



Migration and Development: Building Migration into Development Strategies
Migration DRC Conference, Royal Society, London, 28–29 April 2008

Session Five: Independent Child Migration

Overview

Much recent research on child migration has focused on children facing particularly dire situations, including child trafficking. While such situations undoubtedly exist, research conducted by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty (Migration DRC) reveals that children are not always 'victims' of migration processes. In many cases poor children view migration as a significant opportunity that allows them to exercise their own life choices, improve economic opportunities and sometimes earn funds for their education. Our research on independent child migration in West Africa and South Asia indicates that many child migrants come from areas with a history of adult migration. The experiences of the child migrants we studied were diverse, as young migrants were positively or negatively affected by the existence of extended family networks, established gender roles and the expectations of their parents.

Links with adult migration

Migration DRC research in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Bangladesh and India has focused on children who migrate independently, without their parents or guardians, either within their home country or to a neighbouring country. These child migrants tend to come from poor areas where there are high rates of adult migration. In such areas, there is often an existing culture of migration, and moving to find work is embedded within local livelihood strategies. In such contexts, migration may represent the possibility of significantly better opportunities, and the migration of children is often looked upon positively. Only a small minority of the children in our studies had 'run away'. Indeed, many young people felt they gained emancipation and maturity through migration.

In Burkina Faso, for example, Migration DRC research showed that child migration often occurs with the help of extended family networks. Fostering in West Africa is a long-standing and widespread tradition, which entails calling on extended family relationships in ways that enable the movement of children. This migration to live with relatives other than the parents is certainly not seen as signifying a rupture of the family. Instead, it is viewed as an opportunity by both the children and adults involved.

Re-assessing child agency

Many children interviewed by DRC researchers asserted that it had been their decision to migrate or that they had played a large part in making the decision. However, the reasons

why child migrants left home were diverse. In Bangladesh, poverty seemed to be the main reason why children move, with impoverishment at times linked to maltreatment at home. In India, a study in Karnataka's Mandya district in 1998 suggested that the conflicts and quarrels that triggered boys to leave home rarely involved permanent family breakdown, but reflected a temporary deterioration in relations between fathers and sons. In our 2004–05 study in Udipi district, in contrast, boys were not so much running away as negotiating hard to be permitted to migrate. In short, both children and parents exercise agency in relation to migration, and the notion of conflict between parents and children regarding migration decisions is a complex one.

Importantly, while children often see migration as an opportunity, their agency may be constrained. Children's sense of their options is determined by their often limited circumstances. This may lead them to underestimate the risks and vulnerabilities of migrating and leave them with little choice as to their working and living conditions.

Gendered experiences of migration

The experience of child migrants is influenced by their gender, although this varies greatly with the context. In Ghana, boys' work is more valued and they are more embedded in the social, cultural and economic relations of their communities. They have more economic responsibilities (both short- and long-term) and more leverage in negotiations with parents over their ambitions to migrate and their livelihood choices. Girls' work, much of which is domestic, is less valued and parents expect to lose them as

family members when they move to their husbands' homes upon marriage. Other family members who have themselves migrated often request girls to come and 'help' them and parents send them. However, many girls want to earn their own incomes and livelihoods and, if opportunities are limited in their home communities, this may spur them to migrate.

Child migration and education

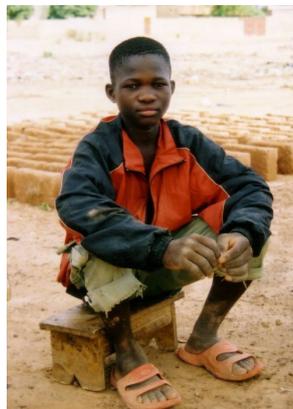
Links between migration and education are also complex and often context-specific. Our research indicated that most child migrants were not in school before migration, or had given up school to migrate. In coastal Karnataka, in India, the educational aspirations of parents tended to be very high, and independent child migrants tended to be educational misfits. This contrasts quite starkly with the Upper East region in Ghana, where education had little value given the limited labour market for educated persons.

In both Ghana and Bangladesh, foster children moving in with another family to undertake domestic work sometimes replaced children of that family who had been sent away to attend school, underlining local inequalities. In Bangladesh, only a very small percentage of children migrated independently in order to pursue education, although some hoped to earn enough to return to it later. Child migration is not negatively associated with education in all cases, as children were often fostered, or actively sought fostering in order to find the funds to eventually go back into education or vocational training. Migration was also undertaken from areas where educational opportunities were limited to areas where access to education was better.

Gaps in services for child migrants

Negative attitudes towards the poor, in general, and towards child migration, in particular, mean that young migrants are often stigmatised and there are few services to support them. They also may have difficulty in accessing health care and education. International campaigns against child labour and child trafficking unfortunately can have adverse effects on child migrants. In instances where child migrants cross international borders they may be entering countries illegally, meaning they often lack access to basic services such as health care and education. Evidence shows that in practice

many states give priority to immigration status and not to children's rights, which increases their risk of exploitation.



Migration and opportunity in Burkina Faso

Migration DRC research suggests that independent child migration may be viewed by parents and children alike as an opportunity to develop improved livelihoods and other life chances.

Photo courtesy of Dorte Thorsen.

Pathways for policy

Migration DRC research suggests that a number of steps are needed in order to develop policies which offset the risks faced by independent child migrants, including:

- the provision of services to support young migrants;
- measures to ensure that education is a universal right for all children, regardless of work status or migrant status, including steps to allow migrant children to access school, non-formal education or training;
- open and sensitive national and regional debates to establish what is locally acceptable and unacceptable child labour, and which address young people's working conditions and rights;
- programmes that alleviate the regional and rural poverty that trigger high levels of adult and child migration;
- 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 need to be built for *all* working children in hardship, not simply those who have been trafficked;
- and states supporting child migrants' rights rather than penalising them because of their migrant status.

For more information

To find out more about Migration DRC's research please email us at migration@sussex.ac.uk. Access to Migration DRC's working papers is available at www.migrationdrc.org.

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