



JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Book Review: Child Migration and Human Rights in a Global Age by Jacqueline Bhabha

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (August 2018), pp. 188 - 190

Published by: Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/42486>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17609/nf7d-kh37>

REFERENCES:

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Naidoo, Jordan. 2018. "Book Review: Child Migration and Human Rights in a Global Age by Jacqueline Bhabha." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 4 (1): 188-90.

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BOOK REVIEW

CHILD MIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN A GLOBAL AGE

BY JACQUELINE BHABHA

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. 392 PAGES

\$24.95 (PAPER)

ISBN 978-0-691-16910-1

Migration affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide. At the end of 2016, 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, more than half of whom were children (UNHCR 2018). Noting that this trend is likely to continue, that the issue of child migration is complex, and that children migrate for multiple reasons, Jacqueline Bhabha's insightful and sobering reflection on this much-neglected issue in the global discourse goes far in shedding light on a "largely untold and unanalysed story" (p. 1). Recognizing that far too many child migrants are denied their rights and that there is little consideration for their needs as children, the book illuminates the gaps in protection and in guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents affected by migration. A key take-away from the book is that "child migrants need to be viewed as agents whose aspirations are relevant to institutional decision-making" (p. 10).

While noting the enormous and ongoing oversights of the international bodies and agencies, governments, and civil society groups involved in the response to child migrants, Bhabha identifies a change since the late 1990s. She notes that, cognisant of the urgent need to better understand and respond to this phenomenon, these organizations are increasingly engaged in a dialogue on children and adolescents affected by migration (see, e.g., Human Rights Council 2016). Bhabha observes that a more recent recognition of the complexity of child migration is "reflected in a more differentiated categorical lexicon and more thoughtful policy articulation" (p. 5). Yet alongside acknowledging such positive developments, Bhabha alerts us to the myriad of deeply troubling examples of how states, NGOs, and national laws and policies still fail migrant children by ignoring their needs and negating their rights, despite the spate of international human rights instruments, policies, and measures at their disposal.

Covering a broad spectrum of cases, the book is organized across three categories of child migrants—family-related migration (family reunion and adoption); exploitation-related migration (child trafficking and armed conflict-linked recruitment); and survival-related migration (asylum and economics). Utilizing this tripartite structure, Bhabha bases her analysis on concrete examples across a plethora of migration situations, and on a discussion of various legal instruments and policies both national and international.

A constant theme of the book is that “human rights protections become practice only if enforced by vigorous agents” (p. 30), and Bhabha poses a key question in this regard: “How can unprotected child and adolescent migrants—the majority of whom have no access to guardianship, to legal representation, to competent advocacy—translate the principles of international law into meaningful human rights protections?” (p. 11). This has particular relevance for the fulfillment of migrant children’s right to education, not least in emergency and conflict-affected contexts.

Bhabha makes a strong case that concerns about child labor and limited educational opportunity do not justify treating all migrant children as “elementary school children” (p. 10), when in fact “most child migrants are teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17” (p. 14). She makes an appeal for creating a balance between protection, autonomy, and educational opportunity that is crafted in true partnership with young migrants themselves as a way to calibrate the tension between the interests of the child and the child’s need for protection with their evolving autonomy.

A key lesson from Bhabha’s book for those working in education in emergency situations is that “alternate mentoring situations (boyfriend pimps, gang leaders, military commanders) fill the gap left by ineffective or non-existent families and state structure.” She argues that there is official “ambivalence” in the pressure to protect children’s rights and to punish juvenile offenders. When we “legislate migrant children’s right to public education and health care irrespective of the legal status, but we erect practical obstacles to their access to these services” (pp. 13-14), it plays out practically with enormous consequences for migrant children and adolescents.

With regard to child trafficking, the book highlights the importance of public education and awareness-raising campaigns but stresses the need for more effective strategies, including the use of technology to target, expose, and monitor potential dangers, as well as the need to provide greater support for trafficking survivors.

Bhabha notes that multi-vector strategies involving the entire community are needed to address the root causes of trafficking. These include issues of poverty and lack of education and skill-building opportunities, conditions which create fertile ground for exploitation.

Highlighting the fact that as many as 300,000 children are serving as soldiers in armed conflicts around the world—thus depriving them of a normal childhood and education—Bhabha suggests that the focus on justice and accountability has not resulted in the kind or scale of social, economic, and political support needed to address the needs of child soldiers. Referencing the case of Sierra Leone, among others, Bhabha calls for long-term reintegration strategies that address the lack of opportunities for education and employment as part of comprehensive postconflict peace-building efforts.

In examining cross-cutting issues such as intercountry adoption, child soldiers, and child labor, Bhabha’s comprehensive interrogation of the complex issue of child migration serves as an important tool for a multi-disciplinary scholarly or applied audience, not least within the field of education in emergencies. As we continue to come to terms with the ongoing global reality of massive forced migration, we must heed Bhabha’s final reminder that human rights instruments can never deliver on the aspirations of migrant children “without political honesty and the mobilising muscle that transforms them into live demands” (p. 281).

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