Challenging some assumptions about ‘refugee youth’

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Young people who migrate without their parents develop peer networks and may not be inherently more vulnerable than those with inter-generational networks.

Many children and young people who live with peers have greater access to resources and decision-making power than many of those who live in families and households where an adult is present. The research presented in this article – carried out with Congolese refugees living in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, and in the rural refugee settlement of Kyaka II – challenges the assumption in refugee policy and programming that unaccompanied minors are inherently more vulnerable and disadvantaged than their accompanied peers. On the contrary, living without one’s parents or guardians can offer opportunities and some young people consciously chose to migrate without their parents and/or to live with peers rather than with adults once they were in Kampala or Kyaka II.

In some cases, young people’s decision to migrate without their parents was the result of individual or collective livelihood strategies to access particular services. For example, the headmaster of the secondary school in Kyaka II partially attributes the disproportionate enrolment of unaccompanied young people in the 2005 academic year to the fact that school fees there are lower than for other secondary schools in the area, acting as a pull factor to the settlement. For example, in 2005 no girls in the second year of secondary school were living with their parents. In Kampala, some young people, especially males, came alone, intending to work to help support themselves and their families in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Once alone in refugee contexts, young people may continue to live alone or with peers, even when they have the opportunity to join households headed by adults. For example, one young male who came to Kyaka II in order to attend the secondary school met a friend of his father’s in the settlement and lived with him for a few months. However, despite the close relationship with this adult male, whom he calls ‘uncle’, he decided to move out with a group of other young males with whom he built a hut close to the school. His decision to live with peers was based not only on proximity to the school but also on the fact that he had fewer household chores and more access to resources as an ‘equal’ member of a peer network.

Although some young refugees thus do choose to move out of inter-generational networks which they view as disadvantageous or in some cases exploitative, it would be erroneous to portray this simply as a struggle between older and younger generations. Most young people were actively seeking and/or maintaining contact with their families and wanted to return to them, and even young people who choose peer networks over inter-generational networks continue to maintain ties to older generations.

Traditionally in DRC young people would not move out of inter-generational households until they married and were ready to start a family of their own. However, movement out of inter-generational networks is not necessarily a manifestation of conflict; migration and conflict have led to changes in social structures, and peer networks have become more socially acceptable.

Decision making among peers

Analysis of decision-making processes within peer networks revealed power dynamics relating to social age, education, language and gender. I observed one group of 10-30 young people (numbers fluctuated) aged 12 to 20, which I named the ‘Karungi’ group, over a 10-month period. Members developed a strong sense of solidarity based in some cases on kinship (siblings or cousins) and in all cases on shared ethnicity. The majority come from the town of Bunia and many had known each other, or of each other, while still in DRC. These kin and ethnic ties facilitated the formation of collective households as required by UNHCR for distribution of resources such as plastic sheeting and cooking utensils.

Within the cohesiveness of the group, there were internal power hierarchies. First, social age – the attributes ascribed in the society to different stages of life – is important. Although all Karungi group members consider themselves and each other as ‘young people’, they distinguish amongst each other using a variety of ‘markers’ of social age. For example, 15-year-old Dominic was physically smaller than the other males. He attended primary school, while most of the others were studying, or had studied, at secondary school. Dominic was considered to be socially younger than other males in the Karungi group and had less access to decision making about collective resources and division of labour. When other males were present, Dominic rarely spoke. Indeed, when asked about decision making in the household, he named Benjamin – the eldest male, who had also completed secondary school – as the person responsible. Similarly, Catherine, the eldest female in the group, described Dominic’s domestic labour as “children’s work”.

Similarly, Joie had no formal education in DRC and was unable to attend primary school because she had insufficient English. Although related to Belle (her niece, although only one year younger), photos of their lives in DRC show a significant difference in income between Joie’s family, which was poor and rural, and Belle’s family, which had cattle and was able to send her to private school. In Kyaka II, Joie spent long days at home or in the field, while the rest of the Karungi females went to school. As a result, although the young women divided up domestic tasks amongst themselves, Joie often did more than the others.

Although Karungi members communicate amongst themselves in their native Hema, knowledge of English or French is important to access services in the settlement. This disadvantages those with low levels of education, who sometimes rely on other network members to speak on their behalf. For example, Joie wanted to send a written statement to UNHCR protection officers in Kampala but this was delayed because she had to rely on others to help her with translation.

In terms of gender, while both female and male members of the Karungi group engaged in decision making about collective livelihood strategies, the daily reality was complex. While the males undertook a variety of domestic tasks traditionally viewed as women’s work, including cooking, collecting firewood and fetching water, gender roles still meant that the males were more visible in public spaces and they were much more vocal than the females in mixed groups.

Conclusion

Conflict and migration in DRC have resulted in changing social structures, including growing numbers of young people migrating without their parents and the social acceptance of peer networks. While these structures are too often portrayed simply as the products of tragedy and conflict, young people may consciously choose them as part of individual or collective life strategies.

Approaching unaccompanied young people as decision-makers in migration processes has important implications for policy and programming. First, those working with refugees should pay more attention to the generational division of labour within families, households and communities in order to better understand and predict the socio-economic reasons for young people’s independent migration. Second, unaccompanied young people are not a homogeneous group. We need to take into account intra-generational power relations – including gender, social age, education and class – that affect young people’s differential experiences of migration, including within peer groups. Finally, young people who migrate on their own are not inherently more vulnerable or disadvantaged than their counterparts living with families. In some cases, independent migrants have more access to decision making and resources and thus choose to remain in peer networks.

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In protracted limbo

A comparative study of the transitions to adulthood and life trajectories of former unaccompanied children in Europe

Young adults who previously entered Europe as independent migrant children face a range of possible outcomes. The majority are denied refugee status or humanitarian protection but are afforded time-limited welfare support and care under provisions of discretionary leave. Once they become adults, young people frequently end up in limbo – uncertain of whether or not they will be able to remain in the country of immigration/asylum and for how long. To date, there has been little exploration of the longer-term trajectories of those young people across Europe who make the transition to adulthood with under-determined political or citizenship status.

A new research project involving Oxford University’s Dr Nando Sigona (Refugee Studies Centre), Dr Elaine Chase and Professor Robert Walker (Social Policy and Intervention) will explore the gaps in theory and knowledge surrounding these dimensions of youth migration and identify the implications for contemporary national and international policy governing the treatment and support of young people subject to immigration control across the EU.

The project will examine: the well-being outcomes of former independent migrant children in Europe; young people’s experiences of negotiating the various structures which govern their legal, social and economic statuses as well as their political and social identities; the types of service and support arrangements most likely to facilitate the best possible economic and quality of life outcomes; and methodological possibilities for monitoring the longer-term outcomes of former independent migrant children across Europe.

For more details see:
www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/experiences/in-protracted-limbo