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Rethinking Independent Child Migration in Thailand: Victims of Exploitation or Competent Agents?

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Abstract

There are differing views on whether independent child migration increases children's vulnerability to exploitation or is an expression of their proactive agency. As little attention has yet been given to the motivations, comparative benefits, outcomes and rights of voluntary child migrants, this paper gives voice to independent child migrants in Thailand. Using child-focused research methodology, it draws from the experiences of 76 youth who all independently migrated when they were children. The research reassesses the common assumptions and adult constructs around children's agency and migration. Labeling all child migrants who experience some degree of exploitation as victims of trafficking is found to be counterproductive. A better understanding of the notion of childhood and children's capacities within the Southeast Asian context illustrates the conflicting concepts of child agency and vulnerability. As such, by listening more seriously to the positive views of independent child migrants we can become more focused on legal and regulatory policies and practices around labor migration and less blind to the realities of children's full rights and true agency.

Keywords

Child migration; agency; vulnerability; resilience; child rights

Introduction: The Child's Journey in Search of Rights

> *Independent child migration is definitely a negative phenomenon! Because children are not yet ready to travel on their own or travel independently. If they are with their parents, they will have a better chance to develop and grow in a better shape - to be a good person as their communities and families expect.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

> *Basically, the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child] defines the legal age – it doesn't take into consideration the child's maturity. The legal age is the cut-off of services for the accountability of the State. The CRC has an assumption of immaturity, but different cultures assess maturity in different ways. I think independent child migration is a positive expression and manifestation of the human spirit and youth.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

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The above two quotes illustrate the dichotomy of views that exist among child rights agencies on the issue of independent child migration. Are these children "victims of change, or agents of change"? (Huijsmans, 2010, p. 14). Most of the literature and studies to date cast the phenomenon of child migration in an unfavorable light; their journeys are frequently irregular, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and other forms of oppression. Furthermore, child migrants are often categorized as 'trafficked children', 'unaccompanied and separated minors', 'asylum seekers' or 'street children' which only reinforces the perception of them as passive victims. Yet independent child migrants generally travel alone, with strangers, extended family members or friends. It is also worth noting that most children migrating are usually well into their teenage years (they are often also referred to as 'adolescents' or 'youth migrants') and are old enough to work legally.

The hidden nature of much of the work that young migrants do in Thailand means that it is difficult to estimate the scale and scope of child migration, although children work in most sectors – fisheries, agriculture, manufacturing and domestic work. Pearson, Punpuing, Jampaklay, Kittisuksathit and Prohmmo (2006) estimated that as much as 14% of the manufacturing sector workforce in Thailand is comprised of adolescent children. The discourse around independent child migration (whereby a child migrates in the absence of parents, close adult relatives or other primary caregivers – see Howard, 2014; Huijsmans and Baker, 2012; van de Glind, 2010; Yaqub, 2009) is generally framed within the crime of child trafficking. However, this seems at odds with the huge numbers of low-skilled child and youth workers who seek out employment in Thailand, despite the apparent risks and dangers.

In large part, voluntary child migration and the recognition of children's proactive agency is seen to be in tension with the dominant conceptualizations of childhood. As a result, little attention has been given to the motivations, comparative benefits, outcomes and rights of these children. This paper gives voice to some of the independent child migrants—from Myanmar, Cambodia and from within Thailand—who are seeking better lives and whose experiences, views and agency are investigated rather than assumed. Based on a child-focused research methodology that aims to reassess the common assumptions, judgments and adult constructs around children's agency and migration, the study seeks to expose the perceptions and capacities of the children themselves. Better understanding of whether these children embark on their journey with sufficient knowledge and capacity, and to what extent their agency is fully consensual, could help re-shape the independent child migration debate. It is hoped that by examining these less explored perceptions, the scale and scope of child migrants in the workforce will be better understood, leading to more effective policy making and practice for states such as Thailand..

Methodology

The target group for the study is children and youth below 20 years of age who migrated independently in search of work, either within Thailand or to Thailand from a bordering country, while still less than 18 years of age. Thai and foreign child migrants who migrated when they were under the age of 15 years were not included, as the legal minimum age of work in Thailand is 15 years of age. Thus, respondents were aged 15-19 when interviewed and were age 15-17 when they migrated.

Sites selected for the study were the capital city of Bangkok and its surrounding economic zones, the provinces Samut Sakhon, Samut Prakan and Chonburi (which includes Pattaya City and the seaside resort of Bang Saen). These are wealthy provinces that are attractive destinations for migrants in Thailand.

Snowball sampling was used to identify target youth who met the above criteria. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique, which means that data collected cannot be stated to be representative of the target population as a whole (Morgan, 2008). No strict rules or criteria were set for the final target breakdown of respondents by nationality or gender and the 'snowballing' technique was allowed to take its course. The first contacts were youth who were currently supported by NGOs working in child protection; this helped to ensure a safe and protective framework for selecting respondents. The first contacts were then asked about their friends or contacts who met the target criteria, and they helped in connecting with other children and youth. By the end of the field research, 76 respondents were engaged for semi-structured interviews. Ten of these children also participated in more in-depth life history narrative case studies. In the end, 47% of the respondents for the semi-structured interviews were Burmese, 29% Cambodian and 24% Thai; 58% of the final sample were male and 42% female (see Table 1). Key informants were also interviewed (35 in all), drawn from agencies working directly with migrant children in Thailand, including government (8), United Nations (3), non-governmental organizations (16), academics/researchers (4) as well as employers of young migrants (4),

Table 1: Number of migrant respondents by nationality and gender

Nationality	Male	Female	Total
Burmese	16	20	36
Cambodian	14	8	22
Thai	14	4	18
Total	44	32	76

No children or youth were selected whose participation in the study was likely to place them in an unsafe or risky situation. A robust ethical research protocol was developed and was approved by Mahidol University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before data collection began, government and civil society services for helping or supporting children and youth that may have been experiencing abuse, neglect or exploitation were identified and these were used to refer children who were found to be in these situations. The lead researcher was assisted in interviews by research assistants/translators from each of the three countries where the child migrants originated from and with the permission of the respondent, interviews were audio recorded. The quantitative data generated from the Resiliency and Individual Coping Questionnaire was analyzed descriptively using SPSS (Statistical package for the Social Sciences). NVivo software was utilized for the qualitative data analysis.

Limitations of the Research

Independent child migrants are a challenging group to research. There may be a tendency for respondents to mask the real situations or difficulties that they are facing for a multitude of reasons. Nevertheless, the information provided by the respondents is still of significant value as it enriches the understanding of motives and practices surrounding their migration.

Conflicting Concepts and Theories of Childhood, Child Agency, Vulnerability and Resilience

In order to get a more nuanced understanding of independent child migration, various conceptual foundations first need to be examined. Cultural influences and the sociology of childhood shape children's ability to act and create their own future. As agency and competency are two complementary tools, this section gives background on how Southeast Asian children 'graduate from childhood' at an early age to take on key familial responsibilities.

Southeast Asian Childhoods

It is commonly held that children from poor, rural families in Southeast Asia transition into adulthood at a much younger age than their counterparts in more developed countries. The cultural view of familial responsibilities results in children starting to work and assist their parents at an early age, which can sometimes be confused with child labor and exploitation (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). Patriarchal societies are particularly prevalent in the region, leading to strong cultural, gender-based and traditional norms. For example, the expectation placed on girls to be 'dutiful daughters' can often result in girls dropping out of school to assist the family at an earlier age than boys (Curran & Saguy, 2001). Even before a child's decision to migrate, parental expectations are an important consideration for promoting children's agency, their capacity to adapt and their assumption of roles of responsibility.

This was clearly a feature in the lives of nearly all the independent child migrants in this study, as shown by the extent to which they assisted their parents with domestic chores or contributed to the family's livelihood as they grew up:

> *I helped with household work, for example, carrying water, washing clothes for mum, washing dishes etc. After I left school, I helped mum with the work of her food vendor business for around 4-5 months.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 15)

Many children in Southeast Asia have thus grown up contributing to the family's livelihood. Through these experiences, they become exposed to the 'school of life' as they work alongside their parents. Working as a family distills values, skills, work ethics and a sense of worth (Lansdown, 2005). For the migrant child, these attributes help them to deal with the uncertainties and hardship they may face during their migratory journeys.

Agency

Key to a definition of childhood is the concept of agency a particularly elusive concept that is often associated with terms such as 'choice', 'independence', 'freedom' and 'capacity' (see Barker's 2005: 448 definition: "the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choice"). Self-determination or autonomy is a fundamental human right that asserts an individual's integrity and respects his/her right to hold and express views and

make decisions. For children, this right is encompassed within two unique articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (CRC) which is the most rapidly and ratified international human rights treaty in the world (United Nations CRC, 1989). Article 5, which invokes the concept of 'evolving capacities', and Article 12, which states that 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. The interrelationship of evolving capacities and varying degrees of participation are intended to form the basis for appropriate respect for children's agency without exposing them to the harmful realities of adulthood (Lansdown, 2005). This formulation affirms that it is in both children's and the State's best interest to support the agency of children as they grow and mature (Van Bueren, 2011). However, evolving capacities of the child are not defined in the CRC, and assessing the extent of children's capacity within the time-bound limitations of age given by legal frameworks is fraught with complexities. Indeed, many interpret the CRC as emphasizing welfare over children's right to participation and agency (Rehfield, 2011). The main argument for this focus is the apparent vulnerability and 'at-risk' nature of childhood, which suggests a more deficient formulation of children's capacity. This construct of childhood has evolved over many centuries (some would say based on an idealized Western viewpoint of children's automatic susceptibility to harm) and has led to strong connotations of the obligation of the family to closely protect and nurture (O'Connell Davidson & Farrow, 2007).

As such, children's agency can easily go unnoticed by adults through a patronization of childhood—which, in the face of assumptions of victimhood and helplessness, sees children's welfare and protection as a prior need to all other rights. This is a sentiment observed by one of the key informants interviewed for this study:

> *Using the word 'children' is not always helpful as the Thai government doesn't see children as being able to work, it only sees them as vulnerable or as victims.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

Orgocka (2012) explains that vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive as children's individual resilience strongly influences their agency and ability to identify and address different risks. This is particularly true where children from different cultures experience varied childhoods. Cultural theories as applied to childhood thus draw on a variety of elements such as local customs, beliefs and child rearing norms, the cumulative effects of which support children's agency and their ability to assume roles of responsibility (Lansdown, 2005). This is particularly pertinent in a Southeast Asian context where social traditions, gender roles and expectations of children towards familial obligations offer a more nuanced understanding of children's agency and abilities.

Reasons for Migrating and Entering the Labor Market at a Young Age

In Thailand, as in most parts of the world, the overwhelming reason for child and youth migration is the lack of employment and livelihood options (Huguet & Chamratrithirong, 2011). Studies in Thailand have identified that Burmese migrant children migrate because of low wages back home, family poverty and political persecution (World Vision Foundation Thailand & Asian Research Centre for Migration, n.d.). Poverty and poor employment opportunities also ranked high as incentives to migrate amongst the Cambodian youth migrants (Tunon & Rim, 2013), whilst Thai children may be drawn by the pull of the urban

centers or to escape domestic violence (Richter, 2014). For this study, over half of the child and youth respondents (67%) had migrated for economic reasons; for most, it was the sole reason. Only 18% of respondents cited a desire to be independent and self-sufficient as a reason for migrating:

> *I wanted to come because there was nothing to do at home. Because my family was poor and there was nothing to do at home and I wanted to get on with my life. I had left school already.*
>
> (Cambodian female migrant age 18)

Nevertheless, for the majority of independent child migrants, the decision to move in search of work is rarely solely autonomous as parents and relational networks play a huge role (Huijsmans, 2010). In this study, whilst all children said that they made the final decision to migrate, 85% say they made the decision in conjunction with their parents. For example:

> *My mother can't do selling and so she did not have a good business. My mother told me if it is good for you to go to Thailand, you can decide to go there. I told my mother when I arrive in Thailand I will call her by phone. She told me to stay well and don't be careless. It was my own decision to leave.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 19)

This can be seen as important for a number of reasons. Generally, adolescents in Southeast Asia have considerable respect for parents and elders and the blessing, permission or support for the child to migrate is a reciprocate manifestation of honor, pride and cultural values. Moreover, these parents presumably do not believe that their children are too vulnerable or lacking in maturity to migrate. In fact, Camacho's (2006) study in the Philippines found that migrant children reported higher prestige, improved family respect and strengthened intra-household positions both during and after migration.

Explicit in this inter-generational contract is the expectation that child migrants will send remittances home to their parents and families (Whitehead, Hashim, & Iversen, 2007). Interestingly, although the risks and vulnerabilities of child migration are extensively documented, little attention has been given to the valuable economic contributions that these children make to their families. The sense of self-efficacy and achievement in sending money home can help empower the young migrant. In this study, 78% aspired to remit despite their low wages[2] and the cost of living in their new location:

> *When I send money to mum I call her by phone and say 'Mum, I've sent you money already'. It makes me feel so proud.*
>
> (Burmese female migrant age 17)

Whilst the above illustrates the motivations and aspiration of young migrants and their families, the notion of how these factors fit within the concept of a 'good childhood' and the 'best interest of the child' principle of the CRC is still a troubling discourse for those who take a more conservative interpretation of the Convention. However, where the idealized

[2] Just under one-third (29%) of all child and youth respondents were earning below the minimum daily wage set in Thailand. Four youth reported cases of clearly exploitative working conditions or a worst form of child labour.

version of the 'innocence' of childhood does not reflect the reality, then adolescents may have few options than to migrate in order to improve their lives. Huijsmans (2006, p. 10) argues that "what really matters is not the fact that the migrant worker is not yet eighteen years of age, but, essentially, the impact migrant labor has on the child". This approach can help us to avoid the assumption that child migration should be automatically defined as 'human trafficking' and it encourages us to look at the conditions and linkages that may make certain employment harmful to children.

The Journey: Experiences during Travel

Foreign child migrants generally enter Thailand through its long and porous borders or they overstay short-term border passes (Huguet & Chamratrithirong, 2011). Both Thai and foreign migrants are faced with a myriad of choices for travel, such as buses, pick-up vans, trucks, boats or cars (both public and privately owned). As most foreign migrants are undocumented, it is often agents or brokers who facilitate their transportation (in this study 86% of the youth used these services). Children generally travelled with groups of other migrants (although they may not necessarily know them personally) at significant cost, ranging from an average of 2,500 baht (USD 81) for Cambodians to around 15,000 baht (USD 484) for Burmese migrants. These costs are many times higher than their future monthly wages. Numerous reports dealing with foreign migration in Thailand detail how this burden of debt makes resistance to exploitative labor more difficult (Wetzler, 2012; Huijsmans, 2010; Federation of Trade Unions–Burma, 2006).

Boys and girls experienced challenges during the migratory journey equally. The majority of the difficulties were caused by the travel conditions and a lack of information about the journey (e.g. too many people inside the vehicle, locked inside the vehicle, long walks across through jungle, forests and mountains, or without access to food and water. Children travelling from Myanmar generally experienced the most hardships. Their journeys were often longer and involved travel through mountainous or forested areas at night to avoid detection.

> *At the time I feel I will die in the back of the truck. I closed my eyes and I prayed, saying Buddhist incantations in my mind. I believed that if I did the incantations and I died in the truck then my spirit would go straight to heaven.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 17)

> *We walked through the forest [came via Myanwaddy] during the night so that we could cross the border. There were about 100 of us and we rested in a house and they gave us tomatoes and minced pork to eat. It was the only meal we had for all three days of the journey.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 15)

For both the Burmese and Cambodian child migrants, crossing the border frequently meant being smuggled in the back of vehicles. Often they were hidden under produce or a tarpaulin and warned against making any noise to avoid being detected. So many migrants were concealed in such small spaces that they ran the risk of suffocation – especially in light of the intense heat:

> *It was very difficult because there were so many people – around 200 of them. When we got in, they closed it up and I had the feeling of it being so tight because people were on top of me – one person, two persons, something like that. I think if [the journey] had taken a little longer I may not stay alive.*
>
> (Burmese female migrant age 17)

These accounts illustrate the risks, hazards and at times, appalling conditions that child migrants may face as they travel. However, this is an important juncture to delineate how the concepts of child trafficking and exploitation may overshadow children's decisions to migrate for work and their demonstration of agency. As will be elaborated in the next section, if the child's eventual work conditions are exploitative then whether the child was coerced, threatened or deceived to take on this work is irrelevant in international law and the child automatically is defined as a trafficked victim. *The* determining factor therefore becomes the definition of exploitation, not the migratory journey, which is in itself a slippery notion. All of the children in this study chose to migrate and, as with the adults with whom they travelled, embarked on their journeys aware that there were risks. Through their families and social networks, they also had some prior level of understanding of the likely working conditions that awaited them.

Resilience

An under-researched and oft forgotten capacity of children as they transition from childhood into adulthood is the concept of resilience. A widely accepted interpretation of resilience is that it "is an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences" (Rutter, 2006:2). The notion therefore that children's resilience can help them survive, 'bounce back' and even become stronger in the face of hardship or misfortune, offers us possibilities for support of children's agency.

Much of the academic and scientific research on risk, vulnerability and resilience in children has been plagued by limitations. Some even doubt that resilience is a viable concept and point to its history as a scientific 'theory of convenience' that is basically the mirror opposite of risk and adversity (Anthony, 1987). Regardless, the concept of resilience – and by association risk, adversity and vulnerability – has undergone much evolution in the last few decades and is closely linked to adult constructs of childhood and the dominant perception of inherent vulnerability of children (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004) Longitudinal studies exposed a multitude of protective factors and personal characteristics (such as autonomy, initiative, self-esteem, intelligence) found to be important in resilience. Certainly the independent child migrants in this study demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy and positive outlook that empowered them to deal with migratory challenges:

> *I'm proud that I can earn money on my own and I don't have to ask from anyone. I can deal with problems that I face and I can take care of myself now.*
>
> (Thai male migrant age 18)

However, as the quote above suggests, individuals are not 'static agents' and they respond to the challenges and environment around them. As such, a psychosocial perspective to resilience and agency evolved which takes into account various influencing factors such as

family, communities and other external structural and material conditions (Cove, Eiseman & Popkin, 2005). In essence, an ecological model of resilience adds emphasis to the nature and level of adversity and examines the extent to which the local context can be mitigated against through personal attributes, learning and development, parenting skills, quality of adult relationships and other peripheral support (Luthar, Sawyer & Brown, 2006). Such reciprocal interactions that enable positive adaption despite negative experiences were explained by one key informant in this study:

> *Self-confidence does not require a graduation from a university but an ability to understand problems and deal with them. If parents are too much protective of their children, they will not develop so easily as the children will not know how to face problems when they grow up. But those parents who are able to instill a sense in their children that although their parents keep an eye on them, they have confidence in them – that's the best. It means that parents much allow their children to think, to speak, to do things that are directly related to them.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

Nevertheless, measuring and defining positive outcomes for marginalized groups particularly exposes the challenges of an ecological conceptualization to resilience. Who, for example, identifies and measures differing vulnerabilities and who decides whether an individual has improved his/her quality of life by proactively demonstrating agency and resilience? Furthermore, as the quote above suggests, resilience is not a consequence of avoidance of adversity, but actually emerges as a result of exposure to it. This suggests that we need a much more versatile understanding and constructivist approach to vulnerability and resilience as protective measures, risks and stressors can vary significantly over time and contexts.

A Constructionist Discourse to Resilience in the Lives of Independent Child Migrants

The constructivist approach to resilience examines not only the individual's personal traits but also the result of their agency in relation to their cultural and contextual lives and the need to mediate changing environments (Ungar, 2008). As an independent child migrant, the young person navigates his or her journey and life in the face of endless risk and adversity to find work and new life experiences. One key informant for this study articulated the interrelationship in the following way:

> *I think resilience is an adjustment to create a balance between the environments they are in and their mentality, their thinking that is cultivated and shaped from the past to the present which helps them to survive and grow in the future.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

Not surprisingly, the volatility of such a construct challenges the identification of universal qualities to resilience and leads some to doubt the absolute relativism that this conceptualization implies (Ungar, 2004). However, such interactions and multiple factors suggest "multiple pathways to resilience" (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver,, 2012, p. 219) which are intrinsically linked to human agency. Whilst there may be global components of resiliency traits in children, resilience-related functioning is not a homogenous experience and issues such as early parental care, ethnicity and culture (particularly in relation to their

childhood) impact youth resilience. Whilst the independent child migrants reached in this study had been affected by socio-economic hardships, they generally had very warm and enduring memories of childhood. One example is a 17-year-old Burmese female migrant who related many happy memories of her childhood:

> *At home, our family was a happy family and we had a lot of fun together. We didn't have money but we can survive and we are happy. My relatives, such as uncle, aunt and cousins are also very close. At least two times per month we slept together at the big house, sharing about what happened in the last week, finding out how other family members were etc. Each night we used to listen to the radio and everybody sings along to the songs. Those were happy times.*
>
> (Burmese female age 17)

During challenging times in her migratory journey, she thought back to her childhood:

> *When it got difficult, I thought about when I made the decision to migrate. My dad always taught me that if I have already thought about it then I must do my best to achieve it 'if you decide to do it, then do it and achieve it' – Dad always taught like this.*
>
> (Burmese female age 17)

Different Coping Strategies

Various coping strategies are also associated with resiliency and they too can help mitigate adversity. As discussed, strategies can include positive emotionality and self-confidence but also other forms of social capital, such as spiritual well-being (Smith, Webber, & DeFrain, 2013). Where spiritual well-being is determined as being present, it is largely seen as a protective factor and the likelihood of negative risk-taking behavior is diminished (Mahaarcha & Kittisuksathit, 2013). Whilst in this study it was harder for the young migrants to directly practice religious beliefs due to their limited free time or reluctance to travel far from their rooms or workplaces, a few said that they continued their religious practices:

> *I go to the temple and make merit for my mom. All I want is for my parents to be happy and well because I don't get to stay with them. So I am proud that I can make merit for my mom.*
>
> (Burmese female migrant age 18)

Support from peers is a valuable informal coping strategy for young people, particularly those who migrate. Peer networks enable shared learning of information, skills and resources which can play an important role in resilience, coping and adapting to a new environment (Thompson et al., 2013; Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry & Flynn, 2007). However, peer and other social networks can also 'hijack' youth into engaging in more anti-social or illegal behaviors (Bender et al., 2007). For some of the key informants reached in this study that worked with the more vulnerable groups of child migrants (such as those in low-skilled but physically demanding construction work or street children) the self-damaging behavior for boys and men from alcohol consumption and substance abuse was a concern. With girls, one child protection expert described what she saw as a negative coping mechanism develop as a misguided self-protection strategy:

> *There is an emerging trend seen in Ranong whereby independent young girl migrants are encouraged to get 'hooked up' as soon as they arrive as a form of a protection mechanism. But they actually become more vulnerable as the boys have multiple girlfriends.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

Nevertheless, very few migrants interviewed admitted to any form of negative coping mechanisms: a few older adolescent males mentioned being concerned about the use of drugs, cigarettes or alcohol. This may be due to the migrant's reluctance to reveal this information or because of their relatively tender age and as yet limited exposure to such behavior.

Whilst a variety of different coping strategies can be identified through this research, the young migrants reached appeared to demonstrate positive levels of resilience. Furthermore, as will be seen below, the utilization of other supportive factors significantly contributed to strengthened aspects of resilience and positive outcomes.

Motivations, Aspirations and Outcomes of Independent Child Migration in Thailand

Children who migrate end up in a variety of contexts and employment, all of which can have a direct impact on their vulnerability or the extent to which a favorable outcome is achieved. Vungsiriphisal, Auasalung and Chantavanich, (n.d.) categorize child migrant work in Thailand into four separate levels: general service jobs (e.g. domestic workers, restaurant or kitchen staff, car washing or gas station attendants); manual labor (such as in the agriculture or construction sector); factory work (e.g. textile, metals, food processing) and other 'small item' work (such as fish grading, working as vendors, etc.). Low wages, long work hours, little time off and few social welfare benefits are the expected norms for these types of jobs. However, a positive outlook on life and a sense of direction or goal can significantly assist children in overcoming these hardships and contribute to a sense of achievement and well-being (Thompson et al., 2013).
As discussed earlier, a sense of duty to family is a significant driving force in Southeast Asian culture that provides strong purpose to the lives of migrant children. One of the key informants interviewed saw the motivational link to the children's ability to overcome adversity and vulnerability:

> *I think all children have an aim in their lives, but these aims may be different from each other. Some want to help their families. I think this is an important factor for those children who decide to come to work because they will receive money in exchange for the work they do. Money is an important factor for their survival and the survival of their families. Therefore, when they face any problems, they must cope….. They feel that they must work to earn and help their families. This is what I find helps these children to cope with the difficulties they face.*
>
> (Key informant, NGO staff)

A sense of direction or goal in a child's life can certainly help in overcoming adversity and encourage agency (Kidd, 2003). All the independent child migrants interviewed articulated their desire to be active social agents, to earn money and to work towards achieving their

life plans and goals. All seemed motivated by their belief that their migratory experience would change their futures for the better.

> *Now everything is better already. I still smile. I live conveniently and nothing makes me feel difficult. I can't describe it - before I had no money but now I have money, a place to live and I have food to eat.*
>
> (Cambodian female migrant age 18)

> *No, I don't feel like I'm being exploited here. I feel that I'm improving my communication skills and general knowledge. I would not have these skills if I stayed in Myanmar. Thailand is more developed and improved than our own country.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 19)

Many of the youth appreciated that they were learning new skills and some had enrolled in non-formal education classes run by NGOs:

> *I'm learning Thai at the organization's office. My neighbor and some friends told me about this school and gave me an information paper on the classes. I am happy to study here. My target is to be a teacher.*
>
> (Burmese female migrant age 17)

> *I've learnt the skill of fixing motorbikes. I plan to continue working in this garage for 4 years and after that I will open my own garage.*
>
> (Thai male migrant age 17)

At the time of being interviewed, the majority of young migrants were not working in the same position that they had first entered when arriving at their destination (in fact 16% had been in at least three different jobs). For their current jobs, more were sourced independently and there was less need for the use of brokers or intermediaries, which suggests increased agency and autonomy. Availability of overtime pay was one of the key reasons why the children and youth changed work as the extra money earned outweighed the long hours worked and low pay.

Using the definition of forced labor as given under ILO Convention 29 ('all work of service which is extracted under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered themselves voluntarily'), none of the 76 children and youth reported such conditions. Other aspects of exploitation were examined (e.g. freedom of movement, inability to leave the workplace, control over documents, violence, excessive work hours). In general, four issues were reported by 17% of the young migrants: long work hours; low pay; registration/ID documents kept by employer; and wage deductions. The young migrants were asked how they felt about their current employment and the majority did not feel they were being exploited: 68% felt satisfied with their jobs, describing them as either good or fair (see Table 2 below). For those 'happy' with their work, it was a combination of wages, good working conditions and general job satisfaction that appealed:

> *I like working here [painting in construction site]. I don't want to change the job as it is good here already. My employer pays the same rate for Thai or Burmese workers. I don't have any feeling of being exploited or taken advantage of. I don't feel that I am a victim of anything bad at all.*
>
> (Burmese male migrant age 15)

> *I like what I do now. I have been doing this for less than a year now. The work is easy here and they pay well with a lump sum when we get an order. I feel like I have more energy when I work hard and get paid in lump sum. I work 8am to 5pm six days a week and I have Sunday off. However, if I want I can also come to do OT work on Sunday if there is a lot of orders.*
>
> (Thai male migrant age 18)

Table 2: Job satisfaction of migrants interviewed

Satisfaction	Total %
Good, no plan to change (happy with pay, work & environment)	18
Good, but will change if better opportunity arises	1
Fair, but aim to change (no ID, hard work, 'grumbling' boss)	20
Fair, no particular problem, so no plan to change	17
Fair, no options, so unlikely to change	12
Poor (verbal abuse, discrimination, low wage, poor conditions)	17
Unemployed	8
Information not available	7
Total	**100**
(n)	**(76)**

It should be noted that the Cambodian children were more positive and happy with their migratory experience, while the Burmese respondents articulated the most negative feelings. This may reflect the level of discrimination, exploitation and xenophobia that Burmese migrants in Thailand particularly face in light of historical and nationalistic sentiments between the two countries (see Pearson & Kusakabe, 2013).

In an attempt to better understand the children and youth's perception of their current situation and their attitude and feelings towards their migratory experience to date, the research helped them to facilitate a description of their overall satisfaction levels (see Table 3). Positive emotionality, a clear sense of achievement and self-confidence are all associated with resilience and agency (Grotberg, 1999; Rutter, 2006). Opportunities to learn, to be employed and to have access to social support networks also mitigate against adversity (Jenson & Fraser, 2011). Being able to earn and help family back home was a key indicator of what the young migrants considered to be a beneficial outcome for both boys and girls. Lack of sufficient funds, legal documents and language difficulties were cited as the greatest sources of unhappiness.

Table 3: Overall satisfaction with migration as measured by reasons for happiness among migrants interviewed

Reason	Male	Female	Total
	%	%	%
Able to earn for oneself/to help family	18	21	39
Be independent/in Charge	17	3	20
Chance to attend school and/or learn new skills	4	5	9
Enjoy social interaction	4	4	8
Received assistance or service when needed	4	4	8
Satisfactory level of earning/working conditions	8	2	10
Information not available	3	3	6
Total	**58**	**42**	**100**

	(n)	(44)	(32)	(76)

All of these findings highlight the benefits of listening to children's perspectives of their migratory experiences, as they have illustrated their active agency in decision making and through their own assessment, and found their experiences to be more positive than negative. In contradiction to the common perceptions and literature associated with child labor and migration (which ignores that migration can be a positive expression of children's aspirations), children were not exploited by virtue of age and girls were not found to be more exploited than boys. Low pay or experiences of discrimination were due to legal status and affected both child and adult migrants equally. As one child stated:

> *I'm glad that I could come and work in Thailand. I think my life at the moment is good as I have chance to come here, earn and study [Thai language] and therefore I have chance to have a better future.*
>
> (Cambodian male migrant age 16)

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to reassess the common assumptions, judgements and adult constructs concerning children's agency within migration. Children's agency within migration would benefit from a new conceptualization that not only acknowledges the multiple dimensions of childhood in Southeast Asia but argues against the traditional concepts of childhood and children's vulnerability. The theoretical framework proposed builds upon a constructivist theory utilizing children's own perceptions of their capacities and agency. While few people would wish to encourage child migration, a better understanding of children's agency and resilience could reduce the risks of unsafe independent child migration and enable more positive outcomes in this unstoppable phenomenon. Furthermore, the presumed notion of vulnerability and victimhood of child migrants often ignores the fact that the children may be migrating voluntarily and that any exploitation is more a result of their lack of the correct documentation then their mobility and agency. Nevertheless, whilst this study has given emphasis to children's voice, agency and resiliency, it has not done so to the extent of ignoring the vulnerabilities and dangers that encroach on the best interests of the child and the full realization of the child's rights to care and protection.

To date, there has been limited research into the motivations and decision making processes that independent child migrants make as they leave home in search of a better life. The migration of a child is rarely seen by adult duty-bearers as a voluntary choice. Accordingly, the distinction between migration, exploitation and trafficking of the child becomes ambiguous. Where the child trafficking discourse dominates the literature on child migration, the cultural factors, capacity of the child and the voluntary nature of their mobility is overlooked. Labelling all irregular child migrants who may experience some degree of exploitation as victims of trafficking can be counterproductive (Pearson et al., 2006; Wetzler, 2012) as it unduly assigns assumptions of inherent vulnerability and helplessness.

The children reached in this study clearly demonstrated considerable agency, although various degrees of exploitation remain a feature of their migratory experience. Examining the phenomenon through the lens of children as active social agents gives them the chance to explain their experiences and share their opinions and perspectives. Many spoke of a change in how they viewed themselves as having become more 'grown up' as well as being

proud that they were looking after themselves, earning and sending remittances home to their families. Whilst we should not be blinded by an overzealous celebration of their agency, not all levels of exploitation are necessarily harmful to children. This exposes the need for a deeper analysis of the nuances surrounding children as competent and free agents and 'consensual exploitation'.

Risks and dangers in independent child migration obviously exist and efforts to stop child trafficking and exploitation must remain an important priority. Virtually all of the child migrants used informal migration channels and entered Thailand irregularly. However, children successfully traveled and secured what they felt was acceptable employment utilizing their own initiative. Not labeling all migrating children as victims of trafficking enables countries like Thailand to focus more emphatically on legal and safe migration options for independent child migrants of 15 years and above; this could include broadening the political and policy responses and regulatory practices related to labor migration, labor standards and enforcement of migrant rights. By listening more seriously to the positive expressions of this group of children, we are not encouraging them to leave their homes and travel to foreign cities, but we are also not becoming blind to the realities of children's full rights, choice and valid agency.

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