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Forced Migrant Youth's Identity Development and Agency in Resettlement Decision-Making: Liminal Life on the Myanmar-Thailand Border

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# Forced Migrant Youth's Identity Development and Agency in Resettlement Decision-Making: Liminal Life on the Myanmar-Thailand Border<sup>1</sup>

Jessica Ball  
Sarah Moselle

**Abstract.** *Migration and refugee studies have elaborated upon themes of voice, subjectivity, and agency of mobile adults while comparatively neglecting forced migrant children and youth. Decades of armed conflict and economic collapse in Myanmar resulted in millions of forced migrants living in neighboring Thailand, China, and Malaysia. This article focuses on the experiences of forced migrant youth aged 12 to 17 from Myanmar who have grown up as temporary residents along the northwest border of Thailand. They are often stateless and disconnected from their families, communities, and cultures of origin and excluded from the formal economy and institutional affiliations, living in a liminal state on the edge of society. This article sets out a rationale for prospective research exploring how forced migrant youth may be both vulnerable and resilient, both victims and agents, and carriers of both their cultures of origin and globalized identities shaped by displacement. Exploring the issues raised in this article can challenge foundational theories of child development regarding normative development and necessary conditions for thriving, which underpin international law and settlement practices. This paper provides a contextual overview and charts a program of research with the intention to better understand the capacity of youth on the move and contribute meaningfully to decision-making about their repatriation or resettlement.*

## Introduction

The population of displaced persons has reached a record high; as of 2015, an estimated 59.5 million people are refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2015a).<sup>2</sup> Most displaced persons originate from conflict-ridden countries in Asia and Africa, including Myanmar, Afghanistan,

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<sup>1</sup> The authors thank Angela Diem, Early Childhood Care and Development Officer for BEAM Education Foundation in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for her guidance and contributions during preliminary information gathering and partnership development phases of the program of research described here.

<sup>2</sup> As the crisis in Syria escalates and disrupts neighboring countries, this figure has likely increased at a rate of 42,500 persons per day (UNHCR 2015a).

Somalia, Syria, and Pakistan. Fifty-one percent of the global population with refugee status are children under 18 years old, and the number of asylum applications filed by unaccompanied or separated children is currently the highest on record (approximately 34,300) (UNHCR 2015b). While accurate estimates are not possible, a significant proportion of people on the move are forced migrants,<sup>3</sup> including unaccompanied forced migrant children, who are not registered as asylum seekers; they may not have applied for or been granted official refugee status. Sustainable solutions are elusive; few of these displaced persons will be repatriated to their home territories or countries in the near future. Rather, there is a growing global population of perpetually displaced persons – people on the move, perched on the precipice of multiple intersecting sources of uncertainty. As often as not, displacement is multigenerational, conferred from parents to children like a legacy of liminality.

Global institutions, including international organizations, educational bodies, and the media, tend to understand migrant children as passive subjects who are dependent on their parents, the state, and international organizations to determine their well being and future (Hart 2014). As the Syrian war escalates, online and print media are saturated with images of displaced Syrians carrying children in their arms in search of refuge. Images like these reinforce the dominant understanding of children as passive persons who must be carried to safety; their stories are often understood as secondary products of their parents' primary narratives of displacement. Most forced migrant children are visible to state and social institutions in only the most transitory ways, as temporary visitors or as an unauthorized, circulating population. Many find a degree of safety and care in makeshift, temporary shelters and informal foster homes. By contrast, this article contributes to a growing call to recognize that migrant children are complex social actors whose subjectivities defy simplistic binary classification as agents or victims, active or passive, or resilient or vulnerable (Beazley 2015; Hart 2014; Wells, Burman, Montgomery, & Watson 2014). As well, the article considers how circulating children may be pioneers of global citizenry.

Although few children may have played active roles as instigators of their migration, in order to survive and thrive they must engage in dynamic meaning-making of their changing circumstances, and learn new skills to understand and adapt to their shifting trajectories. This article posits that, due to their unique experiences of circulation and iterative adaptations to shifting, pluralist circumstances, forced migrant children may embody a novel form of global citizenship – one that moves beyond dualistic attachments to 'origin' and 'host' countries. Hart (2014) suggests that varied outcomes of displacement and forced migration may depend upon children's 'age position.' The research described in this article focuses on youth between 12 and 17 years old.

The conditions and trajectories of forced migrant children's development defy conventional understanding of childhood and identity formation. Migra-

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<sup>3</sup> The International Organization for Migration defines forced migrants as individuals who "leave their countries to escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood" (IOM 2000).

tion paths are charted by multiple coordinates: conditions in one's ancestral homeland, refugee and asylum seeker status, solace offered by host countries, and identity formation, to name a few. For many displaced adults, their identity is tied to a sense of specific nationality or ethnicity. There has been little research to date on how displacement affects the identity formation of youth. In spite of sustained absence from their traditional homeland, many forced migrant adults experience a yearning to return to a familiar homeland and will seek out others with a similar background for solidarity. Do children who have been born into displacement or who have lived their early years as forced migrants also experience this yearning? When they grow up amidst peoples with mixed ethnic, religious and linguistic heritage, do they develop attitudes and skills that prepare them to live in a more heterogeneous world than that of their forebears? What foundations are their identities built upon and how does their sense of identity impact their migration aspirations and outcomes?

The concepts and prospective research described in this article builds upon the first author's program experience and preliminary information gathering with forced migrant youth from Myanmar living in the Thailand-Myanmar border region and with migrant-led organizations providing non-formal education and social services to these youth. During visits in 2013 and 2015, the first author engaged in direct observation of residential programs for forced migrant children and youth and exploratory conversations with migrant youth, caregivers, and staff of humanitarian organizations. This community engagement created the foundation for partnership research to generate knowledge about the experiences, needs, and goals of forced migrant youth from Myanmar. This article provides a rationale for a program of research that sheds important light on the identity and attachments of forced migrant children. Such research could have significant implications on policy and practice; current settlement practice is underpinned by normative paradigms of child development. Although the article focuses on forced migrant youth from Myanmar living in Thailand, research inquiries exploring questions such as those raised in this article could shed timely light on the broader landscapes of circulating children. We hypothesize that – under certain circumstances – migrant youth can forge identities, skills, and sources of belonging in the world, which are unexpected and atypical according to foundational theories of child development, but which may be indications of what it means to grow up in a globalized world where both the constraints and assurances of national belonging are attenuated.

## **Context**

Since the military took control of Myanmar in 1962, ethnic minorities have faced sustained economic hardship and violent suppression of ethnic minorities' land rights, language and self-governance. Millions of children and families have fled their homeland to neighboring Thailand, Malaysia, and China. Thailand, which shares a 2,401-kilometer border with Myanmar, has been host to a steady flow of refugees and forced migrants, peaking in the late 1980s after a string of brutal military crackdowns on civil resistance movements.

Approximately 120,000 Myanmar refugees live in nine temporary shelters on the Thai side of the Thailand-Myanmar border (UNHCR 2014). However, there are as many as 2.5 million Myanmar migrants living in Thailand, and 140,000 living in Malaysia (UNHCR 2014). Some proportions of these are forced migrants. It is estimated that at least one fifth of these populations are children (under 19 years old) (Myanmar Education Integration Initiative 2013), most of whom have been exposed to psychosocial trauma associated with armed conflict. Most of these children lack identity documentation, curtailing their access to protection and formal education (Myanmar Education Integration Initiative 2013). In some instances, children arrive unaccompanied – sent by their families in search of safety and education. In other cases children have been kidnapped or separated from their families during conflict and flight (Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights, Burma 2009).

Beginning in 2011, the Myanmar government began a political shift towards a participatory democracy. What was once a rigidly insular country is gradually opening up to civic participation, foreign investors, and humanitarian organizations. This move seems to presage the end of 54 years of authoritarian rule and human rights violations targeted towards ethnic minorities. Seeing this political shift, the governments of Thailand, Malaysia and other emigration destinations are re-evaluating their policies toward Myanmar migrants. Within the next five to ten years, it is anticipated that Myanmar migrants will be re-conceptualized as voluntary migrants rather than as displaced persons fleeing a brutal regime. International resettlement programs are already beginning to shrink, and support for temporary shelters and services is diminishing.

Despite these changes, migrants living along the border with Thailand remain wary about their prospects for safety, social inclusion, and employment. Myanmar's transition from isolation and authoritarianism is unsteady, and recently negotiated ceasefire agreements are perceived by migrants to be tenuous. Thus, although many migrants look forward to the day they may return to their homeland, others continue to view emigration as a critical strategy for survival and livelihood. Finally, many of the children living in the border region have spent the majority if not the entirety of their lives outside of Myanmar. Accessing their understanding of Myanmar as a country, a possible national identity, and a language, and how these figure into migrants' identities and migration strategies, will be critical as politicians, policy-makers and international non-governmental organizations develop permanent strategies for migrants living in limbo.

### **Statelessness and Liminality**

An estimated half to three-quarters of migrant Myanmar children who are living in Thailand and Malaysia do not have official status as asylum seekers and lack official identity documentation. Many have not had their births officially registered; most would not be able to produce a birth certificate. Lack of birth registration and inability to produce official identity documentation puts these children at risk of statelessness (Lynch & Teff 2009). Statelessness prevents

freedom of movement across international borders and can become a permanent obstacle to repatriation, assimilation as a citizen in one's country of residence, or legal migration to a third country (Goris, Harrington, & Kohn 2009; Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion 2014; Park 2009; UNHCR 2012). It can also lead to a host of lifelong difficulties, including being unable to access social protection, public health services, government assistance programs, school enrollment, legal employment and marriage, and registration to vote (Blitz 2011; van Bueren 2011). For example, despite joining international declarations ensuring the right of all children to enroll in public education (e.g., Education for All, UNESCO 1990), many government schools in Thailand and Malaysia require identity documents when a child seeks to enroll (Dare 2015). Similarly, when a child arrives from outside the country, Myanmar schools require documented evidence of a child's Myanmar identity and, often, a record of prior achievement in Myanmar-language-medium formal education (Dare 2015; Myanmar Education Integration Initiative 2013). For children who are aware of the importance of birth registration and other forms of identity documentation, their inability to produce identity documents can increase an already anxiety-provoking sense of uncertainty about their prospects for integration into the country where they are residing, their heritage country, or any country (Beazley 2003).

This condition of growing up without official recognition of one's identity and citizenship could be described as developing in a state of 'liminality' (Ball & Moselle, in press). Liminality refers to a condition of being intermediate between two or more states, conditions, or regions, or being suspended in a transitional space for an indeterminate amount of time. Irregular child migrants living in the Thailand-Myanmar border region could be said to be living liminally due to their lack of official identity documentation verifying their name, date of birth, and affiliation with a nation-state. Further, these children often live in social groups that are not connected with their family or community of origin, and they often live their lives perched on the territorial and social edges of mainstream society – without access to formal schooling, law enforcement, and health clinics.

### **Identity Formation in Liminal Lifeworlds**

Acutely aware of the transitory and often dangerous nature of their circumstances, and embedded in multicultural, often child-led communities that demand precocious self-regulation, autonomy, and responsibility, youth living in the border region may acquire skills and understandings of themselves and the world that are not congruent with developmental trajectories described in foundational theories of childhood (Ensor 2010). Conventional developmental psychology asserts that children are unable to thrive without stable attachments to primary caregivers and clear social signposts on the path to consolidating a singular, enduring individual, cultural and national identity (Boyden 2003; Boyden & de Berry 2004; Ensor & Gozdziaik 2010; Huijsmans & Tran 2015; Tran & Huijsmans 2014).

By contrast, children growing up in shelters in the border region tend to

live in residential care facilities housing hundreds of children, under the care and supervision of a handful of adults. In the absence of obvious primary caregivers, older children may adopt a care-giving role to younger children. Little research has been done assessing whether this kind of care arrangement – which may not be as consistent and reliable as a conventional parent-child dynamic – can engender the positive self-regard psychodynamic theory tells us is essential for emotional self-regulation and resilience.

Boyden and de Berry (2004) were among the first to posit that the absence of conditions for normative development in the early years does not necessarily equate to negative development. Rather, children growing up and navigating these challenging circumstances on a daily basis may develop enhanced metacognitive capacity to tolerate ambiguity and meet multiple and competing role demands. The author's field experience working with community-based organizations supporting migrant Myanmar youth revealed that many of these children have learned to speak many languages, work cooperatively, and live in close proximity to a array of children and adults from similar and diverse backgrounds, thereby necessitating them to creatively problem-solve and proactively engage with an ethnically- and religiously-heterogeneous group of people of all ages. These children have developed affinity for Thailand as a place that allowed them to live in peace, if not in comfort; to Myanmar as a diasporic horizon (Johnson 2007) where their family originates and where they may have ties to a broader ethno-linguistic community. Conversations with youth suggest some may also have positive feelings for countries beyond their immediate experience, places where aid workers and volunteers originate.

In spite of the many ambiguities and violations of dominant paradigms of positive child development that characterize the childhoods of youngsters in the border region, some of these children's experiences of migration appear to have stimulated enhanced psychological capacities for emotional self-regulation, independent decision-making, role taking, and creativity. Against all odds, many of these children have managed to develop unique capacities that enable them to thrive in a variety of unpredictable, fluctuating circumstances. In the author's preliminary information gathering with forced migrant youth in Mae Sot, youth pointed to opportunities to learn about the world and how to live in it, beyond the cultural and linguistic confines of their home village in Myanmar.

In my home village, I would not have opportunities to learn all kinds of skills, like I do here. Here I have learned three languages – Karen, Myanmar, English, and a little bit of Thai - as well as already knowing Kachin. I learned to play guitar. I learned skills from other youths and learned to listen to the opinions of other youths.

This phenomenon warrants further study, and could shed light on the ways in which aid organizations and settlement services can support migrant children, as well as offer a competing narrative to hegemonic theories of attachment and socialization that posit parental care, family stability, and a carefully or-

cheestrated exposure to gradients of responsibility and challenge as conditions for positive child development.

### **Globalized Identities Shaped by Displacement**

The children in Mae Sot's capacity to adapt to fluctuating environments peopled by a diverse array of actors suggests that children growing up in these environments may be paragons of and uniquely well-suited to the demands of a globalized world. Globalized identities are characterized by a diffusion of ethnic, religious and linguistic allegiances (Bauman 2011). For children living in the border region, the physical border demarking nations may be a permeable one – irrelevant to them due to frequent border crossings. Their community may also be a permeable one, subject to reconstitution as children from their peer group come and go, volunteers arrive and depart. Thus their reference points in the creation of their individual and cultural identity may be more expansive and harder to pin down than conventional theories of identity development can accommodate. Affiliation to Thailand as a source of refuge may be no less strong than their affiliation to their parents' place of birth in Myanmar – even though this place may only be familiar to them through stories and collective memories.

It follows therefore that transmigrants' identities cannot be understood as being dependent upon a singular nation-state (Glick Schiller 1995). Their identity formation may be better explained as a confluence of multiple inputs – each robust and well defined – existing harmoniously with and in contrast to one another. This process is aptly captured in Bhabha's (1994) theoretical construct of the 'Third Space', a discursive arena in which cultural systems are constructed in a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation". Anderson (1991) famously described nations as 'imagined communities' created and sustained by a network of individuals who perceive themselves to be part of a distinct, unified whole but may never interact with each other face to face. The identities constructed by and between children of migration most likely cannot be categorized into a single imagined community, but rather they draw from multiple conventional and novel imagined communities, some becoming more tangible depending on the geographic context or social culture youth are embedded in. The nimbleness necessitated by the precarious circumstances in which children in the border region live may promote skills needed to become agile movers in an increasingly globalized social, political, and economic landscape.

Scholarship on migration has yet to develop a model that accommodates the unique situation of circulating, forced migrant children. Generationally, these children most closely align with '1.5 generation immigrants': born in their country of origin but migrating to a new host country in their early years or adolescence (Alba et al. 2009; Rumbaut 1994). The cultural identities (and associated social behaviors) adopted by such individuals are difficult to predict, and tend to form idiosyncratically – pairing certain aspects of the culture of origin with the practices and values that are available in the host country. But unlike 1.5 generation immigrant children, migrating children lack the concrete

secondary identity afforded by a permanent host country. Further, such children may circulate through one or more host countries before achieving permanent settlement. These trajectories are as yet uncharted, and socio-economic mobilities upon reaching a permanent settlement destination remain understudied.

### **Future Migration Trajectories**

Given the unpredictability of the cultural, linguistic, ethnic and national affiliations and identities of migrant children, it is difficult for state bodies, refugee agencies, and support services to establish ‘best practices.’ However, what seems certain is that current practice is inadequate to meet the goals and aspirations of circulating children and youth. In spite of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’s affirmation that the children have a right to a nationality and a voice in decision-making about their future (UN General Assembly 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005), current practice is premised on antiquated models of developmental psychology and sociology which assume passivity and prolonged dependency of children, and generate a one-dimensional frame of forced migrant children as victims. This was mirrored in international law and migration policies, which – until the 21st century – have centered on adults and constructed children as appendages of mothers and fathers on the move. By contrast, the first author’s experiences with migrant children in Mae Sot in the Thai-Myanmar border region suggest that youth – particularly youth who have experienced accelerated development and individuation in the absence of stable primary caregivers – have elaborated views on safe, viable and desirable next steps. These views are shaped by their experience as migrants, including the capacities, skills and outlooks they have developed and their sense of cultural identity.

In preliminary information gathering conversations with forced migrant youth in temporary shelters and programs in Mae Sot, youth spoke about how they hope their lack of permanent residence will be resolved. Responses were characterized by a high degree of flexibility: “It’s okay if I’m here or there, as long as I’m allowed to stay.” Few youth expressed a yearning for a specific state – their geographies in their responses were triangulated more to their age and sense of community:

I don’t mind where I go. It doesn’t matter. Just somewhere. Here maybe or over there somewhere – overseas I guess. I just want to go where I know someone. I don’t want to go alone. Maybe I can go to Canada... or a friend has a cousin in Mae La camp who said maybe we could go together to Australia.

Several youth expressed ambivalence about their origins, suggesting that living in a heterogeneous, fluctuating community nurtured open-mindedness, respect for being a young age, and opportunities to learn new skills.

Most responses expressed ambivalence about their origins.

If I'm living in my home town in Myanmar, I don't think I will have real youth life. Here, I live with many youth. We are all different, but we listen to others' opinions. In Myanmar, people are not interested in youth opinions. They are interested whether you did work to get money for the family to eat. Here I have friends from many different places, and I found out that everybody has their own intelligence no matter who they are or where they are from.

Most youth anticipated a future of circulation.

My family left Myanmar. I'm not from here [Thailand]. It's just... wherever I end up, I guess.

We are the same youth like youth in any other country or community, even though we did not grow up in our home town. We have the same desires, goals, hopes and skills as youths around the world. If we have opportunities or someone who cares about us, I think we can be developed creatures ready for anything and able to live anywhere.

The youth here are wild – they can learn easily and learn hard things easily. We are sharp, have lots of energy. We can go anywhere and do whatever we want if we have opportunity, anything is possible for us.

Perhaps most notable in their responses was a perception of being left out of decision-making, and assertion that externally imposed agendas have little traction with their personal aspirations.

When I'm old enough, I'll go where I want. Even if I'm told to stay here or go there, I probably won't stay there.

I think they should listen to youths' voices and provide opportunity in every corner for youths to participate. The most important thing is: Should listen and learn what is happening among youths and understand the feeling of youths. They should be involved in every event that is about decisions involving where migrant youth should live.

### **Call for further research**

The authors join the call by migration scholars and advocates for research that amplifies forced migrant children's voice, agency and subjectivities (Bhabha 2014; Bicchieri 2011; Hart 2006; Huijsmans 2012). Ethnographic research is needed to test the hypothesis that at least some youth who have grown up as forced migrants have forged hybrid identities and embody a globalized social positioning that enables them to adapt to radically ambiguous circumstances. Such findings would challenge orthodox assumptions about the necessarily pro-

longed dependency needs of children and the dominant social construction of young forced migrants as victims who must be ‘carried to safety.’ The research would demonstrate the value of listening to children in planning for their post-migration social protection and normalization as citizens. This could have impact on policy and practice –for both formal protection agencies such as the UNHCR, and the informal community-based organizations that provide the majority of support services to undocumented children in conflict zones, border regions and other liminal spaces. Understanding how youth shape their identities by making meaning of their conditions, and how this identity formation impacts their migration aspirations, could inform decisions about settlement. UNHCR’s preferred durable solution is voluntary repatriation (UNHCR 2006), which may not be appropriate for at least some segment of these youth who have spent little or no time in their ostensive homeland, and who may instead seek resettlement elsewhere or integration into Thailand. Concurrently, due to the growing number of children-parenting-children in response to labour demands, conflict, and displacement, evidence-based insight is needed about the impacts of non-normative care arrangements on children’s development. Research such as that outlined in this article could assess whether, under what circumstances, and for whom can such arrangements adequately engender the positive self-regard necessary for self-regulation and resilience, in contradiction to dominant narratives in developmental psychology.

## **Conclusion**

With armed conflicts and persecution affecting ethnic minority populations around the world, and with accelerated globalization, mobility and precarity, research is needed to bring theories of child development into line with new evidence of their capacities and resilience in these increasingly prevalent, twenty-first century contexts of childhood and to inform legal and humanitarian responses. Too often, children’s identity and aspirations are understood only through adult-lenses, focusing on presumed invariant stages or tasks of development, normative trajectories including academic achievement, prolonged dependence upon one or two continuous primary caregivers, and gradients of responsibility that prepares youth for work, marriage, family, and civic participation bounded by belonging to a particular nation-state. These frames ignore the inputs that shape a migrant child’s experiences of identity and projected futures. Further, these constructions of identity are premised on stability. But one out of every 122 people in the world is now displaced. What shapes the identities and future trajectories of children who may have spent most if not all of their childhood in a state of geo-spatial fluctuation? How does globalization affect this population and how does this population shape globalization processes? Unless the self-articulated identities, capabilities, and preferences of forced migrant children themselves are understood and entered into decision-making about resolving their liminal status as displaced and stateless persons, assessments of their best interests are bound to be incomplete and efforts to prescribe their futures are likely to fail.

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