

## **Youth Migration**

**Daniela Sime, University of Strathclyde**

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### **Introduction**

Of the world's 272 million migrants, about one in four are young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (IOM, 2020). Over the last two decades, young migrants' lives have been impacted globally by the financial crisis of 2007-2009, austerity measures, wars and political tensions, restrictions to mobility due to more stringent migration rules, and more recently by the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter focuses on the experiences of young people who migrate, either by themselves or with their families/carers, and examines the extent to which their needs, rights and expectations are addressed by state policies of migrant integration.

The young are more likely than any other age group to be migrants; however, for those aged 15-24, migration poses significant challenges, particularly in relation to their access to education opportunities and jobs (France, 2016). In the context of increasing inequalities, researchers have documented the significant risks of social exclusion facing migrant young people globally. Because of their age and restricted rights, migrant young people are more vulnerable to poverty, stress and poor health, exploitation or trafficking. Globally, political responses to the financial crisis and, more recently, the COVID-19 crisis, continue to produce inequalities. Other global crises have followed since, including the wars in Syria and Ukraine in addition to the ongoing climate crisis. Some of these crises have had direct implications for states receiving thousands of forced migrants, given the immediate needs of refugees and resources required to support their wellbeing and integration. How governments respond to migrant arrivals, often in light of political pressure, has a direct effect on migrants' ability to access opportunities post-migration and the risk of them becoming vulnerable through restricted access to work, education, housing and public services.

### **Youth, inequality and mobility**

The growth in inequality globally has been felt particularly by young people. Over the last thirty years, youth wages have continued to decline, leaving many at risk of poverty even when working (ILO, 2021). During the pandemic, young people were often the first group to be made

redundant, moved to more insecure contracts or forced into inactivity and isolation. During 2020, global youth employment fell by 8.7%, after decades of precarity and insecurity for younger workers (ILO, 2021). Media have used the terms of 'Covid generation' or 'lockdown generation' to reflect the potentially scarring effect of the pandemic on young people, especially in relation to their education, career opportunities and mental health outcomes. Many nation-states have restricted the mobility of all citizens during the pandemic, making it more difficult for young people to seek employment in other countries. The long-term effects of the pandemic, rising inequalities and increasing political instability and wars are all factors likely to lead to a surge in youth migration in the decades to come.

The analysis of these economic trends raises the issue of what happens to social mobility and international migration when inequalities continue to increase. Evidence is clear that across all countries, young people of lowest socioeconomic status have limited opportunities and less economic or cultural capital to face these crises. The opportunities for education and employment have not recovered globally following the financial crisis. This lack of opportunities is likely to be exacerbated by the measures taken by states across the globe to limit the impact of COVID-19 on economies. While youth unemployment has remained at around 13% globally, there are considerable geographical variations, with youth unemployment at 11% in Africa and 23% in the Arab States (ILO, 2020). In addition, even before the pandemic, more than one fifth of young people globally, or 267 million young people, were categorised as NEET (not in employment, education or training) (ILO, 2020). Young women in particular are at additional risk of exploitation or violence, if they are unable to secure work, while also more likely to be burdened by care commitments. When it comes to work opportunities, the groups at the bottom of the social structure are hit the hardest and find it most difficult to cope. These increasing class and gender inequalities have continued to influence young people's decisions to migrate and seek opportunities abroad.

In addition to the group of young migrants seeking better employment opportunities, it is important to acknowledge the increasing number of young people with economic resources who choose migration as a route to personal growth. A significant number of young people are able to study abroad, travel or move across countries due to their high skills in sectors such as IT or finance. This growth of middle-class migration is strongly driven by Asian countries. Globally, students represent one of the biggest migration groups and clearly many young people see the opportunities afforded by studying abroad as a route to improving their life chances and employment opportunities later on. The right to work afforded to students varies between countries and recent years have seen many governments thinking more strategically about using new migration as a route to tackling the challenges of an increasingly ageing population or skills shortages by aiming to retain migrant students.

## **Migrants' rights and policies of youth migrant integration**

The last decade has seen an increasing erosion of migrants' rights globally, particularly in the context of an increasingly anti-immigration agenda. The right wing extremist groups pose an increasing threat to democracy, while fuelling anti-immigration sentiments globally, from the US to Brazil, Hungary, Italy and Poland to New Zealand. In the UK, the 2016 Brexit Referendum was also fuelled by a marked xenophobic narrative of 'taking back control' of borders and migration policies from the EU. The changes to EU nationals' residency rights post-Brexit, with a significant number of EU-born young people vulnerable to increasing xenophobia and future insecurities if they cannot secure their 'settled status' or British citizenship (Sime et al., 2022), is one example of a policy likely to lead to long-term negative impacts for young migrants.

The rights of migrant workers have also been eroded by the pandemic globally (ILO, 2021). Intervention policies such as protections for workers during the pandemic, furlough schemes, compensation packages, investment funds or grants were not accessible to all migrant young people, leaving many vulnerable. In many countries, migrant youth do not have access to funded education or training, social security and healthcare unless they have full citizenship or residence rights. Young people also find themselves falling between systems targeting certain categories such as migrants *or* young people, where age can make a significant difference to rights. For unaccompanied young people who seek asylum alone, turning 18 means an immediate risk of losing state support which was afforded to them as children. Currently, young migrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, girls and women, young people with disabilities or those categorized as NEET remain especially vulnerable to the accumulated social impacts of successive crises.

Another area of concern is related to 'the politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 2011), in particular the extent to which young migrants are seen as 'belonging', the discourses used to exclude particular migrant groups and how these discourses are shaped by specific social actors. While young people's subjective sense of belonging to places has been shown to be in flux and influenced by factors such as opportunities to be involved in their communities or perceived attitudes towards migrants, policies of inclusion and access to full citizenship can facilitate migrants' sense of belonging and influence their future plans. Young migrants are often more likely to settle long-term in countries where they feel their rights are respected and their skills recognised and where access to secure citizenship is facilitated by states. In turn, they are also likely to engage in further mobilities if countries do not meet their expectations long-term.

The 2007-2009 economic crisis and the 2020 pandemic show how global events can rapidly jeopardise young people's opportunities and futures and subject them to forced im/mobility, marginalisation and vulnerability. Over the last few decades, we have seen significant increases in the number of young people migrating in search of better work or education opportunities, but also because of conflict, war and threats to their safety or rights. Increasing global inequalities and the climate crisis will likely drive youth migration in the future, causing concerns for 'brain drain' in countries young people leave behind. The priority for governments globally remains to develop policies that tackle youth marginalisation and create fair opportunities for young people. In receiving countries, integration policies influence the level of support young people can access, creating hierarchies of opportunities and rights between young people, depending on their age and status on arrival, e.g. children, students, workers, asylum seekers. Priority policy areas remain around the regularisation of migrants' rights, to reduce the risks of trafficking and exploitation, tackling social and political exclusions created by residence and citizenship restrictions, and ensuring an intersectional approach to policy making. The intersection of certain characteristics, such as migrant status, gender, age, disability, will likely further exacerbate the vulnerability of migrant youth, unless policy measures are specifically directed at boosting their rights, protection and recognition. Migrant young people also need inclusion in social dialogue to inform policies and practices, to ensure that inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic are tackled rather than further entrenched.

## References

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