



The Lakshmi Mittal and Family
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE
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Creating Safe Environment for Migrating Children Podcast Transcript

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Drawing from her harm prevention research relating to child protection, Professor Bhabha argues that the state has an obligation to create a safe environment and provide for the basic needs of migrant children. She also touches on the importance of access to education in countering intolerance and exclusion in regards to her work with the Rohingya community in Bangladesh.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hello and welcome to this episode of India In Focus podcast. I am Sanjay Kumar, the India Country Director at Harvard's Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute. For our inaugural episode, we are joined by Jacqueline Babha, who is the Professor of Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health. She is also the Director of Research at the FXB Centre for Health and Human Rights. Her current research focuses on adolescents at risk of violence, social exposure or discrimination. She is actively engaged in several research projects in India examining the factors that drive access of low-caste girls from illiterate families to higher education and that transform gender norms among children and adolescents.

Professor Babha, welcome to the podcast. Across the world, children are at risk from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Conflict and natural disasters have forced millions to flee their homes and face the dangers of migration and displacement. How should we address the challenge of managing large-scale distress migration.

Jacqueline Babha: Well, thank you first of all Sanjay. It's very nice to be in conversation with you. So, the problem of large-scale and distress migration is really an enormous one, both in terms of intra-country migration and cross-border migration. So, in terms of cross border now at the moment in 2020, we are seeing about 30 million people who have been forced from their homes and forced to leave their countries for a range of reasons. So, they've left not out of choice but because they felt that they couldn't survive or they couldn't have a future. And, at least one-third of this population are children and when I say children, I mean people under the age of 18. That's how a child is defined in international law. So, this is a very huge number and it means that for millions of children and their families across the world, life brings with it enormous challenges.

So, I think there are several very basis problems with that distress migration raises from a human rights and the health perspective. First of all, when people leave their own country, often they are forced to leave with very little. Sometimes, they are literally fleeing for their lives in situations of war and we all have seen the images from Syria, or the images from Rohingya, closer here to India, I mean in Bangladesh. So, people are literally leaving, maybe they manage to grab their passport for future other possessions, they are leaving with very little. Even people who are qualified, people who have had

comfortable lives, people have been used to living in a certain way may find themselves in extremely harsh situations. So, there is an enormous challenge there for people who are used to having running water, who are used to having a comfortable life. And of course, there are many of the people who are forced into the most arduous journeys are poorer people who don't have the option of buying a visa or buying an air ticket, and so the journeys are very hazardous.

If you combine the difficulty of leaving and the difficulty of the job where you don't have family, where you don't have any means of protection, there are enormous challenges presented. And these are challenges not just for individuals, these are challenges for states. States have obligations to protect people who are fleeing from humanitarian challenges but we have not done a good job. We have done quite a poor job, so, in many cases, and I was just recently, I was in Cox's Bazaar some months ago seeing the Rohingya refugees and more recently, I've been also in Greece seeing Syrian refugees living, I mean the lives in the camps are very harsh and the children themselves face many, many challenges. So states have obligations at least to create a safe environment to provide basic needs for shelter, for healthcare, for food and water but on top of that states also should have a responsibility to provide education for example and we see that many of these children are not getting an education.

So, some people talk about a lost generation, you can imagine if children for years are out of school, this creates a dreadful basis for the future of their lives, they don't have a skill set they don't even have a sense of belonging, of purpose, so these are some of the challenges that we are facing.

Sanjay Kumar: And what do you think have been the main challenges that come in the way of providing safe asylum to the refugee children and what do you also see as response by the international agencies?

Jacqueline Bhabha: We've seen a mixture of responses, I think many of us as human rights people tend to focus on the bad things. I mean we have seen also seen some wonderful examples you know, I suppose the best example is Germany in 2015 where over a million people were admitted and I was just in Germany last week talking to some colleagues, including senior colleagues in government, they've really done quite a remarkable job of including refugees now a high proportion are earning and people are learning the language, of course nobody is homeless. So, there are some really good examples where there is political will of course we know Chancellor Merkel herself said we can do this, she created a 'can do' attitude.

Of course, Germany has its own history which also I think made the population particularly receptive in a way to kind of clear the stain of 20th century Germany and what happened. So, if there is political will, if there is public support, you can do a lot because actually refugees and forced migrants generally are the more able and more dynamic among their population. It's not the poorest of the poor, it's not the most fragile or the most vulnerable who leave, it's usually the most entrepreneurial, often young, healthy, determined, ambitious. So there's a huge human dividend you can try to reap.

The trouble of course is that political will is hard to sustain and we have seen this in Germany, we've seen this elsewhere so it's always a regular trope in political life that you know scapegoating outsiders is a very convenient tool for political leaders to cover problems they are having domestically. We've seen this again and again, unfortunately we are also seeing this in this country. So, it's easy to blame outsiders for political problems that occur within your own country, and so this unfortunately is what we're seeing now across Europe, and we are seeing this in Bangladesh where Bangladeshis were welcoming initially to the Rohingya, we are seeing this in Turkey, again Turks were very welcoming to Syrians.

So, one of the problems in our situations is Sanjay political leadership is often not sustained and instead of that you get xenophobia, you get a kind of leveraging of hostility and of course if you have that and you incentivize you know the dark side of people and everybody has a good side and a bad side, if you incentivize that dark side, then the political will and the effort to include and welcome and incorporate the benefits of a new population are lost. And, so I think unfortunately we are often seeing this where they could be a huge gain, a brain gain, a personnel gain, a youth gain, instead we are seeing this rise of hostility. We are seeing a ghettoization of new arrived refugees or forced migrants in very unsavory circumstances where there's crime, where there's lack of employment, where there's hatred and then of course there's a vicious circle.

So, states have a huge responsibility, you mentioned international organizations and certainly international organizations, humanitarian organizations in particular have been very involved, the most obvious is UNHCR, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNICEF and International Organization of Migration and UNDP, many others have also been involved. At the end of the day though, it is going to be states, not the international community who are going to sustain these populations. International community can do so much, you can create a situation of sort of dependence where you are supporting a population of refugee camp for a while but that's not a permanent situation and we wouldn't want it to be a permanent situation. So, ultimately however abled the international community is, at the end of the day the international community is made up at states. So, states have to give the money, states have to contribute but at the end of the day these are political decisions that states or regions make and there's only so much the UN can do to patch up the gaps.

Sanjay Kumar: Right, so according to you, how can we make sure that the rights and safety of children and young people are preserved as they undertake migration? Can you suggest some of the things?

Jacqueline Bhabha: Yeah, I think you know there's a lot of expertise on this and we should be doing much better than we are because despite what people say child migration is not a new thing, children have always migrated. It's true that the visibility of unaccompanied child migration has increased, you know we have seen this of course at the US-Mexico border, we've seen this in other places with Afghani young people, with Pakistani boys, with people coming from sub-Saharan Africa but it's not a new phenomenon. And, so we should and people like myself and many others have been talking for a long time about what needs to be done to make the situation better but so far we haven't made enough progress.

So, what I think we should be doing are several things. First of all, we should think of these migrant children, first of all it's children, which sounds very banal but in practice it's not banal because it means that if you have an unaccompanied child whatever the nationality the state, the organizations that care for children should have a responsibility to that child. So, for example, you have an unaccompanied Rohingya child fleeing Myanmar coming into Bangladesh, that child first and foremost should be the responsibility of the Bangladeshi Child Welfare Organization because it's a child and shouldn't be put into some refugee department or police department or migration department who know nothing about children. It should be the specialist who deals with children, that's no one. So, domestic child welfare systems should include within them people whose responsibility it is to incorporate the needs of a migrant and refugee children, that's number one, we don't really do that, very few countries do that the sort of kind of segregation.

Secondly, when children arrive accompanied, they need to be of course accommodated with their families. They should not be separated from their families like we saw in the US recently, you can't detain the parents and take little toddlers away, I mean it was an obscenity. So, parents and children should be kept together, families should be kept together and should be looked after as families and they

should not be detained. Children should not be detained where they have not been charged with a criminal offense, it's never acceptable to detain a child just because he or she does not have a documented migration status and yet that happens all the time. So, that's the second point, shouldn't detain children, should keep families together not in detention and there are lot's of ways of making sure that you are keeping track of them if you're worried they are going to disappear, there are ways of keeping sure , they can report to police stations, in this day and age with cellphones you know where people are, it's not a mystery.

Thirdly, every unaccompanied child should have someone who is allocated like a guardian or somebody in place of a parent in Latin they say in loco parentis, somebody who has that responsibility like we would do for a domestic child who is in care. So, somebody who's responsible for helping a child find accommodation, helping the child get a lawyer, helping the child get into school, protecting the child from exploitation or violence. What happens instead is that many of these children particularly the teenagers are on their own and so I have mentioned being recently in Greece we see children regrettably, children even selling sex in order to get money to cope because there is nobody looking after them, they're not really properly attended to, some of them have a lot of pressure from their families to send money back, some children feel the pressure to move on from where they are to a better place, and they want to get money to pay smugglers for whatever reason. This is a very big problem and of course in other situations it's not the children who are deciding or whatever, it's adults who are taking advantage and we are seeing this in Mexico now where there are very large numbers of unaccompanied children and the gangs, the cartels, the drug lords are using these migrant children. So, you need to have responsibility for unaccompanied children whether they're your nationals or not, it doesn't matter. Ultimately, in future these are going to be one of your population. So, ultimately, I would say these are very, very basic starting points you should ensure.

Sanjay Kumar: So you spoke about some of these international border issues and the migrant issues, so what according to you are some of the challenges related to children protection unique to South Asia?

Jacqueline Bhabha: So, you know South Asia has huge strengths and huge weaknesses. There's an enormously young population, so there's an enormous opportunity for growth, for exploration and we've seen that, we've seen the unbelievable success of so many South Asians. Obviously, everybody talks about the IT field but I think those of us who work in American universities we see it and these are not just wealthy kids, South Asian kids who've done so well because there's a strong family, there's a strong support for education, there's a very good sense of investing in the child and the future of the family.

So, I think these are all very strong assets that South Asia has which other areas do not have, I mean in Europe you have a really sharp demographic decline. Even a country like Mexico now is beginning to decline, so this is an asset. It means that you have young people who have enormous potential. The downside is of course that there are very many serious child protection issues which are still sadly not addressed, some of them are closely related to gender, some are closely related to cast and many are related to poverty and inequality. I would say those are the three factors, so start with gender, you know still unacceptably high rates of child marriage when I say child marriage, I mean girl child marriage. Rates have come down, situation has improved but i think over 20% of 18 year olds in India are still married and that's very high if you think of the size of the country, we are talking about millions of girls and of course marriage is not just marriage, marriage is then the risk of pregnancy, early pregnancy which is dangerous if you are very young. Of course, high risk of violence if you are a young girl in a family, so child marriage is something which is till a very pervasive norm and South Asia is not the only region in the world, there are parts of sub-Saharan Africa for example where there are very high rates of

child marriage but it's something that there's a long way to go and I would say other related issues that I've already mentioned of course domestic violence, rape, whether because increased reporting or whether because of increased kind of movement in modern life, rape is one of the fastest growing crimes in India. So, as I say it maybe an artifact of the Nirbhaya case and the fact that a lot more people are reporting but it may also be that a lot more girls are also now going to college and going out of their home so that's one factor. So, I think all these gender related challenges to children are not very unique to South Asia but they are definitely a feature of South Asian life, these gendered norms about family, about the position of girls.

Secondly, I would say caste. Caste, unfortunately, particularly an Indian problem continues to absolutely dominate life chances for children even though it's not meant to even though I don't know how long Ambedkar lived wonderful constitution in India but the inequalities, caste-based inequalities are still pervasive and we are all familiar of the cases we read in the paper even of cases of people who despite their caste manage to make it, you know that young doctor and then they get attacked. So, caste is a very distinctive South Asian problem which unfortunately is still a long way to be solved and I think know that this current climate is not helping at all. There's an increase in tribalism, there's an increase in religious hostility which of course ricochets on children and children's life chances and children's sense of safety.

And then lastly, just overall inequality. We know that India has increased it's middle class dramatically, we know that I don't know if it's the 5th or the 6th largest economy in the world, I mean India is an absolute behemoth of productivity, of entrepreneurial and industrial success and yet, so many of the poorest people in the world live in this country. So, I mean it's not just India also probably other parts of South Asia but I am most familiar with India so I think that growing India rising has not been combined with reducing inequality and this means that the children's life chances are extremely unequal and that's still an issue. It's an issue quality of education, quality of food, access to healthcare, access to jobs, the whole government.

Sanjay Kumar: I think you touched upon several issues and the role of education is very important where they are forced to leave their education and that leads to number of issues, they become dependent on and especially the girls and that is also a big issue in and around India and in South Asia.

Jacqueline Bhabha: I think you are right. I think education is a huge issue and of course here too, it's not you can say that the glass is half empty and half full. I mean there have been an enormous progress in India, when the British left the situations was a disaster, absolute disaster now, 75 years after independence whatever we are, there's much greater access. Over 19% of children have access to school, even secondary school enrollment has increased, college enrollment is increasing but there are still so many children who whether it's marriage, whether it's seasonal migration or other reasons, there's so many, I think there are 60-70 million people in seasonal migrants in India. That means that 7 months of the year the whole family moves to mines, sugarcane or cotton or quarries or whatever and then they move back during the monsoon. So, of course that kind of undermines the possibility of education. So, I think even though there's been so much progress in the educational context, there are also still so many challenges, including cost, safety and many issues like that so there's a long way to go.

Sanjay Kumar: Professor Bhabha, you have been leading a course on child protection under Harvard X. Would you like to share a bit about that and how people working in this field can be benefitted or enrolled if you can provide some insight?

Jacqueline Bhabha: Sure, yes, I would be pleased to Sanjay. So, Harvard X is a very good initiative I think which makes available free of charge to anybody the expertise of people who work and teach at Harvard. Researchers and professors and there are many courses, the one that I did with several colleagues is Harvard X course on child protection as you said and it's quite a systematic course which introduces people to the concept of child protection what does it mean, what are the main issues it talks about, children, it's not just about children in general, it's not about children's health or vaccination or child development, it's about child protection as a specific sub set of issues, dealing with abuse, violence, exploitation of children.

So, where are these problems seen, what causes them and what can be done about it. And, so the course looks at this and gives a framing of the international law that's relevant in a way that's very accessible, you don't have to be a lawyer to understand it. It has very good graphics and it has readings attached so that you can listen to the lecture and then there's a reading list and then you can click on it and you can read. And then, there's a opportunity for questions, you can ask yourself questions to see if you have understood the material. So, I would encourage people who are interested, we have a lot of experts who we have interviewed in the course of this course, people from the UN, various advocates who talk about different issues, we've had people from South Asia.

Sanjay Kumar: And is it also useful for young students who want to work in the child rights field?

Jacqueline Bhabha: Very useful for young students who want to work in the child rights field, people who are interested in international law, people who are interested in maybe in issues like child marriage or trafficking, so many different issues conflict, war children affected by —

Sanjay Kumar: And do they get any certificate?

Jacqueline Bhabha: So, I think you can get some sort of credentials. I mean obviously it's not a classroom teaching, there's no, a professor doesn't give an input or grade you, there's peer to peer grading and collaboration and I know that literally hundreds of thousands of people are involved in these courses and I think it's a very good experience.

Sanjay Kumar: Wonderful. So, thank you for sharing that and could you please tell us more about your work with the Rohingya community, very briefly if you can touch upon that?

Jacqueline Bhabha: Yes. So, we have been very fortunate actually thanks to the Mittal Institute colleagues as well to have a partnership with BRAC. And, as I am sure many people listening will know that BRAC is the largest NGO in the world, they are a very impressive community based organization which started in Bangladesh many years ago after terrible floods and is now really a model of sort of social entrepreneurship if you like. So, we work with BRAC in the context of our work with Rohingya children and other lessons in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazaar, which is in the Chittagong area of South East Bangladesh.

And we have been doing a project, more or less develop now a curriculum, which is to be used in the learning centers, which is really kind of a synonym for school but you know it doesn't call them schools because the Bangladeshi government doesn't want Rohingya children be seen to be going to schools. So, these are learning centers set up by the humanitarian community but in these learning centers, there's a very rudimentary curriculum. What we've done is added to that rudimentary curriculum a life skills component and this is not just an optional extra. The idea of the life skills component is if you, like these young children and young people, have had a really traumatic and extraordinarily painful experiences in your early life, like they have, maybe seeing a relative's murder, being raped, being forced to leave your home with nothing, and then coming a living in a very harsh condition in what is just basically a forest. If you've had that then you really need tools to manage your own emotions and your own ability if you are going to be able to be resilient, otherwise it's likely that you are going to suffer.

So, these life skills are really quite simple tools for enabling children and young people to set targets, to prioritize certain goals, to deal with aggression and adversity in a constructive way, to listen, to be resilient. I mean there are all sorts of ways, making friendships in groups rather than enmities. So, we've developed a curriculum, and I'm happy to say that this is now being presented to the colleagues in the education sector in Cox's Bazaar, it's just been presented actually and we are very hopeful that this will be rolled out in 30 schools to start with. The BRAC colleagues will roll this out, so we'll train the trainers and then the idea is this will be a model, which will spread to all the, about six hundred thousand children now in Cox's Bazaar. So, this is an enormous enterprise and I must say for all the problems that there are, the problems are enormous, it's also very impressive that this poor country, Bangladesh has managed to absorb in some sort of way, not ideal at all, but at least created a safe space for so many people, of over a million people.

So, that's what he have done, we would like to now develop more work with young women. There's an enormous need there, both for adolescent girls and also for young women who are married. There's huge needs, health related issues, sexual reproductive health and also mental health issues, also issues of skill, of work. So, I think the work that's offered there is again pretty rudimentary, it's just like craft, which is, there's nothing wrong with craft, I love craftwork but it's not really a solution to having an income generating future. So, there are many other skills I think these young women could be taught. So, there's a lot to be done and I think maybe for us would be the next chapter which we would like to work on.

Sanjay Kumar: Wonderful. So, all the best for your projects and it was a pleasure to host you for this podcast and thank you for sharing your insights. Thank you so much.

Jacqueline Babha: Thank you for the opportunity, Sanjay. Thank you.