'Children, childhood and migration: some critical thoughts'

Roy Huijsmans, Senior Lecturer Children & Youth Studies, Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Hague, the Netherlands

Email: r.b.huijsmans@gmail.com

Webpage: http://www.iss.nl/iss_faculty/profiel_metis/1129250/

Abstract:

Limiting myself to the development literature, I first ask why it is that the issue of 'independent child migration' emerged as a specific field in the early 2000s even though the phenomenon itself was hardly new. I concur that its original concern was a critique to the hegemony of the child trafficking discourse, with trafficking understood as a form of boundary management within development studies' 'migration turn' working to construct 'bad' forms and categories of mobility as separate from 'good' forms/categories of migration.

The 'independent child migration' research agenda that thus emerged may be summarised as: demonstrating young migrants' as actors in migration; highlighting that staying is often not a desirable option'; deconstructing the trafficking discourse; and reconstruction the phenomenon of mobile children as a migration issue with exploitation instead of children's mobility as the target for intervention. Although this research agenda generated some important insights and has affected interventions, I argue that after a decade this research agenda is in need of reflection.

Here I limit myself to three points. First, the phrase 'independent child migration' effectively amounted to a further compartmentalisation of migration (despite this being a point of critique in general migration studies). Such a categorising approach tends to hinder rather than deepen a situated understanding of young people in migration. The latter would require attending to relational dimensions, by for example concentrating on the role of 'migration networks' and the role of various conceptualisations of age shaping young people's inclusion in the migratory landscape. Second, a relational approach is necessary for moving away from an exclusive concern with 'critique' based on deconstruction-based analyses towards constructive analyses that would ask how young people's migrations shed light on broader questions in children and youth studies. This would include debates on: life course dynamics, young people and state, transnationalism, global householding, etc. Thirdly, the focus on 'independent child migration' has kept out of focus the largest group affected by migration: those that are not (yet) moving. A focus on the young offers much scope for teasing out the interrelation between staying and moving in migration research.

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Introduction

Since the turn the turn of the millennium the theme of children and migration has developed into a distinct area of study. There are now a number of (edited) books on the theme (Knörr, 2005; Ensor and Goździak, 2010; Hashim and Thorsen, 2011), journal issues specifically dedicated to the topic (Orgocka and Clark-Kazak (eds.), 2012), it received specific mention in the 2009 Human Development report (UNDP, 2009) and 'children & migration' is included as one out of a total of eight modules in an online course offered jointly by UNICEF and the Economic Research Foundation on 'Socio-economic policies for child rights with equity'(Ghosh and Ortiz, 2011). And not the least, we have seen a number of specialist conferences dedicated to the theme like the one here today.

Given this state of the field it becomes increasingly difficult and I would say undesirable to talk in general terms about children and migration. Therefore, let me situate my talk: Within the contemporary work on children and migration, we can identify two bodies of research. First, there is work on children who are affected by migration without migrating themselves, mostly because one or both parents have migrated. These children are typically referred to as 'left-behind children', a topic that has attracted considerable scholarship (Asis, 2006; Graham and Jordan, 2011). Importantly, this research mostly focuses on children in their first decade of life – the younger children.

Second, there is work on children who themselves are migrants. This body of work is usually further divided between research with children who have migrated as part of family migration and those that migrate without their families (Yaqub, 2009). The latter is often referred to as 'independent child migration', and typically refers to 'children' in their second decade of life. It is this part of the field that I'll limit myself to in this talk, mostly drawing on material from the development studies literature.

The discovery of 'independent child migration'

Amidst the wealth of material on children and migration that has appeared over recent years, it is easy to forget that only very few scholars wrote about children and migration in the 1990s. And those that did (e.g. Koning, 1997; Punch, 1998; Camacho, 1999; Mills, 1999), seldom framed their work as 'child migration'.

The construct of 'independent child migration' must thus be marked as a recent invention, whilst we should at the same time realise that the phenomenon of children migrating independently from their families is far from new (e.g. De Lange, 2007: 147).[1] For example, Beverly Grieg (1994: 29) notes in her historical account of child labour in colonial Zimbabwe that in the 1920s

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[1] Whether these young people were considered 'children' is of course a different question. The debate on how to define childhood remains valid today despite the fact that we now have universal definitions of the child based on chronological age (e.g. Clark-Kazak, 2009).

there was 'an exodus from the rural areas of male children seeking work 'on their own' [which] brought new problems for employers of child labour and for officials'.

Secondly, it is also noteworthy that many of the children in policy categories that attracted much attention in the 1980s and 1990s such as 'street children' and 'child workers/labourers' were probably *also* 'child migrants'. Yet this migration dimension seldom received much explicit attention (an exception includes Camacho, 1999). This raises questions about how we must understand the discovery of the policy category of 'independent child migration' as well as the conditions that led to its discovery.

I would argue that there are two factors at stake here. First, the discovery of independent child migration needs to be seen in relation to the re-entry of migration as a central theme in the development literature. Second, the concept of 'independent child migration' needs to be understood as a reactive construct, aiming to liberate 'migrant children' from the, then, dominant construct of human trafficking. As I will show these two points are intertwined.

Migration and boundary management

In a review paper published in 1997 Christopher McDowell and Arjan de Haan (1997: 1) observe that 'much of the development literature makes the false assumption that sedentary patterns in society are the norm' and they note that migration is often presented as a problem; 'a threat to stability and a challenge to established lifestyles'. At the same time, they point out the paradox that 'Western development models that seem to export the myth of non-movement while advancing policies (commercialisation, agricultural intensification, industrialisation, and liberalisation) which induce and often demand population movement' (McDowell and De Haan, 1997: 4).

In 2006, de Haan published another review paper on the role of migration in the development literature. Much has changed since writing his earlier paper in the mid-1990s, which is evident from the title 'Migration in the Development Studies Literature: Has it come out its marginality?' (De Haan, 2006). Although de Haan remained critical about the extent to which migration research has affected mainstream thinking in development, he writes about an 'upsurge of studies' on migration in the context of development since the turn of the Millennium (De Haan, 2006: 16).

These two articles are reflective of considerable transformation in the global discourse on migration in relation to development. From migration as a problem frustrating development (e.g. overpopulation of cities, brain drain), migration is increasingly celebrated as a solution for all sorts of development challenges. Such a discourse is promoted by major global development agents. For example, the 2013 World Migration Report (IOM, 2013) is entitled 'Migrant wellbeing and development', the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) dedicated its 2009 flagship report (UNDP, 2009) entirely to migration ('Overcoming barriers: Human mobility and development'). In the same year, the World Bank's (2009) World Development

Report entitled 'Reshaping economic geography' is also very migration heavy. And there are a number of international reports on the apparent positive contribution of 'remittances' to development (contrast this with earlier emphasis on 'brain drain').

As we know well from the European context, embracing migration in positive terms and even encouraging it does not mean that all population movement meets such favourable evaluation. In fact, I would argue: now that migration is increasingly discussed in favourable terms (though not exclusively), it has become only more necessary to distinguish 'good' migration and 'deserving migrants' from 'bad' migration and 'undeserving migrants' as well as to separate the 'desirable' dimension of migration (the economic) from less desirable aspects (the social). This requires boundary management and brings us back to the children and migration.

The case of Laos constitutes a useful illustration here. Laos is a relatively poor, land-locked country in Southeast Asia. Despite a long history of migration, cross-border migration by Lao nationals into Thailand (the main destination for Lao migrant workers) was an extremely sensitive issue over the past decade. Following years of civil war and Laos' role in the Vietnam war, the communist *Pathet Lao* proclaimed the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. In the years that followed, the young nation attempted building a socialist economy and under this politico-economic regime cross-border migration into (capitalist) Thailand was strictly policed and mostly a one-way journey. When in the 1990s a politics of isolation gradually gave way to one of regional integration and market economics, crossborder migration into Thailand, although widespread, remained extremely sensitive. The Lao government, for long, responded to it with a politics of silence (towards international audiences) and framing cross-border migration as unpatriotic (towards domestic audiences).

The cover of the 2006 National Human Development Report (Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Myers, 2006) illustrates that much has changed in the Lao state's position on migration. Cross-border migration is no longer constructed as undermining national development, instead it is now presented as contributing to Lao national development.
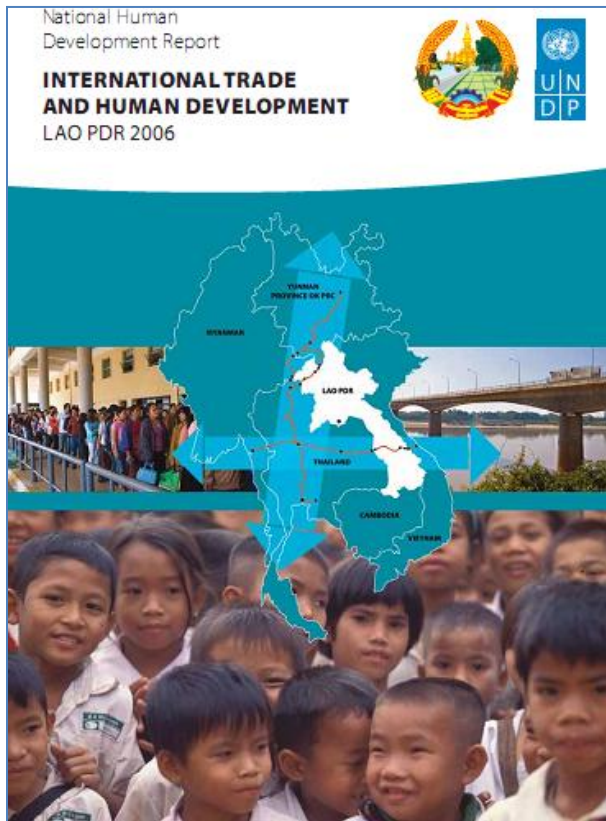
One of the new development slogans embraced by the Lao state is that of 'crossroads', in which the Laos is seen as geographical space connecting the economic giants of (South)east Asia. In this crossroads development imaginary migration is pivotal and this is clearly evident from the cover page. The arrows on the map of peninsular Southeast Asia illustrate the 'economic corridors' that are constructed. This has taken the form of infrastructural developments (roads, bridges, border crossings) that not only eased the mobility of capital and goods, but also that of people. Migration is further depicted in the image at the top-left: the border checkpoint with people waiting to board a bus that takes them (image top-right) across the Mekong River (over the first Friendship Bridge[2]) into Thailand.

Despite the apparent centrality of cross-border migration in this renewed Lao development imaginary, it remains a reluctant and conditional embracing. First, it is migration through formal channels that is sanctioned, not the far more widespread informal and undocumented migrations. Second, 'good' migration is also framed in generational terms. As the cover page illustrates, it is adults that queue for cross-border migration, whereas the labour of children remains closely tied to Lao national territory through the labour of schooling.

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[2] This is the 'first' Friendship bridge, and was opened in 1994 (funded with Australian development aid). Meanwhile, a fourth Lao-Thai Friendship bridge has been constructed and is scheduled to open in December 2013.

This generational order may hold for the stark adult-child dichotomy depicted on the UNDP cover page, but shatters in relation to the 'older children' with whom I have conducted research (see Figure 2). These young people are children according to Lao national and international regulations, yet are considered 'youth' (and definitely not children anymore) locally.

Figure 2: Research participants in a study on young people and migration in Laos

The various policies and politico-economic changes that have unfolded in the Lao PDR over the past decade have induced population movement, particularly so among the young population. This is evident from the 2003 Lao Migration Survey (Fig 3). Migration is situated in the youth stage of the life course, with considerable share of the migrants below the age of 18.

Figure 3: 2003 Lao Migration Survey

Figure 2. 2003 Lao Labour Migration Survey: Khammuane, Savannakhet and Champasack
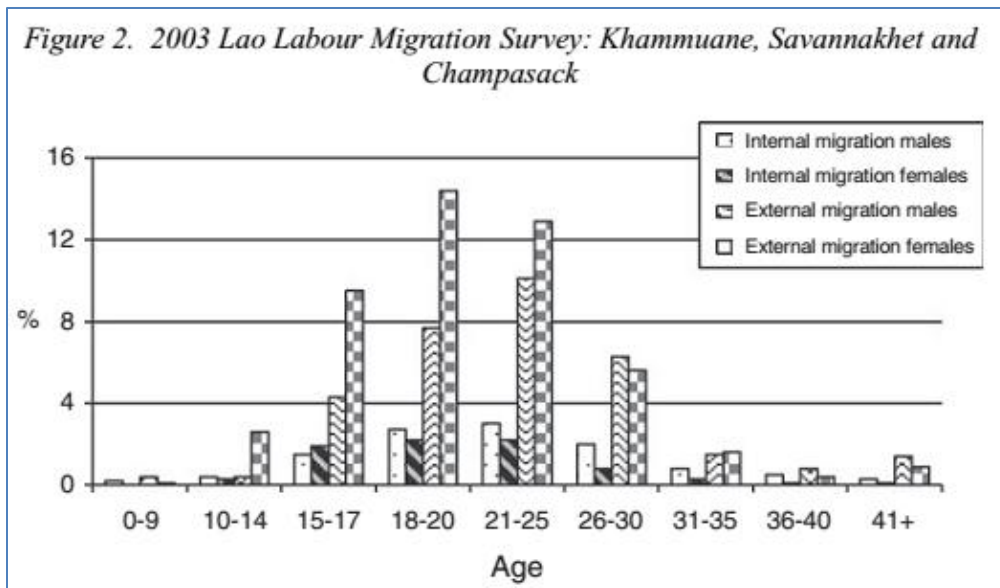
From: (Huijsmans and Baker, 2012)

The prevalence of youth in Lao migration flows relates very poorly to the Lao migration regime that has unfolded over the past decade in which migration through regularised channels concerning adults is increasingly stimulated and 'made safe' whilst undocumented migration and migration by minors is presented in terms of dangers and as a problem of 'human trafficking', and effectively made more 'unsafe' (Huijsmans, 2014).

Despite the apparent clarity of distinction, it is often far from clear when 'migration' becomes 'trafficking' and vice versa (Bastia, 2005; Huijsmans and Baker, 2012). These boundaries thus need careful discursive management, hence the insistence on 'child' trafficking instead of 'teenage' trafficking or 'youth' trafficking which would in many cases be a more appropriate term (compare: 'youth migration' is a common phrase).

The cover page of a Unicef (2004) report presents an example of how boundary management is staged. The report states firmly that this is study on 'child trafficking', and by presenting a girl photographed from the back the illusion is upheld that this may indeed concern young children.

Figure 4: Unicef report cover page
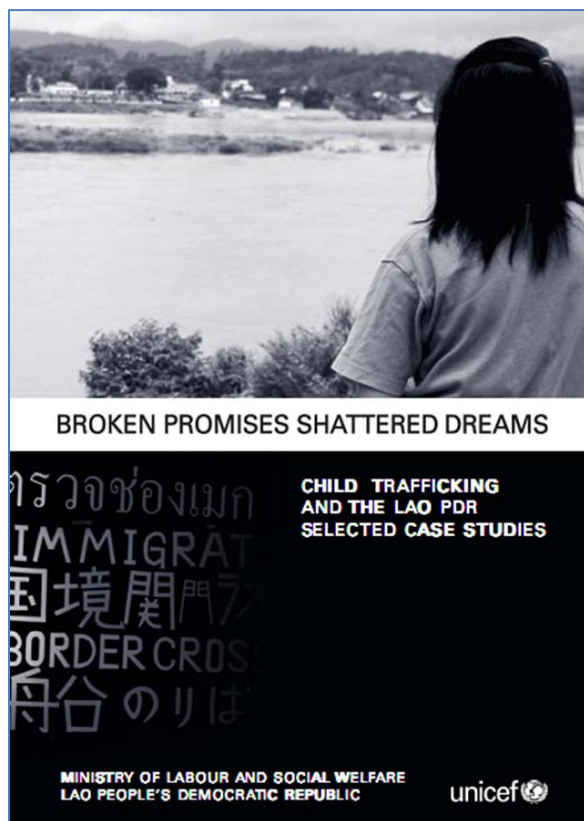
A closer reading of reports like that of Unicef makes clear that the boundary management between migration and trafficking is nearly impossible to maintain when it concerns actual cases. For example, despite the firm suggestion that this is a study about 'children' we learn that only 63% of the sample consists of people below 18 years of age (no further age-disaggregation

given), 33% was aged 19-29 and 4% 30 years and older. Furthermore, whilst the report generally talks about 'victims' or 'child victims' there is a telling slippage on p. 18 where the sample is suddenly referred to as 'migrants/victims'.

The table below provides further evidence that despite the clarity in title, clearly separating 'trafficking' from 'migration' even where it concerns children is indeed a very difficult act to maintain.

Figure 5

Table 2 Frequency of usage of the terms migration and trafficking[a]		
Title of the report	*Traffick(ing)*	*Migra(tion)*
Broken Promises Shattered Dream: A Profile of Child Trafficking in the Lao PDR	219	51
Lessons Learnt through TRACE: Human Trafficking from Laos to Thailand (Draft Report)	423	392
From Lao PDR to Thailand and Home Again: The Repatriation of Trafficking Victims and Other Exploited Women and Girl Workers	88	83
Migrant Children and Youth in Lao PDR: Migration along the Border of Thailand		
Labour Migration Survey 2003	21	330
Preliminary Assessment on Trafficking of Children and Women for Labour Exploitation in Lao PDR	125	194
Trafficking in Children into the Worst Forms of Child Labour: A Rapid Assessment	119	90

[a]This is done using a simple 'search' function tracing words starting with *traffick…* and *migra….*

Source: (Huijsmans, 2008: table 2)

The emergence of 'independent child migration'

When I first started working on the issue of young people and migration in 2005 I was indeed struck by the discrepancy between a policy insistence on 'human trafficking' and an apparent empirical reality which suggested 'migration' would constitute a more appropriate lens to describe the mobilities of young people. I recall conversations with people working in shelters created for the rehabilitation of 'child victims of human trafficking'. They mentioned that one of the problems they were confronted with is that these 'children' often ran away from the Lao shelters and returned to Thailand. The anti-trafficking agenda revolves around rescue-rehabilitation-reintegration, and effectively amounts to removing minors from migration and

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seeking to restore a sedentary life. In contexts where youth will continue to migrate and where they also too often end up in exploitative conditions anti-human trafficking programming has little to offer for the bulk of the migrants of minor age.

Based on such a realisation, I think my research followed that of many others. Drawing on the conceptual premises of the new social studies of childhood which treats childhood as a social construct and children as social actors we set out on a research agenda which main objective was a critique of the human trafficking discourse and to problematize the artificial boundary management of migration and human trafficking. Thereby, seeking to open a policy space conceiving of minors as agents in migration whose exploitation needs to be addressed without necessarily removing minors from migration.

In doing-so a fairly coherent body of research emerged based on the following principles:

- A demonstration of minor as active agents in migration process (to counter the featuring of children as passive victims in the human trafficking discourse)
- A deconstruction of the human trafficking discourse and how it pertains to minors (rendering irrelevant the notion of consent (and thus agency) in defining trafficking where it concerns minors as long as exploitation is identified somewhere in the process)
- Reconstructing the phenomenon of 'mobile minors' as an issue of 'migration', with exploitation of minors in migration the target of intervention instead of minors involvement in migration

This research agenda has, I think, produced some effects. For example, the 2009 Human Development Report on migration does no longer discuss the involvement of minors in migration in terms of human trafficking solely but contains a separate, albeit, short discussion on 'independent child migration' (UNDP, 2009: 59). Perhaps more telling is a recent shift implemented by the international organisation Terre des Hommes (TdH). It recently launched a new international campaign entitled 'Destination unknown' (http://destination-unknown.org/). Following a decade of 'anti-trafficking' programming I consider this a remarkable move as it shifts the programmatic focus away from anti-trafficking and towards the 'protection of children on the move'. A 2012 TdH report by Mike Dottridge (2012) explains how this shift has come about:

> *At the beginning of the campaign, the issue of child trafficking appeared relatively straightforward. Crimes were being committed against children, which were going largely unnoticed, so governments needed lobbying to persuade them to take action. As the years went by, however, the complexity of the issue became more obvious, along with the risk that certain messages linked to the campaign could have unexpected or even counter-productive effects for children. It also became clearer that trafficking cases represented an extreme along a continuum involving children who moved from one place to another…so, measures to prevent trafficking needed to be supplemented by a range of*

other measures to protect unaccompanied children and other children who had left home, whether they remained in their country or went abroad (Dottridge, 2012: 13)

Thus far, a policy approach based on the idea of 'safe migration' to address exploitation of migrants and improve migrants' wellbeing has been limited to adult migrants. The TdH campaign extends such thinking towards minors which may offer new scope to thinking about children's rights for independent child migrants. So far, children's rights have largely failed migrants of minor age as they have contributed to keeping minors in, and returning minors to, places of origin and have done little to address the various forms of exploitation young migrants are confronted with too often. A safe migration approach appears potent of overcoming the shortcomings of anti-trafficking programming and start from the recognition that the involvement in migration by minors is not the problem that needs addressing, but the exploitation that young migrants face in migration.

Beyond 'independent child migration'

The policy question of how a 'safe migration' agenda might look like when it comes to migrants of minor age is certainly one that merits further discussion. However, I think we are doing ourselves a disservice by limiting the discussion to policy questions and a concern with children's wellbeing – however important and urgent this may be!

Research on children and migration has a much broader relevance and is fertile ground for furthering some contemporary debates within children and youth studies more broadly. In order to realise this potential we might want to let go of the research agenda on 'independent child migration' as I think it is limiting the conceptual thinking in some important ways. I note three points.

The problem of compartmentalisation

The construct of 'independent child migration' I find somewhat misleading and analytically limiting. Migration studies has long shown that migration is seldom an 'independent' undertaking but something that is networked and deeply situated in all sorts of relations (Massey *et al.*, 1993). The focus on 'children' and their 'independence' in migration has resulted in relatively little attention to young migrants' migration networks. Yet the available research on the issue has shown that networks are no less important when it comes to young migrants (see e.g. Huijsmans, 2012). Like the case with adult migration, it is important to appreciate the different ways in which young people are networked in migration. In my work in Laos I found it relevant to distinguish between networks that minors can access independent of their parents and other adults (peer-networks) and those in which adults effectively function as gatekeepers. This sheds some light on why some young migrants navigate migration landscapes with relative ease whilst for others it constitutes a far more constraining terrain.

A second problem is that a research focus on 'independent child migration', ironically, has offered fairly little on how 'age' works in migration. A focus on 'independent child migration' amounts to a compartmentalisation of migration. Migration is indeed a highly compartmentalised policy and research terrain, revolving around a number of binaries: 'forced-voluntary migration', 'internal-international migration', etc. It has been observed that compartmentalisation 'obscures rather than illuminates the processes underlying the decision to move, with potentially harmful effects on policy-making' (UNDP, 2009: 12). The construct 'independent child migration', in effect, adds a new binary to the list: an adult-child binary. The subsequent specific focus on migrants below 18 years of age cannot illuminate how age as a structuring relation shapes the migration landscape, and it also leads to an underemphasis on how young people's migrations are often intimately connected with migrants (and stayers) that have reached the age of majority (Huijsmans *et al*, 2014). Redressing these short-comings require adopting a relational perspective that seeks to understand migration at a young age as situated in webs of social relations with age working as an important structuring force.

Linking migration with staying

Toyota *et al* (2007) have noted that migration studies has typically paid very little attention to a very large group affected by migration; those that do not migrate. Where the literature does pay attention to 'stayers', they are often depicted as receivers of remittances or struggling with the consequences of being 'left-behind'. What is lacking from these accounts is the agency of stayers and how questions of staying and leaving are often closely intertwined. The frame of 'independent child migration' leaves unmarked the question of 'staying'. Yet, especially where it concerns young migrants who have not yet established their own households there is much to say for studying the linkages between staying and migration even though this comes with some real methodological challenges.

One of the most striking findings in my research in a Lao village was perhaps not that so many young people got involved in migration, but rather that there were virtually no households where all children had left (Huijsmans, forthcoming). Teasing out who of the young household members had migrated and who was staying by gender and by position of relative seniority showed that young women where far more likely to become involved in migration if a senior child was staying, whereas this did not seem to influence migration patterns among young men. These findings are based on a dynamic understanding of the household as a field that is constantly 'in flux'. In such a conceptualisation, relations of relative seniority between young people in a household cannot be reduced to 'birth order', as this limits the analysis to members of the nuclear family and fails to account for changes in relative seniority following the departure (or return) of some young household members (e.g. following marriage or migration).

In addition, working through the linkages between young migrants and young stayers within the context of the household demands treating 'householding' as a process that takes place across space, that is shaped by migration regimes, and with the contribution of individual members

deeply shaped by the intersection of relations of gender and age (Douglass, 2006). Exploring the dynamics of staying and migration within the context of households has much to contribute to a deeper understanding of intra-household dynamics which have so far paid relatively little attention to relations of seniority (as compared to gender) and requires rethinking the spatiality of householding. It also allows theorising young people's migration in relation to wider societal transformations. The literature on rural change provides the case in point. In rural areas, it is through the migrant work of young rural folk that rural households become increasingly spatially expanded and become less based on the land and the local community (Huijsmans, 2010).

Theorising young lives through migration

As a critique based research agenda, the 'independent child migration' frame leads one to rethink human trafficking and by extension migration. In contrast, the early work on children and migration adopted a different approach and treated migration as a context to rethink young lives. The work by Samantha Punch (2002) on 'negotiated interdependence' is the case in point. She used the empirical phenomenon of young Bolivians involved in cross-border migrant work in Argentina to rethink a fundamental concept in the youth studies literature: the idea of transition. A focus on young people's migration illuminated how 'young people in rural Bolivia negotiate ways to balance their individual needs with household responsibilities; their unpaid work at home with paid work' (Punch, 2002: 131).

Other work on migration has suggested that young people's involvement in migration changes young people's social position in communities. For example, a male youth in a study on adolescents' lives in the Thai context reflected on his involvement in migration:

> 'It's very different. They [his parents] listen to everything I say now. When I didn't earn money, it was like blowing in the wind when I talked' (Soonthorndhada *et al.*, 2005: 116).

In some contexts, this may arguable amount to structural change in the gender-generational order of societies. For example, in Koning's (1997) research in Java daughter's involvement in migrant labour was a recent phenomenon reconfiguring the generational order:

> 'bolstered by their cash, children gain a position in their relationship towards their parents that is new and more powerful than at any other time in history' (Koning, 1997: 222)

Next to teasing out how young people's involvement brings about shifts in young people's relational position in society it would also be pertinent to consider how it relates to other events in young people's lives. For example, how does migration (and non-migration) at a young age relate to shifts (or continuities) in marriage patterns and family formation, residence patterns, occupational trajectories, etc. Such a broader empirical remit requires going beyond the individual experiences of migration experience by young migrants that is now typically the area of analysis. Instead, it seeks to tease out how the activity of migration, which is often related to a life phase, affects the life course in a gendered and generational fashion.

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