

Children in migration: Research report

RESEARCH REPORT



SUMMARY

This report examines how South-South migration impacts children who move or who stay. This includes a cross-corridor analysis of children's access to migration, the vulnerabilities and protection challenges associated with migration, and opportunities for inequality reduction created by South-South migration.

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Executive summary

South-South migrants constitute a significant portion of the total stock of migrants in the globe. When compared to North-North and South-North migratory movements, South-South migrants represent the plurality of migrants globally at roughly 36 percent (OECD n.d.; Reidy 2021) – and are increasing. Despite this, the scholarship remains biased towards South-North migration. Migration, and their impacts on the understanding of children's agency and lived experiences within the Global South has consequently been improperly conceptualised. This has limited the evidence base on South-South migration. The MIDEQ thematic area on children in South-South migration aimed to address this gap with empirical research in three migration corridors: Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia-South Africa, and Egypt-Jordan.

The bias in migration scholarship has resulted in children in South-South migration contexts receiving less attention from programmers, advocates, scholars, and policymakers (Crawley et al. 2023). Children in migration contexts, and especially children in South-South migration contexts do not conform to universal assumptions of what is a “good” child or childhood. Often these unitary approaches to children and childhood prioritise forms of sedentariness, passivity and of the nuclear family – which may be contrary to many children's experiences in South-South migration contexts (Fass 2005; Huijsmans 2011; Thorsen 2006; White et al. 2011). As a result, the evidence base on South-South migration is limited.

Yet, how children in South-South migration contexts are understood has real-life impacts. For example, when child migrants do not conform to the common understanding of what a “child” is, they may lose the subsequent legal protections they are entitled to as children, their legal status coming under suspicion (McLaughlin 2018). Further, when children are not understood as individual right bearers, such as in return migration decisions, the resulting lack of attention to their well-being and their own

preferences may lead to a migration crisis for the children in family contexts (Majidi et al 2023).

Despite these gaps, a growing body of literature on child migration has led to notable advances, which this report builds on and contributes to. Children are increasingly seen as agents in their own lives (Dobson 2009) and specifically targeted in programming and policy. Yet, overemphasising children's agency has tended to produce general statements which are uncritical and romanticised (Abebe 2019; Bordonaro and Payne 2012; Durham, Cole, and Durham 2011). Thus, many authors have advocated for nuanced explorations of children's agency which go beyond universal claims of agency or victimhood. Today, authors have shown that children's agency occurs on a continuum and is both changing and specific to context and place (Abebe 2019). Responding to this, there thus exists a clear need to examine the more nuanced, everyday agency of child migrants (Payne 2012).

This Research Report examines how children affected by migration engage with migration's consequences. It analyses both the positive and negative ways children engage with the effects of migration, through an in-depth study of the literature and a review of specific contexts. The report examines if, why, and in which ways children can act in the face of migration - and the strategies they deploy to make the best choices for their present and future.

The literature reveals that, first, child agency is not simply the exercise of freewill against societal constraints (Abebe 2019). Second, child agency is not universal and is not always exercised in the child's best interest. Third, agency is a qualitative notion – and quantitative approaches threaten to categorise the exercise of agency incorrectly (Abebe 2019). The findings in this report are based on qualitative interviews with children, parents, caregivers, and other migration actors across the countries.

The MIDEQ research reveals that:

- In **Burkina Faso**, children may undertake their migration to Côte d'Ivoire based on their own decision, negotiating directly with migration facilitators, while others negotiate with their parents to allow them to undertake the journey. Children in this context are under gendered notions of migration: migration of boys confirms societal and gendered expectations, while when girls migrate, they defy expectations and use migration to act against systems of power that they disagree with.
- In **Egypt**, gendered roles in migration prevail as well in the context of their migration to Jordan. Similarly to Burkina Faso, migration results in shifts in responsibilities at home. Children, including those who stay back, show high levels of maturity and adaptability, engaging directly with the migration process and its consequences. Their parents' migration allows children who stay back the opportunity to build stronger ties with their extended families and create larger systems of support. Children in these contexts are more interconnected with their environment and engage actively in various roles.
- In **Ethiopia**, social understandings of age prevail over legal framing of age. As in Burkina Faso, child migration is closely linked to child labour and is socially deemed as acceptable. Investing in migration becomes a priority over education for some households, given the benefits it can bring to households and communities. However the risks are real, and while children take on adult roles as in Egypt, they are exposed to risks – such as trafficking – due to their age. Other risks include, in South Africa, the accelerated transitions to adulthood, and the discomfort child migrants feel taking on new roles

without corresponding educational benefits or opportunities.

The Report concludes on five takeaways:

- **Children exhibit agency within situations of vulnerability**, and both positive and negative coping mechanisms can open space for new vulnerabilities.
- **Child migration is embedded in social constructs that are often seen as more legitimate than legal ones**, and closely tied to structural inequalities related to poverty. These justify both child migration and child labour.
- **Children who stay back need to be included in national migration plans** and not be considered as exogenous to the migration process. They contribute to decision making on migration and are impacted in their roles and responsibilities by migration.
- **Gendered notions of childhood impact children's participation in migration**, yet migration can help defy expectations that go against children's best interest. Migration can be an outlet to rectify harms to children.
- **Children, especially older children, can be full actors in the migration process as they can independently decide to migrate**. This underlines that programming and policy need to target not just adults, but also children.
- **Beyond targeting children, programmes and policies need to be inclusive of children**. As the MIDEQ research demonstrates, children's voices need to be elevated in research, programming and policy.

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH-SOUTH MIGRATION

CHILDREN, CHILDHOODS AND MIGRATION: SOCIAL AND MOBILE CATEGORIES

The consolidation of the idea that children are a special category of humans is a modern construct emerging over the last several centuries (Bhabha 2006, Norozi and Moen 2016). While this has had the tremendous accomplishment of securing children specific rights and protections, it has also contributed to the widespread view that children are a more vulnerable form of human being, which has perceptually taken away children's agency (Bhabha 2006).

As Mintz (2008) argues, "age categories are not natural," (93), nor are they neutral. "Implicit in terms like child or adolescent are certain assumptions about immaturity, irresponsibility, and incomplete development and maturation," (Mintz 2008: 93). Indeed, defining who a child is extends beyond biology and instead reflects other social constructs in society, such as gender. Scholars increasingly attempt to capture and investigate those socially constructed categories associated with biological age, like Clark-Kazak (2009, 2012) who introduced the term "social age."

Childhood is not a social category that can be universally determined as it can then ignore children's context and experiences (Norozi and Moen 2016). This in turn produces anachronistic and acontextual understandings, programmes, and policies. Childhood is a social construct, whose definitions vary depending on the context, as well as the individual experiences and environment of the child. As a result, theoretical insights into childhood "have moved away from the idea of universal, chronological life stages towards much more fluid definitions that foreground the historically and culturally constructed qualities of such categories," (Thorsen 2006, 90).

However, the biases in child research more generally have carried over into child migration research, as well, where de-contextualized understandings of children, childhood, and child migration are common. Indeed, adhering to a universalized and age-based definition of who a child is and of childhood itself in sociological research has limited our understanding of migration's impact on children, as well as produced ineffective policy responses (Crawley et al. 2023). As Hashim and Thorsen (2011) argue, children's migration "is rarely understood in terms of how childhood, socialization, work and education normally crystallize in their local context," (2). Childhoods are fluid (Valentine 2003) and non-linear (Punch 2002), especially in migration contexts where the transition to adulthood is achieved and maintained across multiple sites (see Barratt, Mbonye, and Seeley 2012).

There needs to be greater reflection on how migration as a phenomenon shapes conceptualizations of childhoods. The concept of children in migration contexts is itself on the move. As has been documented by MIDEQ (Crawley et al. 2023), migration can at times speed up children's life transitions. For example, children in migration contexts often occupy elevated positions within the household, providing translation services, acting as cultural mediators, and providing emotional and financial support for their families (see Crawley et al. 2023, Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 2013; Orellana 2001; Thorne et al. 2003). While this can at times represent a burden, child migrants can experience these new roles and responsibilities as positive and as a source of empowerment (see Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 2013; Orellana 2001).

Referring to children as all those individuals under the age of 18 remains a relevant frame of analysis because of the rights and protections those under 18 are specifically entitled to. However, children and childhoods are socially constructed, much like gender, and can be at times hyper-local and individualistic. How migration transforms children and childhood as constructs requires greater attention in South-South migration contexts as this deeply informs

how children are able or unable to express agency. Ultimately, this will serve the important work of recentering the Global South (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2023).

CHILDREN AND EXPRESSIONS OF AGENCY IN SOUTH-SOUTH MIGRATION

Since the 1990s, social studies on childhood and the legal framework on children “discovered” that children are social actors who have agency (Abebe 2019). As Abebe defines, an agent, someone exercising agency, “is someone who does something in relation with other people and, in doing so, makes things happen,” (2019, 6). Kuczynski provides a more robust and often cited definition, with agents being defined as “individuals as actors with the ability to make sense of the environment, initiate change, and make choices,” (2003, 9).

In the literature, the concept of agency has three aspects: 1) autonomy, including self-determination and self-preservation, 2) construction, i.e. the capacity to make sense of experiences and create new meanings; and 3) action (Kuczynski 2003 as cited in Deng et al 2022).

The concept of children as agents has become so persuasive in studies on children, including those in migration contexts, that when the concept of agency is applied it is assumed that it represents something that all children have the right and ability to exercise (Durham, Cole, and Durham 2011). Indeed, both “the academic view of children as active and knowledgeable human beings, and children as right claiming subjects in international policy, have contributed to the recognition of children’s capacities and competencies” (Abebe 2019, 5).

However, such statements are uncritical and romanticised (Abebe 2019; Bordonaro and Payne 2012; Durham, Cole, and Durham 2011). Children are neither universal victims nor unrestricted agents (Huijsmans 2011). Children can both be victims and agents simultaneously (Crawley et al. 2023). Children are both agents capable of shaping their own lives and

simultaneously dependents and embedded in contexts – which often disempower them, and shape if and to what degree agency is expressed (Abebe 2019). This is perhaps even more true in migration contexts where children are vulnerable and when vulnerability can compel children to engage in practices, and produce outcomes, which are harmful yet were generated from their choices, their agency (Abebe 2019, Samuel Hall 2022). Children’s agency, and whether and how they act it out, is thus not binary but occurs on a continuum and is specific to context (Abebe 2019). As Abebe writes:

“It is important to go beyond the recognition that children are social actors to reveal the social, cultural, material, and political contexts as well as relational processes within which their everyday agency unfolds. In so doing...[we can] move forward productively in theorising child agency from relational and generational perspectives. (2019, 2)”

The case studies in this Report build on this approach and move beyond common assumptions about children’s agency to ask instead what Abebe (2019) encourages: namely “what kind of agency they have, how they obtain and exercise it, how context shapes it, and how their agency relates to others” (10). In doing so, this Report contributes to providing a more nuanced evidence base on children’s expressions of agency in South-South migration contexts.

MIGRATION AND CHILDHOOD

South-South migration has influenced and shaped important institutions and systems of power. Indeed, in the Global South, migration has become, or remained, so ubiquitous that it represents a rite of passage for many communities. Migration has become a way for children to exhibit agency in the face of a larger sense of “waithood,” (Khosravi 2017, Honwana 2014), whereby children have sought out migration in contexts where barriers prevent them from achieving the standard markers of adulthood (see Ungruhe and Esson 2017).

While this is often most relevant for boys and young men, migration also represents a rite of passage for girls and young women (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013). The existing research tends to emphasise how South-North migratory movements represent a gendered rite of passage where often young men can prove their manhood by taking on risks and overcoming danger (see Palillo 2022) or where girls and young women can gain access to a new womanhood (see Zhang 2021). However, rural-urban migratory movements within Global South countries, as well as South-South migrations, similarly represent a rite of passage onto themselves.

For example, in her examination of rural Burkinabé young men and boys, Thorsen (2006) described how migration to urban cities had become a rite of passage via repeated rural-urban migration over generations and oral tales of urban lifestyles: “Decisions rarely concerned *whether* to migrate, but *when* to go,” (Thorsen 2006, 99). Thus, migration was part of the process of entering adulthood – regardless of if that migration achieved “nothing.” Further, examinations in other Global South contexts, such as on male Afghan migration to Iran (Monsutti 2007) and male Bangladeshi migration to South Africa (Pande 2017), provide further evidence that migration can act as an important rite of passage onto itself. Much like marriage, giving birth / having children, or securing employment, migration itself thus becomes a “symbolic entrance into adult life,” (Pande 2017, 393) and consequently carries with it certain characteristics of adulthood, womanhood, and manhood.

Recognising that migration at times represents a rite of passage – rather than the manner through which certain hallmarks of adulthood are achieved – indicates that the migration journey itself can reflect an expression of agency. While it can and often is risky depending on the context, that migration has become a rite of passage indicates how child migrants’ expressions of agency have also mutated the contexts in which they live.

In the literature, the outcomes of migration in the Global South, rather than the mere movement itself, also act as the vehicle through which migrants achieve adulthood. In other words, in addition to migration itself marking adulthood, migration can facilitate adulthood by providing migrants the opportunities to achieve the necessary markers of adulthood, such as education, work, financial independence, marriage, etc. (see Crivello 2011; Johnson et al. 2021). For example, one study on rural-urban migration in Mali found that migration enabled education and work, which facilitated girls’ and boys’ transitions to womanhood and manhood in gender-specific ways (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013). Another study in Malawi found that the transition to adulthood centred on marriage, work, and school, all three of which migration enabled (Beegle and Poulin 2013).

However, migration is not just a neutral vehicle but can also accelerate the transition to adulthood. One study on rural-urban migration in Uganda found that migration hastened the shift from the migrant being a “dependent child” to an “independent, economically productive adult,” (Barratt, Mbonye, and Seeley 2012, 220). Another study on rural-urban migrants in India found that women who migrated between the ages of 10 and 17 were likely to have a sped-up transition to adulthood. They entered employment, marriage and motherhood earlier – all context-specific markers of womanhood (Utomo et al. 2013). However, accelerated transitions do not always entail more successful ones. For example, a study on internal Kenyan migrants found migrants took on adult roles more quickly (i.e. became an adult faster) but were more likely to have lower levels of parental support and to have dropped out of school (Clark and Cotton 2013).

By shifting what childhood includes and means, child migration can also shift social constructs, such as gender. Given migration of girls and young women has increased in recent decades, there is newer evidence in the literature on how migration has transformed notions of girlhood, womanhood, and the transitions in-between. As Grabska writes in her book *Adolescent Girls’ Migration in The Global South: Transitions into*

Adulthood (2019) “migrant girls and adolescents are slowly carving out alternative ways of becoming adult women,” (244). For example, two studies on rural-urban migration in Ethiopia documented how young girls migrated away from the rural communities to escape harmful traditional practices such as circumcision and early and forced marriage – forging a transition to a new womanhood marked by independence from traditional practices (Erulkar et al. 2006; van Blerk 2008). Further, in rural to urban migration in Mali, fathers initially did not allow their daughters to migrate (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013). However, this shifted over time to resignation. Girls thus were allowed to make migration decisions overtime more easily, with their migration slowly shifting gender dynamics.

Research from Asia suggests how hybrid forms of adulthood have emerged. Khoo and Yeoh (2017) examined the aspirations of young women at the cusp of adulthood in Indonesia and found that the migration of their parents led such women to “unsettle, inflect and challenge the normative linear education-work transitions by expressing their desire to replace their parents in accessing labour migration as a livelihood option,” (2017, 280). In a study on Thai migrant women in Hong Kong, Zhang (2021) found that they reinvented their version of womanhood in Hong Kong, working to redefine and challenge the gender roles and expectations of their families and Thai society, while also balancing this new identity with Thai cultural expectations (Zhang 2021).

Returnees and circular and temporary migrants are a critical link in the process of establishing new and hybrid forms of adulthood as these migrants in particular must contextualise as well as achieve their transitions against the backdrop of their communities of origin, inevitably negotiating adulthood across contexts, including urban and rural (Barratt, Mbonye, and Seeley 2012). Their return brings the translocal nature of migration to a single geospatial point with the return forcing an interaction between old forms of adulthood with new ones in more intimate ways. Over time, returns validate or reject new forms of adulthood as they gain increasing

acceptance or denial with their communities of origin (see Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013). In this way, migration is not always facilitator to adulthood and can instead block adulthood because of prevailing norms.

This rejection of new forms of adulthood and pathways is not uncommon. For example, in Crivello’s study (2011) on Peruvian internal migrants, one mother described how her daughter had begun to wear pants and attempted to *castellanizar* (‘Spanishise’) the family, who speak Quechua – which the mother rejected. In Grabksa’s study (2014), when Nuer returnees to South Sudan similarly attempted to bring back new forms of womanhood to their communities, such as by wearing pants, they were assaulted. Further, fathers were reticent to embrace female migration as a path to adulthood in Mali (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013).

The development of new, and perhaps eventual replacement of old, adulthoods, and the markers in the transition to it, emphasises the dynamic nature of transitions in migration contexts – with transitions themselves in motion. Migration has become a point of differentiation among children and adults and demarcates inequalities. For example, migration can facilitate access to an adulthood which is viewed as “better” than the one which was achieved through staying back. In a study on Peruvian internal migration, parents saw migration as fostering access to an adulthood in which their children could better defend themselves and better engage with the state system by virtue of achieving a higher education and/or profession (Crivello 2011). Children who stay back can at times have access to a “better” childhood and adulthood because of remittances, as well. In the study, siblings who had migrated encouraged their siblings who stayed back to continue to pursue their education, thus enabling them access to an adulthood demarcated by education rather than farm work (Crivello 2011).

Importantly, these shifted versions of adulthood in specific contexts can facilitate children to express greater agency in migration processes. As migration continues to become increasingly

common in South-South migration contexts, it can be that children in migration contexts increasingly find themselves more able to express greater agency than before, if they are supported, listened to and heard.

CHILDREN WHO STAY BACK

Children in migration contexts include not only those children who migrate but also children who stay back when a parent or customary or traditional caregiver migrates, either internationally or within the country. Children who stay back are also referred to as children left behind. As South-South migration continues to increase, so to do these number of stay-back children, with some estimates ranging into the tens of millions (Cappelloni 2011). However, estimates vary widely from country to country. For example, it is estimated that 27 per cent of all children in the Philippines stay back when one or more parents migrates (Antia, Rodoreda, and Winkler 2022).

The literature, policymakers, programmers, and advocates often treat this group of children as after-thoughts, exogenous or on the peripheries of the migration experience. Further, when these children are examined, they are inaccurately conceptualised as passive and abandoned (Guo 2022). Existing evidence emerging from South-South migration contexts contradicts such conceptualisations (Crawley et al. 2023). First, children who stay back are not inevitably abandoned, as evidence on transnational parenting shows (see Meyers and Rugunanan 2020; Peng and Wong 2016). Indeed, the larger care networks common in Global South contexts often facilitate caregiving efforts. Children who stay back are also not simply passive but can exhibit agency in varying degrees. For example, in a systematic review of children's agency in migration contexts, children who stayed were identified to have expressed agency in four distinct ways: 1) in terms of care provision, 2) how they cope with the absence of their caregivers, 3) initiating communication with their parents, and 4) disclosure or withholding of information (Deng et al. 2022). Finally, children who stay back are often at the centre of households' migration and livelihood strategies, motivating caregivers' migration decisions

(Bushin 2009; Lam and Yeoh 2019) and taking on new roles in the household in the face of migration (Crawley et al. 2023).

Approaching children who stay back as potential agents and refusing universal assumptions of children who stay back allows for a more accurate investigation into their experiences of migration and renders visible how children who stay back cope with migration's consequences. It allows researchers and policymakers to better understand and respond to the realities of children who stay back.

This more context-specific and nuanced approach to children who stay back is required as, firstly, much of the current evidence-base remains limited because it focuses on how children who stay are impacted by migration – rather than how they continue to express agency within a context of migration. Secondly, studies focusing on the perspectives and experiences of children who stay back have repeatedly produced contradictory findings.

Regarding the latter, there is significant literature on how parental migration impacts children's educational trajectories with the conclusions varying. Some research finds evidence to support that parental migration negatively impacts the education of children who stay back (see Jingzhong and Lu 2011; Kandel and Kao 2001; Lu 2014; Tawodzera and Themane 2019). However, others have found that parental migration positively impacts the education of children who stay back – largely through remittances (see Boyden 2013; Caarls et al. 2021; Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2017; Crivello 2010; Wassink 2018). MIDEQ research uncovered this tension between parental migration and stay-back children's education; Parental migration in Ethiopia simultaneously led stay-back children to devalue education as a viable livelihood strategy, but also made high-quality education more affordable to such children (Nyamnjoh, Seaman and Zeleke 2024).

Some scholarship has tried to explain this variation. Scholars have found evidence that the gender of the parent migrating (see Dunusinghe

2021; Sun, Liu, and Schiller 2020), as well as the gender of the child determines the impact of migration on the education of children who stay back (see UNESCO 2019; Sun, Liu, and Schiller 2020). Reviewing the evidence on education, UNESCO (2019) found that migrant families may not benefit from special policies, such as school fee exemptions, and that children from such families drop out at higher rates. This review found that girls often suffered more from such disadvantages.

Similarly, research investigating how children who stay back are impacted psychosocially has produced mixed findings. Children who stay back often suffer psychosocially in their parents' or caregivers' absence (see Botezat and Pfeiffer 2020; Fellmeth et al. 2018; Mu and Hu 2016). For example, research in Jamaica found that staying back was associated with psychological difficulties among children (Pottinger 2010). One systematic review on children who stay back found that stay-back children are at an increased risk of depression, suicidal ideation, conduct disorders, and substance abuse (Fellmeth et al. 2018). However, recent studies have focused on how children actively and consciously build resilience in the face of parental migration (Rose-Clarke et al. 2022). One study revealed that children who stay found ways to cope with such emotional challenges (Asis 2006). Further, MIDEQ research found that children who stay back, especially older children, can make sense of their parents' absence and, in doing so, mitigate some of the negative psychosocial impacts (Crawley et al. 2023), a finding corroborated in the literature (Nazridod, Pereira, and Guerreiro 2021). In the research in Jamaica, Pottinger (2010) also found that relevant protective factors included stay-back children having someone to talk to about the migration and living in a supportive family (Pottinger 2010). Indeed, as Mu and Hu (2016) argue: while some children who stay back...

“struggle to survive, some do prosper and thrive despite the life challenges that they face. This phenomenon prompts us to move away from the

vulnerabilities...to the strengths of these children,” (146).

Thus, contextual factors influence how children who stay back are impacted by migration, as demonstrated by a multi-country study in the Global South which found that the effect of parental migration varies across different countries and different types of migration (Nguyen 2016).

In the same vein as stay-back children's sense-making, emerging research focusing on how children who stay back in Global South contexts express agency has found that such “children, through strategies of resistance, resilience and reworking, are conscious social actors and agents of their own development, albeit within constrained situations resulting from their parents' migration,” (Hoang et al. 2015, 263). For example, a study examining how children who stayed back from Indonesia and the Philippines express agency within their parents' absence found that children influenced parents' migratory decisions (Lam and Yeoh 2019).

Importantly, context-specific approaches which leave open the potential for stay-back children to express agency reveals how children negotiate their experiences with, as well as the meanings, of childhood. For example, one study in China documented that children who stayed back fostered resilience and made meaning of their parents' absence through discovering value and empowerment in reformed familial dynamics post-parental departure, such as participating more robustly in family work (Mu and Hu 2016). MIDEQ research in Egypt similarly found that stay-back children took on increased household and cultural responsibilities in their father's absence (Crawley et al. 2023). The elevation of stay-back children as contributors to the household builds on and bolsters notions of childhood already existing in the Global South – that children can be, and even should be, contributors. This serves to negate the relevance of universalized notions of childhood in South-South child migration work, where childhood is seen as a life stage devoid of responsibility and one of passivity.

CHILD MIGRANTS

Today, there are an estimated 34 million international child migrants (UNICEF n.d.). These children either migrate alone, are accompanied by a parent or customary or traditional caregiver, or migrate with others, such as friends and siblings. Some become separated along the way. These children migrate irregularly and regularly, and with diverse intentions – some migrating with the desire to remain in the countries of destination permanently, and others hoping to eventually return to their communities of origin. Some cross international borders, while others migrate internally to urban centres. Child migrants are diverse as well in terms of genders, ages, ethnicities, races, socioeconomic status, ability, and other factors.

Given the number of child migrants globally, the impacts of migration on children have been documented. There is robust research on the child migrants' education outcomes, psychosocial health, physical health, familial relationships, sense of belonging, economic well-being, and more. The vast domains of research which focus on the impact of migration on child migrants have produced effective programmes, policy, and advocacy campaigns – although at times patronising (Orgocka 2012).

However, similar to children who stay back, there exists a need to move beyond the impacts of migration to examine how children engage with these impacts. By doing so, research, programmes and policies increasingly open the space for child migrants to be potential agents and negate unhelpful narratives describing child migrants as highly vulnerable, universal victims. Not only do child migrants often not view themselves as such (Orgocka 2012), something MIDEQ research supports (UNRISD and MIDEQ 2023), but also vulnerability narratives stunt examinations into children's agency given it is often presumed vulnerability precludes agency – when in reality they can exist at the same time (see Abebe 2019, van Blerk 2008). Examinations into child migrants' agency thus cannot be binary – they require nuance. As Huijsmans writes:

“Fully embracing the notion of child migrants as social actors requires steering clear of essentialized and homogenized representations of “the child migrant.” Children’s lived experiences of migration are multiple since their social position is, amongst other things, intersected by the form of migration the children engage in, contextual particularities and cross-cutting relations such as gender, generation and class.” (2011, 1314).

Thus, *which* child migrants are able to exercise agency, and *how* they are qualitatively able to, requires further scrutiny.

Research has emphasized that child migrant's agency, given children's social status as children, is often interdependent and varies according to contextual and individual factors. Deng et al. (2022)'s systematic review on children's agency in migration contexts found that child migrants exhibited agency in two ways – through migration decision-making and through agency in their everyday life. Regarding the former, while child migrants made at times their decisions autonomously, other children had little power in the decision or the decision was taking interdependently. Regarding the latter, in their everyday life post-migrating, the authors found that children expressed agency in various ways in the household. They chose to withhold or share information, support their families through serving as mediators, and negotiating between different cultures.

As a result, migration has the potential to empower children within the household and to disrupt or dislocate traditional power systems (Deng et al. 2022; Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 2013; Kuczynski 2002). For example, children in migration contexts often occupy elevated positions within the household, providing translation services, acting as cultural mediators and providing emotional and financial support for families (Orellana, 2001, Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya, 2013; Thorne et al., 2003). Taking on such new roles and responsibilities represents a form of agency which can represent a burden,

although not inevitably (Orellana, 2001, Hynie et al, 2013), and which renegotiates what childhood and transitions to adulthood entail.

EXAMINING CHILDREN IN SOUTH-SOUTH MIGRATION

Based on MIDEQ research, the case studies presented below examine how children in South-South migration contexts engage with the consequences of migration. The research highlights how children are not just impacted by migration. Rather, they carve out space for agency to deal with the negative and positive effects of migration, and how this reflects and informs notions of childhoods in the Global South.

BURKINABÉ MIGRANTS IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: FULFILLING, SHIRKING AND REIMAGINING EXPECTATIONS

MIDEQ research in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire examined the experiences of child migration and its intersection with child labour.

CONTEXT

Burkina Faso is considered one of the poorest countries in the sub-region, with a very young population, a context that pushes Burkinabés to migrate to more affluent countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire (MIDEQa n.d.). Migration flows originate in rural Burkina Faso and their main destination is rural Côte d'Ivoire, with migrants largely pursuing this migration for economic reasons to support themselves and their households (MIDEQa n.d.). However, upon arrival, Burkinabé migrants often face xenophobia, rejection, and exclusion and do not always receive the desired benefits from their migration (MIDEQa n.d.).

In this migration corridor, children migrate, or are trafficked, for work. In this context MIDEQ research examined children's experiences with child work, but also with the phenomenon of migration more broadly.

GENDER AND CHILD MIGRATION TRENDS

Empirical data collected by MIDEQ in Burkina Faso demonstrates that predominantly boys migrate to Côte d'Ivoire. While girls were restricted in participating in migration, cultural values opened up space for boys to express agency and participate in migration. One head of household interviewed for the study underlined this: "It involved everyone, but it is much more the boys" who migrate.

The greater migration of Burkinabé boys needs to be understood within the larger cultural traditions surrounding boyhood and transitions to adulthood. Communities often place particular emphasis on the education and supervision of the young girl, which can at times prohibit migration. One respondent described this phenomenon: "It is the young boys who migrate more. With us, the bissa, the young boy is freer than the young girl. A girl can't afford to take the path like a boy. If she does, she's not a girl who respects her parents...who doesn't listen to her parents. Otherwise here you will not see a young girl going on a trip like that."

CHILD MIGRATION AND DECISION-MAKING

MIDEQ data from Burkina Faso investigated the migration decision-making of children. The children's migration project is often an individual project at times designed by the children themselves. This personal decision to migrate without involving parents or family members is often due to fear of the family member not supporting their migration decision. This is why children may decide to hire the services of a migration facilitator themselves, as one facilitator described: "It is the children who come to see me most of the time." One father described how he did not know his son had planned to migrate: "It wasn't me who gave him money. I don't know where he got the money to go. He did not leave with anyone's consent."

However, not all children take the migration decision independently. Some negotiate with their parents, undertaking the journey with their

parents or receiving encouragement from them. "When I left for Côte d'Ivoire, I was still a child, I was nine years old at most. I knew nothing, and [the migration facilitators] went to my parents to say they will go with me." Parents' decision-making Burkina Faso is often motivated by the aspiration that the children's migration will bring benefits for the parents and the household. This is associated with gendered expectations placed on boys who are, even in childhood, expected to contribute to the household.

REASONS FOR CHILD MIGRATION

The reasons underlying the migration of children are economic and cultural. The deterioration of the economic context of households encourages children and parents to seek out migration. One child described this belief: "The cause is the lack of money...since the cultivable lands are insufficient and the harvests are bad." A head of household also stated: "It is the lack of means that leads some parents to say to bring their child to Côte d'Ivoire." Boys' migration is seen as way to bolster the economic conditions of the household, with migration both being informed by and contributing to the notion that childhood also entails children contributing to the household.

Beyond supporting their households, boy migrants also face pressure to marry – which requires resources that can be attained via migration.

"A young boy from 12 or 13 years old, if he does not go to school, he will already be thinking of getting married. However, if you have nothing, you cannot get married. Currently, marriage needs money. To get married, you have to offer a certain number of things, you also have to do the wedding ceremony. So he [the young person who wants to build up his marriage capital] has to go out and get the money and come back to get married. So, to start preparing for the wedding, he will migrate."

This demonstrates how migration is an expression of agency whereby children choose migration as a vehicle through which they can achieve adulthood.

MIDEQ research also found evidence that girl migrants can use migration to express agency and to escape a marriage they do not desire. One child who stayed back in Burkina Faso expressed this view: "There are girls who migrate because of early marriage."

For boy migrants, migration thus represented an embrace or an attempt to fulfil the gendered expectations placed upon them to provide for the household and prepare for marriage as they transition into manhood. On the contrary, migration for girls was at times an attempt to liberate themselves from gender constraints and negotiate girlhood and womanhood.

CONSTRAINED AGENCY

Some respondents in the research saw migration as a practice which offered benefits to children in terms of knowledge and skills, in addition to financial gains. One child reported how he was able to buy a plot of land in Burkina Faso because of his migration. This same child also reported that he gained knowledge from his migration. Another child reported a similar outlook: "Leaving here to go to Côte d'Ivoire is good because you can go and make money."

Nonetheless, child migrants remain vulnerable (see Samuel Hall 2022) and the MIDEQ research demonstrated that even when migration represents an expression of agency – this agency can open up space for harms. As one informant reported: "I lived in Côte d'Ivoire, I often saw the suffering of children."

One key informant explained how once these children leave their homes, they are exposed to hunger, lack of accommodation, culture shock, and xenophobia. Another stated: "They [the children] face issues like exploitation, trafficking and violence. The poverty of the parents means that some children are forced to migrate, to deprive themselves of love and protection while submitting themselves to risks."

However, how children negotiate this vulnerability deserves increasing focus. This is because examinations of child migration have long suffered from a universal perspective which sees the children as passive victims who are denied their childhood (Ensor 2010).

Local cultural systems can encourage and expect children to contribute to the household – which migration can facilitate. Indeed, in recognition of this, more context-specific approaches to child work have emerged, specifically in West Africa. The Ivorian State has been committed since 2022 to the establishment of a migration policy framework aimed at regulating the migration of children and the ethical recruitment of migrant workers in economic sectors such as dessert bananas, cocoa and gold mines.

MIDEQ research in Côte d'Ivoire highlighted how Burkinabé migrants struggle to carve out forms of resilience amidst extreme vulnerability. For example, the research demonstrated that Burkinabé children in Côte d'Ivoire are preferred because, according to respondents, they are viewed as innocent, easily controlled and exploitable. At the same time, the children take advantage of this status for financial gain, demonstrating they can be actors in migration processes.

"There is a 17-year-old Burkinabé who was in gold panning, and when he finished, he got 110,000 CFA [180 USD] and then he left."

CHILDREN OF EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN JORDAN: ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE

MIDEQ research in Egypt and Jordan investigated how children in migration contexts navigate a complex landscape of change and adaptation when they stay back.

CONTEXT

Egyptian migration has long played a significant role in the political, economic, and social spheres in Egypt, with Jordan hosting the largest number of Egyptian migrants second only to Saudi Arabia (MIDEQb n.d.), most of whom migrate for work. The number of Egyptian migrants in Jordan range from a bit more than 100,000 to more than 1 million (MIDEQb n.d.).

Egyptians in Jordan primarily work in the agriculture, construction, and service sectors and are mostly young men who are considered important breadwinners for their families (MIDEQb n.d.). Egyptian migrants often leave behind children, wives, parents, siblings, and other family members who rely on their remittances to improve their quality of life (MIDEQb n.d.).

NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the context of Egypt, children who stay back when their fathers migrate assume additional roles and responsibilities in the absence of their migrant fathers, helping with household chores and acting as problem solvers. They also play an unexpected role in migration decisions, recognising its financial benefits and encouraging their fathers to migrate for better access to resources.

MIDEQ research showed how in the absence of their fathers, children, especially older sons, often become the primary support for their families. They step up to assist their mothers with household chores, care for younger siblings, and handle day-to-day tasks that would have been traditionally fulfilled by the father. This shift in responsibilities goes beyond typical childhood roles, and these young individuals demonstrate remarkable maturity and adaptability in the face of their fathers' absence.

Moreover, the absence of fathers often results in children developing strong bonds with other male figures in their extended family, such as uncles. These relationships provide emotional support and guidance, offering a sense of

stability and connection during their fathers' migration.

CHILDREN AND PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION DECISION-MAKING

The migration of Egyptian workers to Jordan is often driven by economic aspirations and the pursuit of better opportunities to support their families back home. Within this context, the motivations for migration are intertwined with the well-being and prospects of their children. Children of Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan seem to play a notable role in the decision-making process of migration. They recognise and appreciate the financial benefits that migration brings, understanding that it can significantly improve their family's quality of life. As they witness the remittances sent back home, which contribute to access to essential resources such as private lessons and improved clothing, children become active stakeholders in their family's migration trajectory. One child explained their experience:

"He (my dad) never deprives me of anything, for example, all my requests are fulfilled. For instance, my friend tells me that her father is here, but he doesn't know how to get her the things she wants."

The promise of a better future for their children serves as a motivating factor for migrant workers in Jordan. In seeking improved living conditions and economic stability, parents endure separation to secure a brighter future for their families, particularly their children, and children recognise that and seem to support it.

The active engagement of children in the migration decision-making process underscores the interconnectedness of family dynamics and aspirations. By acknowledging their agency in understanding migration's potential benefits, we gain valuable insights into the multidimensional nature of migration's consequences for children in the context of Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan.

COPING MECHANISMS AND ENGAGING WITH MIGRATION'S CONSEQUENCES

Children of Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan demonstrate diverse coping mechanisms, both positive and negative, to navigate the consequences of their fathers' migration.

Parental absence presents opportunities for children to develop resilience and adaptability, with positive coping strategies reflecting children's determination to overcome challenges. First, children turn to their mothers, uncles, grandparents, and other relatives for emotional support and guidance during their fathers' absence. These family members serve as crucial pillars of strength, providing comfort and reassurance. Additionally, building strong social bonds within their communities becomes essential for children, offering companionship and a sense of belonging during times of separation.

Adopting an optimistic perspective enables children to cope with their fathers' absence and focus on the benefits of migration, such as improved access to resources and opportunities. Children who stay back conceive the migration as something positive and from which they benefit. Especially among older sons, assuming social responsibilities within their families showcases their maturity and willingness to support their parents.

The benefits of remittances extend beyond financial support; they contribute to building independent homes for families and improving access to education and healthcare, enhancing children's overall well-being.

Regular communication through phone calls and social media allows children to stay connected with their migrant parents, bridging the physical distance and fostering emotional closeness.

However, children may employ negative coping mechanisms, especially in response to emotional challenges arising from parental absence. In the absence of their fathers, children may experience feelings of longing and

emotional distress. Some children resort to risky behaviours, as a temporary escape from emotional distress. Moreover, emotional challenges, like rebellion and stubbornness, particularly among adolescent boys, manifests as a response to their fathers' absence and the changes in family dynamics.

MOBILITY, GENDER AND NOTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

In the context of Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan, the interplay of mobility, gender norms, and societal notions of childhood influences children's experiences with migration – similar to MIDEQ research in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.

In Egypt, gender norms profoundly shape the division of household tasks. Boys, often seen as inheritors of their fathers' roles and responsibilities, may take on additional domestic duties that differ from their usual expectations. As the father is away for greater periods of times, boys increasingly can experience an accelerated transition to manhood, fulfilling roles in traditional ceremonies, like marriage, that their father would have assumed.

In contrast, girls may also experience changes in their roles within the family. They at times assume more responsibilities in the absence of their fathers than what they typically would fulfil. They contribute more to household duties and can provide emotional support to their mothers and younger siblings. Such experiences can elevate the role of girls in households in maintaining family cohesion during migration.

The greater and new roles and responsibilities children who stay back assume within their families showcase their resilience and adaptability. Indeed, their capacity to employ diverse coping mechanisms, both positive and negative, reflects the need for comprehensive support systems that address their emotional well-being.

ETHIOPIAN CHILD MIGRANTS AND TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

MIDEQ research on Ethiopian child migrants to South Africa examined how children use migration to enact change in their lives. The negotiation of vulnerability and attempts at expressing agency within the constraints of childhood often produced mixed outcomes for such children, as well as informed and bolstered notions of childhood.

CONTEXT

More than three million Ethiopians are believed to live abroad and recently South Africa has taken over as the major destination for Ethiopian migrants in the 'South' with tens of thousands of Ethiopians having migrated to South Africa in recent decades (MIDEQc n.d.). This migration to South Africa is gendered with most being young men. Many migrate for economic reasons and most of the Ethiopian migrants in South Africa come from Southern Ethiopia, specifically the Hadiya Zone, which is relatively lagging compared to other parts of the country in development indicators although has greatly benefited from remittances (MIDEQc n.d.). Despite the route becoming increasingly common, the Ethiopians' journeys to South Africa are fraught with risks (MIDEQc n.d.).

While many young Ethiopians migrate to South Africa, there are increasing numbers of children born to Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. These children are attempting to overcome stubborn legal and other structural barriers to reap the full benefits of migration and their South African life, while also negotiating the increased burdens of being a child of a migrant household in South Africa (Seaman and Nyamnjoh 2023).

“CHILDREN” MIGRATE

MIDEQ research in Ethiopia found that while government officials and community members understand that legally speaking one is considered to be a child as long when they are below the age of 18, social understandings of children prevailed.

The research found that the average age of child migrants ranges between 13 to 17, while in few cases, children as young as 10 years old migrate on their own. The study found out that the majority of Ethiopian child migrants leaving Hadiya zone (the main area of research for the study) for South Africa are children from impoverished backgrounds. One aspect of social age definition observed from the research relates to defining age based on the strength of a person to perform tasks. If one is old enough to engage in laborious tasks (depending on his/her physique) they will not be considered a child. This, according to informants, is above 15 in many cases, but could be as low as 12.

Child migrants in the region are often not conceived as “children” as universalized by legal instruments. In the study, the use of child labour is acceptable from an early age, at least in the off-school hours and seasons. This is more so in the poorest households where a child is expected to help meet the basic needs and expenses related to schooling. Indeed, children from poor economic background in all study sites are often forced to drop out of school to support the subsistence of their families.

Child migration in the MIDEQ research was often conceived by those in the community as an appropriate avenue within childhood for children to achieve economic benefits and contribute to the household. Indeed, most child migrants were school dropouts and children coming from large households which faced economic hardships. Migration, in other words, was seen as an age-appropriate livelihood strategy for older children to pursue. Nonetheless, this livelihood strategy was one taken to negotiate vulnerability, namely economic deprivation.

CULTURALLY SANCTIONED YET RISKY RITE OF PASSAGE

Given the commonality of migration in the Hadiya zone in Ethiopia, migration was also a culturally sanctioned rite of passage for children to undertake. Migration was accepted by the majority as a viable alternative in life and was increasingly becoming the preferred livelihood choice for many children in the region.

The MIDEQ research found a significant shift from investing in children’s education to investing in migration, as the value of education has become increasingly discredited as a way to earn a livelihood in the region. Hence, an investment in migration is considered as a wiser investment. Further, aspirations are no longer attached to land or agriculture, but rather to the more tangible and available benefits of urban life brought about by migration.

It is nonetheless a strategy which is incredibly risky. MIDEQ research found that children’s journeys from their place of origin to their respective destinations are rife with protection risks. The multifaceted risks faced involve being held by criminals against their will, trafficking, detention, deportation, living on streets under abysmal conditions, and lack of access to services.

ACCELERATED TRANSITIONS UPON ARRIVAL

MIDEQ research in South Africa found that once children of Ethiopian origin arrive in South Africa, their “child” status is not restored. Many take on adult-like roles in South Africa (Seaman and Nyamnjoh 2023) – a finding similar to that of the MIDEQ research on children who stay back in Egypt.

Indeed, children of Ethiopian origin in South Africa often take on a parental role in their household (Seaman and Nyamnjoh 2023). Able to speak fluent English and/or Afrikaans, these children serve as intermediaries between their households and their schools. Further, these child migrants often act as representatives for their families in official functions (e.g. at immigration proceedings or at school meetings for younger siblings). This represents an empowerment within the household – which can simultaneously add additional stress.

Exacerbating the stress these children endure, MIDEQ research in South Africa found that these children struggled to embrace their new roles as structural barriers prevented them from accessing certain educational and professional opportunities in South Africa (Nyamnjoh,

Seaman and Zeleke 2024; Seaman and Nyamnjoh 2023). For example, documentation challenges and irregular migration statuses prevented these children from graduating onto higher levels of education or seeking certain forms of employment. This was true even for those children who were born in South Africa.

Children of Ethiopian origin in migration processes demonstrate how for many children, migration accelerates transitions to adulthood by heightening the roles and expectations placed on them. However, even when these are culturally sanctioned, the research in South Africa demonstrated how structural barriers can prevent such children from being able to fulfil these new responsibilities and complete the rite of passage.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the literature review and case studies, this report concludes on take-aways regarding children's role in South-South migration:

- **Children exhibit agency within situations of vulnerability**, and positive coping mechanisms can at time open up space for new vulnerabilities. As a result, nuanced examinations which emphasize the gradations of vulnerability and resiliency in child migration contexts should be encouraged. This would allow policy-makers and programmers to recognise, and build off, the coping mechanisms children themselves are developing and exhibiting.
- **Child migration is embedded in social constructs that are often seen as more legitimate than legal ones.** While international standards must be upheld, there exists an increasing need to recognise that children will migrate, particularly in South-South migration contexts. This is even more salient in contexts where migration has become both a rite of passage and an economic necessity. There thus needs to be programmatic and policy efforts which strive to make child migration safer rather than to eliminate it.
- **Children who stay back need to be included in national migration plans.** As demonstrated in MIDEQ research in Egypt, children who stay back are integral parts of the migration process. They should be treated as exogenous, but rather endogenous to the migration process. This can be done through more migration policies which allow family reunification or visitation, as well as supporting programmes which target stay-back households.
- **Gendered notions of childhood impact children's participation in migration, yet migration can help defy expectations that go against children's best interest.** Girl and boy migrants participate in migration differently because of the expectations placed upon them. Understanding the gendered nature of child migration also allows for more robust analysis of why specific children are vulnerable and/or resilient in specific ways, and how they can be protected.
- **Children, especially older children, can be full actors in the migration process.** Programmes and policies need to directly include children as target groups. MIDEQ research in Burkina Faso demonstrated how children themselves can independently decide to migrate. This underlines that efforts aimed at informing migration decision-making, such as information campaigns, need to target not just adults, but also children.
- **Children's voices need to be elevated in research, programming and policy.** As the MIDEQ research demonstrates, children, especially older children, are able to interact with migration and its consequences to a much greater degree than is typically attribute to them. The research thus emphasises the importance of speaking and directly including children, their voices and their experiences, in programme and policy design, implementation and monitoring.

CONCLUSION

This Research Report explored how children affected by migration engage with migration and its effects. While the research emphasised that children in South-South migration contexts can be vulnerable and are often exposed to harms and protection risks, they are also capable of negotiating this vulnerability, coping positively, and fostering greater resiliency. While this represents a choice to examine such experiences through a more positive approach, this perspective allows programmers and policy-makers to better recognise and thus adapt to the strengths and existing coping mechanism of children in a more meaningful manner.

Importantly, the MIDEQ case studies on children in South-South migration contexts in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Jordan, and South Africa represent a concerted effort to elevate children's voices in South-South contexts. In this way, MIDEQ aims to decentre children's experiences from the Global North to the Global South, producing more accurate evidence and conceptualisations of these children.

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Cover image: In Hudet, Ethiopia, Samuel Hall teams captured the voices of children on what their communities need to recover and move beyond the recent conflicts. Photo by Saadia Ali for Samuel Hall.

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