, health and psycho-social factors – all of which are interrelated.

In terms of available quantitative data, migration has been shown to have positive effects on children's health, with migrant households being linked to lower child mortality rates and better nutrition for children. However, macro-data figures on migration show it has a mixed impact on children's schooling, in some cases providing funds which allow children to stay in school longer, in other cases making households more dependent on children's labour in the absence of adults. The psycho-social costs of migration may be very great for children, as they may spend significant amounts of time apart from their parents, or in cases where they migrate they may be forced to cope with negative attitudes towards migrants. These costs, however, are extremely difficult to measure.

Whether they stay behind or move to a new location, children are intricately bound up in migration processes. More needs to be done to bring the challenges faced by 'migrant households' to the attention of policymakers, who often narrowly focus on policies which only address the specific issues faced by migrants themselves.

Mobility of Children and Youth in West Africa: Re-imagining West African Societies
Guy Massart, Plan International

Guy Massart's presentation focused on Plan International's work in West Africa. He stressed the need to avoid generalisations when thinking in terms of child migration and he pointed to diverse causes of child mobility within West Africa, specifically in Niger and Guinea Bissau. He stressed the positive connotations that being mobile brings for West African youth – 'in Niger if you don't move, you are a loser, no woman will want to marry you'. He discussed the need for academics and policymakers to re-imagine how rural life-cycles unfold. For example, most children in West Africa learn to farm by the time they are seven years old; by the time they are 11 or 12 years old, many children are working independently. In short, many children in West Africa develop a sense of responsibility at a very young age.

Massart pointed out that the idea that migrating at an early age generates a trauma is overestimated – indeed, children in West Africa who *do not* move, especially girls, may be traumatized through local conditions or practices, perhaps to a greater extent than most child migrants in the region. Child migration often forms an integral part of children's pursuit of their dreams, as migration gives them a better chance to be a 'somebody'. The role that 'miracles makers' such as footballers, dancers, wrestlers have on the collective imagination of children is important to acknowledge here. Thus, migration serves partly as an instrument to broaden children's life-worlds and opportunities.

Discussant: Jo Boyden, Young Lives Project, Oxford University.

Jo Boyden highlighted the merits and the contributions of each paper. In particular, she mentioned Rossi's creative use of quantitative data and both Whitehead and Massart's qualitative insights into child migration, stressing how rare it is to actually find research on children which is focused on the children themselves. In particular, Boyden stressed the importance of looking at migration as a natural human process, as a product of aspirations, which for children also reflect the eagerness to become fully-fledged adults.

She noted that the presentations' sensitive approaches to child migration contrasted sharply with the normative approach, which is focused on notions of child trafficking and the forced movement of children. She argued that this focus is partly due to a Western fixation on 'dangerous strangers' and the idea that children are in danger if they are not looked after by their families. Related to this point is the idea that we need to control children, and that migrating will induce a change in values or behaviours which are negative for children. This is often accompanied by the notion that the household is the only possible healthy option for a child, while other options are never to be considered. Boyden emphasised how the session presented a new focus on those issues by highlighting the gains and the potential benefits that migration may have for children. These are not historically isolated examples, she said, but are part of a long historical trend of human migration, which children have been involved in to a considerable degree.

General discussion

Question overview: Conference participants asked for more clarification of the terminology used to describe child trafficking/migration in the West African context and what kinds of policies should be pursued to support child migrants. The concept of child agency generated a number of questions, including whether advocating for child agency would serve to justify structural forces and push factors behind children's decisions to migrate, such as the failure of governments to pursue better policies in underdeveloped regions. The question of how to balance the legal age of adulthood with the local lifecycles was also raised. The issue of the numbers of child migrants in West Africa was raised, as was the concern that increasing the profile of child migrants might make governments who otherwise ignore them more eager to stop their movement.

Whitehead clarified that her work on child migration was not meant to condone the failure of governments to eliminate the 'push' factors of migration – or to claim that the conditions which perpetuate high migration rates are acceptable. Nevertheless, the present discourse on child migration serves to exacerbate the situation of many child migrants, who are often seeking to escape from difficult economic situations, by contributing to negative portrayals of child migrants.

In terms of the human rights debate, the panellists stressed that even though the theoretical framework offered by the recognition of the rights of the child is valid and important, in practice these conventions are not working very well for migrants. The panellists pointed to the failure of the education system in West Africa in supporting the children and advocated for a more pragmatic view when thinking in terms of future policies in this area. They emphasised that if their presentations seemed provocative, it was because they were trying to challenge the normative view that 'children should stay at home'. If people move it is because they want a better life. This is a sign of the failure of the state but there is no point in trying to stop migrants – children included – as this will only make their situation worse.

The panellists stressed that child migrants often lack access to basic services, such as healthcare or education, especially when they cross national borders illegally. More programmes are needed to help eradicate poverty in areas with high amounts of child migration, and an acknowledgement of the social protection child migrants require is also needed. Sensitive debates at the national and regional level about what constitutes acceptable labour for children to undertake are also needed.

The session chair, Stephen Kwankye of ISSER, concluded the session by stating that more research is needed in order to better understand why children migrate, as this is by no means a one-dimensional process. Children who migrate do not do so solely to escape poverty but may have other goals and desires in mind as well.