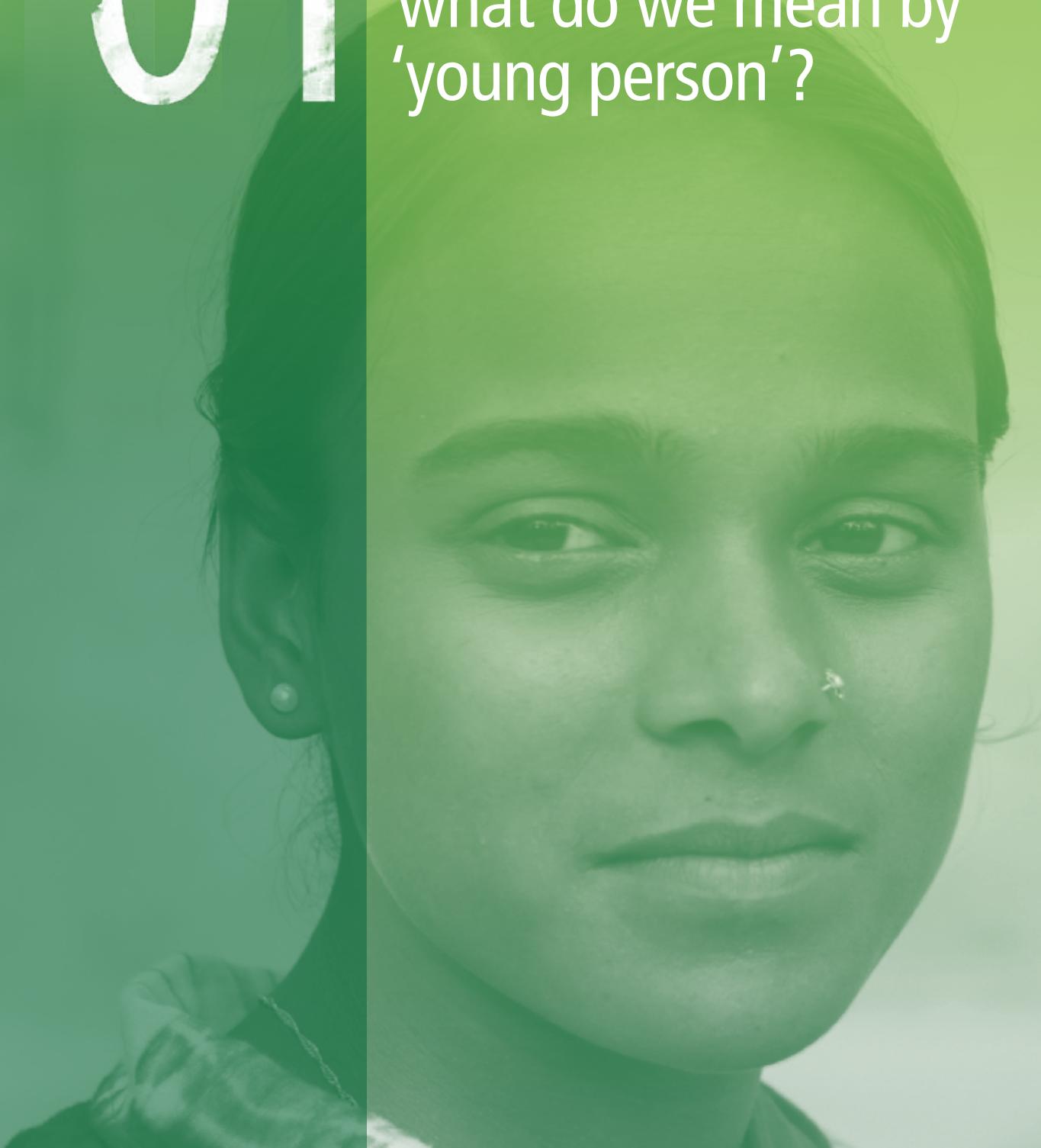


01

Understanding young people's right to decide

## What is childhood and what do we mean by 'young person'?



# About the Right to Decide series

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) works towards a world where women, men and young people everywhere have control over their own bodies, and therefore their destinies. We defend the right of all young people to enjoy their sexuality free from ill-health, unwanted pregnancy, violence and discrimination.

IPPF believes that all young people have the right to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health in line with their evolving capacities. We also recognize that the estimated 1.7 billion young people in the world are sexual beings with diverse needs, desires, hopes, dreams, problems, concerns, preferences and priorities. Amongst the 1.7 billion, there are young people living with HIV; young women facing unwanted pregnancy and seeking abortion services; young people with an unmet need for contraception; people with sexually transmitted infections and lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual young people. IPPF advocates for the eradication of barriers that inhibit access to comprehensive sexuality education, information and sexual and reproductive health services that respond to all young people's needs and realities.

One such barrier that impedes young people's access to education and services is the widely-held and historically-rooted belief that young people are incapable of making positive decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health. IPPF's experience providing education, information and services around the world for the past 60 years tells us that this is untrue. Thus, in 2010 IPPF initiated a year-long project to learn more about young people,

autonomy and sexual rights from experts working on these topics in various fields. We wanted to understand the theory behind the laws, policies and practices that both facilitate and restrict young people's autonomy as well as the key factors contributing to the development of young people as autonomous decision-makers.

IPPF commissioned five experts to answer the following questions that form the basis of the papers you find in the Right to Decide series:

- 1. What is childhood? What do we mean when we say 'young person'?**
- 2. Why is it important to develop young people's capacities for autonomous decision making?**
- 3. Are protection and autonomy opposing concepts?**
- 4. How can parents support young people's autonomous decision making?**
- 5. How do we assess young people's capacity to make autonomous decisions?**

With an enhanced understanding of young people, autonomy and sexual rights, we hope to be better placed to promote and fulfill our vision of a world where young people are recognized as rights-holders, decision-makers and sexual beings whose contributions, opinions and thoughts are valued equally, particularly in relation to their own sexual and reproductive health and well-being.

## About the author

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# 01 Introduction

This paper discusses ideas concerning childhood and young people within different societies and disciplines, and in international law. In doing so, it highlights disparities in both concepts and experiences of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, across different times and cultures. Much research draws attention to a distinction in the experiences of young people growing up in interdependence-oriented cultures.<sup>i</sup> Anthropological and cross-cultural research demonstrates that concepts of personhood, agency and autonomy differ depending on the socio-cultural context and whether individual or collective values are prioritised. These have important implications for child rearing practices, young people's daily activities (e.g. play, study or work), cognitive and affective development, and transitions to adulthood. Such understanding also shapes the level of autonomy young people exercise in determining marriage partners, place of residence, and livelihood choice.<sup>ii</sup>

## 02 Defining childhood and young people's autonomy

Some qualities often associated with childhood are 'physical and emotional immaturity and vulnerability in comparison to adults, causing lack of autonomy and social dependence'.<sup>iii</sup> Internationally recognised definitions refer to chronological age in marking the boundary between childhood and adulthood, which is often set at 18 years. In industrialised countries, births are recorded and birth date is an important aspect of people's personal and legal identity. However, this is not the case in all societies, and in many locations social experience such as labour migration or marriage, and physical markers including height, facial hair, or the start of menstruation, may be more important than age in signifying adult status. Although the experience of being young is universal, it takes many forms determined by cultural, political, economic and personal factors.<sup>iv</sup>

Until relatively recently, prevailing academic discourses presented childhood as a universal biologically and psychologically determined phase of human development. Since much research on children's cognitive and social development has been conducted in Europe and the United States, the experiences of young people growing up in these countries have become the normative standard against which childhoods around the world are measured. The concept of childhood prevalent in the global North<sup>1</sup> developed under the conditions of industrialising Europe, and is considered to be a period of innocence, vulnerability and development, during which time children are in need of adult protection and care due to their physical and emotional immaturity. Children are expected to receive a formal education in schools, and are separated from the adult domains of work, sex and politics, which are seen as potentially damaging to young people.<sup>v</sup> Although this (globally dominant) concept of childhood belongs to a particular historical and cultural moment, it has been treated as natural and universal.

<sup>vi</sup> This has resulted in a lack of attention to the variation in experiences and models of childhood across different epochs, socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts, which impacts on the nature of policy and welfare interventions, and academic research.

Research from around the world demonstrates that the boundaries of childhood and adulthood both within and between different societies vary dramatically. Childrearing practices are influenced by the type of skills, cultural attitudes and social behaviours that are necessary to succeed in a particular socio-cultural and economic setting. In many poor, urban areas in the global South, children may be working on the streets or caring for younger siblings from the age of five, while in rural areas where families survive on subsistence farming girls and boys work in the fields and home, making important contributions to their household's wellbeing despite their young age. By contrast, in the industrialised societies of the global North, young people's economic and personal dependence on parents often lasts for over twenty years.<sup>vii</sup> Further, even within the same society or family children experience differences in their work, study and social responsibilities that are affected by factors such as gender, birth order, caste, and (dis)ability. Girls and boys may be encouraged to develop different attitudes and skills, which are influenced by the roles they are expected to play as adults. In many families, the eldest children acquire household and work skills at an earlier age than their younger siblings, for whom they may have caring responsibilities.<sup>viii</sup> Despite these disparities in ideas and experiences of childhood and youth, the model of childhood common in the industrialised countries of the global North retains widespread authority, through the historical legacy of colonialism and the impact of international children's rights legislation.<sup>ix</sup>

Some societies have a concept of 'youth', which is applied to young people who are no longer considered to be children, but have not attained yet the status of adults. This often coincides with a period of 'adolescence', which describes the physical changes associated with the onset of puberty, and the transformations in young people's social roles as they move towards adulthood. In contrast to the idealised notion of childhood popular in the global North, international perceptions of youth and adolescence often view it as a time of 'storm and stress'<sup>x</sup> when young people are seen as deviant, problematic, or threatening.<sup>xi</sup> In the industrialised countries where most research on adolescence has been conducted, it is usually assumed to be a 'process of separation from parents' when young people 'should strive for independence'.<sup>xii</sup> Some argue that 'becoming an

1. The North-South divide refers to the political, social and economic inequities between wealthy, industrialised countries (referred to as the global North) and poorer, less developed nations (referred to as the global South).

autonomous person – a self-governing person – is one of the fundamental tasks of the adolescent years'.<sup>xiii</sup>

However, anthropological and cross-cultural psychological studies suggest that this perception of the transition to adulthood is based on a culturally and temporally specific idea of personhood, in which the individual is viewed as an autonomous and rational being.<sup>xiv</sup> In contrast, many societies have a more relational or social perception of personhood, where both children and adults are constructed 'as fundamentally part of a family, lineage or clan'.<sup>xv</sup> This has an impact on the relative importance of young people's negotiation of autonomy in their marriage, lifestyle, and economic choices,<sup>xvi</sup> since household interdependence may be maintained throughout childhood and adulthood.

Yet although many researchers differentiate between individualistic and interdependent cultures, some draw attention to problems in this binary distinction. For example, even in so-called independence-oriented societies, where individuals are seen as independent agents, 'companionship, consideration and commitment to others' are not rare in adults.<sup>xvii</sup> Additionally, research shows that children and adolescents in the global North construct themselves through interdependent relationships with peers and friends, which are built on mutual obligation and reciprocity.<sup>xviii</sup>

Similarly, even in interdependence oriented cultures, there is scope for individuals to exercise some personal choice despite the social constraints they face. For example, Samantha Punch's research on youth school-to-work transitions in Bolivia demonstrates that young people are active in negotiating socio-economic restrictions in their work and study choices. These structural limitations include rural location, economic impoverishment, gender, birth order, parental values and social networks.<sup>xix</sup> Punch describes this process as 'negotiated interdependence', which is a 'careful way of understanding how young people work within their structural limitations while fulfilling both individual and household needs and asserting some level of agency over their choice of transition'.<sup>xx</sup> In fact, building on the idea that interdependence and family relationships are also important in relatively individualistic societies, Punch suggests that 'negotiated interdependence' may be a useful way of understanding youth transitions in various contexts around the world.

As the above examples suggest, it is important to acknowledge variation in the level of choice that young people (and adults) in different cultures, classes, and socio-economic contexts are able to exercise over personal and collective decisions. Yet it is difficult to conceive either of a completely autonomous individual who is free from all social constraints, or of a person with absolutely no control over their circumstances. Practice theorists, such as Anthony Giddens<sup>xxi</sup> suggest that people are products of their socio-cultural circumstances and are subject to social, political, economic and cultural opportunities and limitations. Yet at the same time, an individual's actions and choices are never solely shaped by structural determinants. All individuals, even those most restricted by their circumstances, are able to exercise some agency, which can be defined as people's structurally or contextually conditioned capacity to make choices and act in the world. As this paper will show through the use of specific examples, in order to understand the opportunity available for young people's agency it is necessary to develop a detailed knowledge of the social, cultural and economic opportunities and constraints in their particular context(s).

# 03 Concepts of childhood and children's development

Until a few centuries ago, children around the world worked together with their parents, learning how to cultivate crops, collect water and firewood, helping at home and herding animals. Under the conditions of industrialising Europe, children continued to work alongside adults in factories and mines. Yet 'child labour in 19th century Europe was qualitatively different from what had preceded it', becoming more dangerous and involving machines, chemicals, poor ventilation and long hours, which were felt by some to damage young people's welfare.<sup>xxii</sup>

These and other issues, including a concern that children should receive religious and moral instruction in schools and that delinquent youth should be removed from the streets,<sup>xxiii</sup> led to advocacy in many European countries to prevent children from working under such conditions. These changes were also linked to rising standards of living, increased state regulation of family life and the influence of philanthropists.<sup>xxiv</sup>

From the 1830s laws were passed in western European countries, which gradually removed children from the workforce and introduced compulsory schooling. The UK was amongst the first countries to create legislation specifically addressing children's working practices and attempting to limit their working hours.<sup>xxv</sup> In England and Wales the 1870 Education Act made school attendance compulsory for 5–13 year olds. The introduction of compulsory schooling and the notion that children should no longer have to work resulted in a lengthening of the period of childhood.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Significant changes occurred during the period of the British Empire, resulting in these laws being applied in many colonies and continuing to influence legal and social systems post-independence.<sup>xxvii</sup> For example, early in the 20th century the British introduced legislation restricting children's employment in factories and mines in India.<sup>xxviii</sup>

These studies show that in the past children were often 'closely involved in adult society',<sup>xxix</sup> and played active roles in social life, such as working. Although the idea that all children should be ensconced in schools and removed from the work place is relatively recent, and is 'linked to the emergence of modern civil society',<sup>xxx</sup> education has come to be seen as the 'proper' role for children. Historians have contributed to childhood studies by illustrating the variability of the concept over time. They have demonstrated changes

in children's socio-economic roles and attitudes towards them, thus challenging the idea of a universal and natural understanding of childhood. The above transformations in children's work and education practices impacted on other academic disciplines because researchers and policymakers have been concerned about childhood 'since the state began to assume some responsibility for how and where children spent their time'.<sup>xxxi</sup> This led to the emergence of studies into children's psychological development at the end of the 19th Century, since it was hoped that such research would improve the education system.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Research on children in the field of developmental psychology has influenced prevailing models of childhood. Jean Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development through universal stages determined by chronological age<sup>xxxiii</sup> has been and continues to be extremely influential.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Piaget's work outlines how the individual child sequentially acquires sensori-motor, language and numerical skills, eventually progressing to the formal operational stage which includes autonomous, rational thinking abilities.<sup>xxxv</sup> In these accounts children's development 'has a particular structure, consisting of a series of predetermined stages, which lead towards the eventual achievement of logical competence'<sup>xxxvi</sup> Piaget<sup>xxxvii</sup> and Lawrence Kohlberg<sup>xxxviii</sup> assert that children's moral capacities also develop through stages. This idea underpins perceptions of young children as morally and politically incompetent due to their lack of abstract reasoning skills.<sup>xxxix</sup> Within sociology Piaget's ideas contributed to the concept of childhood as a natural progression of biological and cognitive development towards adulthood,<sup>xl</sup> encouraging teleological explanations of children's socialisation focused on achieving the end-state of adulthood.<sup>xli</sup> Since the individual's 'development of an autonomous sense of self has always been assumed to be a core feature of mental life',<sup>xlii</sup> studies of children's development often 'emphasise the 'cognitive and affective skills that will enhance that person's independence and achievement of goals.'<sup>xliii</sup> As much psychological and sociological research has been carried out in the global North, ideas concerning appropriate child developmental pathways in industrialised societies have been applied in very different contexts.<sup>xliv</sup> Yet in cultures where children are taught that familial rather than individual goals are primary, the values, competencies and knowledge that children acquire are likely to differ from those suggested by western psychological developmental theories. Within the discipline of anthropology, ethnographers have used data collected in field sites around the world to criticise

the cultural assumptions of universal developmental theories.<sup>xlv</sup> Such accounts are based on field observations, interviews and discussions of children's lives in particular historical, economic, social and cultural contexts, which 'make sense of their behaviour there and then'.<sup>xlvii</sup> Margaret Mead's anthropological research in Samoa,<sup>xviii</sup> for example, questioned Stanley Hall's influential notion of adolescence as a universal period of turmoil by showing its absence in her field site,<sup>xix</sup> and drew attention to the importance of cultural context in the experiences of children and adolescents.

According to LeVine,<sup>xix</sup> in the 1990s anthropologists published more studies of childhood than in any previous decade.<sup>1</sup> These studies are based on the premise that varying models of childhood can only be comprehended with the 'detailed knowledge of the socially and culturally organised contexts that give them meaning'.<sup>li</sup> Susan Seymour's longitudinal study of women, family and childcare in Bhubaneswar, India provides a detailed description of the changing patterns of children's socialisation and development amongst families of differing socio-economic backgrounds in the state of Orissa. Seymour analyses the child-caring strategies of 'Old Town' extended families, where children were encouraged to develop interdependent values through group sleeping and eating patterns, and by teaching young children the names for kinship terms and relationships, rather than things.<sup>lii</sup> Although families in the 'New Capital' also emphasised interdependence, parenting styles were adaptive to a society where formal education and competition for jobs were increasingly important, so parents of these children encouraged their independence and personal aspirations to a greater degree.<sup>liii</sup>

In families of low economic status, children were expected to become responsible and self-reliant at a much younger age than their more affluent peers.<sup>liv</sup> Seymour also draws attention to variations in the socialisation of boys and girls in this patrifocal society where girls are expected to move to their husband's family after marriage and are therefore prepared for their roles as wives and daughters-in-law. This requires them to be raised to be hardworking, obedient and self-sacrificing in order to maximise their chances of adjusting to their roles as wives and daughters-in-law.<sup>lv</sup>

The recognition of the diverse experiences of childhood across different cultures, historical periods, and socio-economic settings has led to a new paradigm of childhood studies.<sup>lvi</sup> This paradigm views childhood as socially constructed and sees it as 'neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups', but rather 'an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life'.<sup>lvii</sup> Since this social constructivist model challenged the universalising approach to childhood studies, children's accounts could no longer be discounted with reference to their lack of cognitive

skills.<sup>lviii</sup> In this respect, the paradigm has inspired much research which approaches children as competent social actors and accords value to the study of children's social and cultural relationships in their own right, rather than in relation to their construction by adults.

However, the new paradigm of childhood studies has been challenged for paying insufficient attention to the 'impact of political economic forces (or 'systems') working over time,' on children's learning and roles.<sup>lix</sup> The 'vast disparities in the social and economic constructions of children's (and adults) lives around the globe' are 'a consequence of the workings of the global economy,'<sup>lx</sup> rather than simply cultural variations in what it means to be young. For example, in her ethnography *Death Without Weeping*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that the combination of high rates of fertility, poverty, and child mortality in a shanty town in Brazil produced an environment in which 'death is understood as the most ordinary and most expected outcome for the children of poor families'.<sup>lxii</sup> This situation impacts on maternal-infant interactions, and has led to mothers being less emotionally invested in weaker infants, and in some cases withdrawing compassion and care towards them. Scheper-Hughes notes, however, that these practices are not autonomously, culturally produced', but instead 'they have a social history and must be understood within the economic and political context of a larger state and world (moral) order that suspended their relations towards these women'.<sup>lxii</sup> The actions of these women must be considered alongside the wider national and international situation of political violence caused by a military coup in Brazil, 'everyday' structural violence, economic exploitation, impoverishment and chronic hunger.

The paradigm's focus on the socio-cultural aspects of childhood has also been criticised for over-emphasising the role of culture in constructing childhood and adolescence and thus neglecting biological and psychological elements of development.<sup>lxiii</sup> For example, recent developments in neuroscience suggest that the 'biologically based changes in neural systems of emotion and motivation' result in 'a natural increase in tendencies toward risk taking, sensation seeking and emotional changes during pubertal maturation'.<sup>lxiv</sup> Risking taking during adolescence is associated with a desire for 'heightened stimulation' and an 'immature self-regulatory system' and these observations are 'consistent with emerging research on the development of pre-frontal cortical systems'.<sup>lxv</sup> Therefore, rather than understanding adolescence and youth primarily as a socio-culturally determined stage, it is important to recognise that in addition to cultural, economic, and political factors, the physical changes that take place during this period may have common effects on cognitive functioning and young people's ability to govern their emotions.

# 04 Concepts of adolescence and transitions to adulthood

The term adolescence was coined in the 20th Century<sup>lxvi</sup> and has been defined in various ways. It 'begins with the biological/physical changes related to puberty, but ends in the domain of social roles' and can be considered 'that awkward period between sexual maturation and the attainment of adult roles and responsibilities'.<sup>lxvii</sup> Similarly to childhood, much psychological and sociological research on adolescence has been carried out in the United States, which has influenced dominant understandings of this life stage.

Since America is 'a culture oriented towards independence', young people's 'entry into adolescence has been characterised as a time of transition during which children become increasingly concerned with establishing themselves as autonomous'.<sup>lxviii</sup> However, cross-cultural studies have demonstrated variation in the amount of autonomy that young people exercise. For example, in a comparison of American and Chinese young people's autonomous decision-making, Qin et al found that in the United States parents permit children greater autonomy than in China, which is categorised as having an interdependence oriented culture.<sup>lxix</sup> Such increases in adolescent decision-making 'predict enhanced emotional functioning to a greater extent among American children for whom it is normative for such increases to be relatively large than among Chinese children for whom it is normative for such changes to be relatively small'.<sup>lx</sup>

In addition to variations between adolescents' development of autonomy in different countries, research provides evidence of diversity within the same society. Julia Brannen's study of adolescent transitions amongst middle class, working class and ethnic minority groups in the UK found that 'adolescence may not necessarily be defined in individualistic terms as entailing an increase in young people's rights to autonomy and independence'.<sup>lxxi</sup> Within middle-class families the transition to adulthood involved achieved status and high autonomy, with parents respecting their children's individual rights to construct their own path and exert control over their lives. Amongst working class families, ascribed status and high autonomy characterised this process since young people's entry into work was an event that gave them more individual freedom and signified adult status. In households where parents were born outside the UK in India, East Africa or the Middle East, children's transition to adulthood involved ascribed status and low autonomy but high responsibility. Parents expected young people to take

on greater household and caring responsibilities, yet 'did not grant them or see them as having a right to greater individual autonomy'.<sup>lxxi</sup> Young people from these families, especially girls, were not permitted much freedom to go out with friends, and engage in leisure activities or relationships with the opposite sex. Research conducted in the UK with children who assume vital domestic and caring duties for their parents or siblings in the case of their disability, long-term illness, or substance misuse demonstrates that in such situations young people are 'in-effect taking on parent-type roles' from an early age.<sup>lxixii</sup> Young carers perform household tasks and provide personal care for their family members, which limits the time they can spend away from home with friends, or pursuing individual educational goals. These varying routes to adulthood in the UK demonstrate that parent-child relationships and the degree to which young people acquire independence are 'differentiated by social class, culture and gender'<sup>lxixiv</sup> and family circumstances.

Anthropologists have studied the diverse social meanings associated with the onset of puberty around the world. These physical changes may be accompanied by 'young people's participation in elaborate rituals marking the transition from childhood to adulthood'.<sup>lxv</sup> For example, in Bangladesh the circumcision of Muslim boys is an important rite of passage towards adulthood and adult sexuality,<sup>lxvi</sup> while for high caste Hindu boys in Nepal, a sacred thread ceremony marks their entrance into male adulthood.<sup>lxvii</sup> In most Asian societies, marriage remains the paramount rite of passage for girls transitioning from childhood to adulthood, despite the increasing salience amongst the middle classes of education and employment.<sup>lxviii</sup> For example, Kumar identifies three stages of female adolescence in Rajasthan, where marriage is universal. These relate to girls' physical development and their transformation from daughter to daughter-in-law, wife and mother, signified by a gradual shift in residence to their husband's family's village. Although many couples have their marriage ceremony between the ages of two and ten, the mean age for effectively beginning their married and sexual life is 15–16 years. For girls, adulthood commences when they become mothers, which usually occurs a few years after the onset of menstruation.<sup>lxix</sup> Kumar highlights the fact that in this social setting adolescents and particularly newly married girls, 'are still under the power of their elders' and may have limited opportunities to express their opinions or exercise autonomy over their reproductive choices.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Historically, in most parts of the world transitions to adulthood were automatic with 'young people following the route their 'culture' dictated'.<sup>lxxxii</sup> However, in many places 'there is now greater divergence in the transitions undertaken by different young people, particularly where education becomes more available and marriage can be delayed'.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Research on youth transitions in the global North demonstrates that 'young people are increasingly able (and required) to make choices in their transitions to adulthood'.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> In the UK, for instance, the transition to adulthood is a process over time with young people acquiring different legal and political rights and responsibilities at different ages. Young people also have to make choices over the following interrelated elements: leaving school, beginning work or higher education, setting up a new home, initiating sexual relationships, getting married or cohabiting, and becoming an adult consumer.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Socio-economic and demographic changes have made it more difficult for British young people to successfully transition to adulthood,<sup>lxxxvi</sup> and young people in the global North usually remain economically dependent for longer than their peers in many southern countries.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Processes of globalisation and developments in communication technology have also impacted on young people's progression towards adulthood in the global south. Increasing access to information technology, such as the internet, amongst young people around the world results in their being presented with possible ways of living in other places. For some, these images have become benchmarks against which to measure their own lives and hopes for the future. In Nepal, Mark Liechty shows how many young people become frustrated because they face a 'systematic incongruence' between 'their expectations and their real life', which is born of modernism, education, global mass media, tourism and commercial interests, and the interconnections between these elements.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

The above research from around the world challenges the notion that young people become more independent as they mature since in some socio-cultural contexts 'youth is understood as a time when young people become progressively more integrated into the family and community, rather than becoming more autonomous'.<sup>lxxxix</sup> One useful concept for understanding differences between families is that of 'intergenerational contracts', which see 'family relationships as a set of implicit understandings concerning the roles and responsibilities of family members'.<sup>lxxxi</sup> These contracts shape how resources are transferred from the working generation to older and younger household and society members. In north-eastern Ghana, from their early teens boys and girls are both expected to contribute to their household's livelihood as well as being responsible for providing their own personal items (e.g. soap) and the 'items

necessary for their progression into adulthood; namely pots, basins and bowls, in the case of girls, and livestock to rear in the case of boys.'<sup>xc</sup> In this cultural context, 'there is an explicit inter-generational contract where interdependence and autonomy co-exist, albeit the relationship is unequally balanced in favour of seniors and parents.'<sup>xcii</sup> Intergenerational contracts in this area include relations between extended family members, who are dispersed due to a history of labour migration. This provides both additional responsibilities and choices for young people who may be expected to move to another household to provide assistance in times of need, or may take advantage of the mutual reciprocity between relatives to migrate to an area where they can access better educational opportunities. In rural Bolivia, intergenerational contracts also exist between older and young siblings with younger siblings being more likely to attend secondary school since their elder brothers and sisters can contribute to the financial cost.<sup>xcii</sup>

In the global North where most countries have a welfare system, intergenerational contracts are largely secured by the market and the state.<sup>xciii</sup> However, in countries such as Bolivia there is a 'strong sense of obligation and responsibility to family'<sup>xciv</sup> and children rely on their parents for access to animals. Further, in addition to the strength of family bonds, since the national welfare system is non-existent, 'there are strong expectations that children should be responsible for their parents in old age, whether that be physical care or financial support'.<sup>xcv</sup> Household relationships of interdependence change and are renegotiated over time meaning that 'in some situations some individuals give, whilst others take, but in time each will have contributed as well as received'.<sup>xcvi</sup> This has implications for how young people balance their own aspirations and needs with fulfilling familial and social expectations.

# 05 Childhood and youth in international agreements

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been ratified by almost all countries, and is used as a framework by many international bodies, development and relief organisations.

Most of the UNCRC articles aim to protect children from various types of harm, such as exploitative work, sexual abuse or military engagement. However, the 'participation' articles<sup>2</sup> grant children the rights to freedom of expression, information, religion and conscience, having their views heard, and forming associations. In practice the participation rights have led to various opportunities for young people to be trained and informed on topics such as environmental preservation, basic hygiene, sexual health, and awareness raising techniques. Many governments and international agencies have initiated children's groups or clubs to involve young people in policy consultation or community activities.<sup>xcvii</sup>

The concept of rights stems from modern liberal political philosophy and is based on the idea that 'all adult human beings are capable of making rational, autonomous decisions' and (so long as they are not harming others) should be able to lead their lives as they see fit.<sup>xcviii</sup> Yet certain categories of person, including children, are seen as unable to make rational and autonomous decisions and need others to do this on their behalf.<sup>xcix</sup> Archard outlines two contrasting standpoints on children's rights. The liberationist view is that children are socially competent and are entitled to the same rights as adults, including the rights to vote and work.<sup>c</sup> The caretaker approach assumes that children are not self-determining agents and do not possess the cognitive maturity to make decisions in their best interests, and therefore require others to act for them.<sup>ci</sup> From the caretaker angle, the 'impulse for the institutionalisation of children's rights is the vulnerability and incapacity of children' who need 'advocacy on their behalf'.<sup>cii</sup>

The UNCRC can be seen as incorporating elements of both the liberationist and caretaker perspectives, which creates a conflict between 'asserting children's autonomy and rights to self-determination', whilst simultaneously stating 'that they must be protected from harmful influence'.<sup>ciii</sup> This leads to varying interpretations of children's rights, where liberationists might support children in arguing for their right

to work, whilst caretakers would advocate for children's right to be protected from economic exploitation.<sup>civ</sup> This tension impacts on children's right to participation since, as Judith Ennew argues, there is often a distinction between participation that is allowed by adults and young people's spontaneous resistance, which may not be recognised by adults as legitimate. For example, during an adult organised Global March Against Child Labour in 1998, which called for an end to child labour, some organisations of child workers refused to take part demanding instead the right to work with dignity.<sup>cv</sup> Despite such instances where adults have chosen not to listen to children, Article 5 of the UNCRC establishes the principle of the 'evolving capacities' of the child. This is the concept that 'as children acquire enhanced competence, there is a reduced need for direction and a greater capacity to take responsibility for decisions affecting their lives'.<sup>cvi</sup> The idea of evolving capacities represents a way of finding a balance in the UNCRC 'between recognising children as active agents in their own lives' and their entitlement 'to protection in accordance with their relative immaturity and youth'.<sup>cvi</sup> However, the assessment of children's evolving capacities in any given context allows room for subjective interpretations that, in practice, may either increase or limit young people's opportunities to exercise autonomy.

Representatives from many different nations were involved in drafting the convention and the UNCRC preamble acknowledges 'the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child'.<sup>cvi</sup> The use of non-prescriptive terms to articulate children's rights, 'such as an "adequate" standard of living or freedom from work that is "harmful" to child development'<sup>cix</sup> allows space for discussion over how to interpret children's rights in local contexts. However, in reality the application of children's rights values may be narrow, and often conforms to the ideal of childhood held by particular organisations implementing programmes.<sup>cx</sup> In addition to this, 'Western countries in due course dominated the drafting process' of the UNCRC and 'cultural viewpoints and economic situations were seldom adequately taken into account'.<sup>cxi</sup> This is why the agreement is regarded by many as Eurocentric and has contributed to the global spread of Northern models of childhood in very different cultural, political and economic contexts.<sup>cxii</sup>

2. According to Roger Hart, the UNCRC articles interpreted as providing participation rights include 12, 13 (freedom of expression), 14 (freedom of thought conscience and religion), and 15 (freedom of assembly) (1997: 12).

The very concept of children's rights is 'a western way of constructing child-adult relationships' and contrasts with regional agreements such as the OAU Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which also refers to the child's responsibilities and duties towards their family and society.<sup>cxiii</sup> The UNCRC has thus been criticised for conceptualising children as independent rights-bearing individuals, rather than recognising that many societies adopt a social understanding of personhood, where children are first and foremost seen as members of an extended family, clan or village.<sup>cxiv</sup> Further, although the UNCRC defines children as all those under 18 years this definition does not correspond to social understandings of childhood and adulthood in many parts of the world. For example, 'there is no Bangla word to describe a life stage going from birth to the age of 18 which is the age span covered by 'the child' in the UN Convention'.<sup>cxv</sup> This definition does not reflect the gradual process through which adult status and rights are acquired by young people in many parts of the world.<sup>cxvi</sup>

# 06 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted significant variations in concepts of childhood, adolescence and youth both between and within societies. Such models affect young people's lives since they influence the content and process of children's learning and development, whether they are expected to attend school or work, their level of social and economic responsibility within the household, when they marry and bear children, and how much personal autonomy they exercise over these choices.

These differences are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances, including whether or not young people are growing up in independence or interdependence-oriented societies.

As the examples discussed in this paper show, children living in independence-oriented societies develop different skills and attributes to young people who are members of interdependence oriented cultures, where collective goals are often prioritised. Young people within independence-oriented societies are likely to gain a higher level of personal autonomy, particularly during their adolescent years. However, some research suggests that the distinction between independence and interdependence oriented cultures may be blurred. This is because social relationships are also important to members of independence-oriented societies, who do not solely make decisions based on furthering their own interests, but also as result of feelings of care and mutual cooperation with friends, neighbours and relatives. Similarly, young people in interdependence oriented cultures are able to influence collective decisions within their families and communities, and balance their personal aspirations with social obligations. Indeed in some settings such as north-eastern Ghana, young people are expected to contribute to family endeavours, whilst simultaneously developing personal autonomy and economic independence in other areas of their lives. A concept of 'negotiated interdependence', which takes account of the relationship between structural constraints and young people's social agency in both their everyday and major life choices, may be useful in understanding young people's decision making processes across the continuum of independence and interdependence oriented cultures.

Since there are such a wide range of factors impacting on models of childhood and youth, research from many disciplines has contributed to understandings of how children develop and transition to adulthood. Building on

research from the fields of history, sociology, psychology and anthropology, which demonstrate the variability in children's experiences across different cultures and time periods, the new paradigm of childhood studies<sup>cixvii</sup> has drawn attention to the socially constructed nature of childhood. It also emphasises the importance of recognising children's agency and consequently the need to study children's lives from their own perspectives, and has inspired much contemporary research with children around the world. However, it has been criticised for over-emphasising socio-cultural factors to the detriment of acknowledging the roles played by biological and psychological processes and political-economic forces in shaping models and lived experiences of childhood and youth.

The disciplines of psychology and neuroscience add to our knowledge about children's development of physical and mental competencies including motor coordination skills, language acquisition, abstract reasoning abilities, and moral behaviour. Studies of changes in experiences of childhood over time set contemporary ideas in historical context, and demonstrate how political, economic, and social transformations impact on concepts of childhood and youth, and young people's expected life paths. Anthropological studies of childhood and youth enhance understandings of how cultural values, family and kinship relations, and factors such as gender, caste and ethnicity influence child rearing practices, the skills children develop, and the age or stage at which they begin work and married life. This research takes account of young people's socio-economic situation demonstrating that young people growing up in impoverished communities where their work is necessary for household survival, in areas where families rely on subsistence farming, or in places where a long period of education is necessary to compete for jobs, are likely to acquire diverse skills, competencies, and attributes and to become economically independent at different times. Perceptions of the ages and stages at which children are ready for social (e.g. caring for siblings), economic (e.g. working to earn money), and political (e.g. fighting in a war) roles vary depending on local circumstances and livelihood choices.

Building on the strengths of the social constructivist model of childhood, it is important to explore the many and varied factors (biological, socio-cultural, economic and political) which influence young people's lives in particular contexts. In doing so, it is necessary to take a multidisciplinary approach to furthering our understandings of young people's autonomy and agency.

# Appendix 01

## Case studies

### Case study 1

#### Children's rights and child prostitutes in Thailand<sup>3</sup>

The small slum community of Baan Nua is situated close to a tourist resort in Thailand, which is known for sex tourism. The migrant community of Baan Nua is small with the number of households fluctuating between 16–20 households, many of whom live in makeshift shelters, which leak during the rainy season. There is no welfare or social security assistance available for the residents of this impoverished slum and children's work is essential to families' survival. Most households are headed by women and their children are expected to earn money for the family as soon as they are able. The majority of children in this small community work in prostitution, mainly with foreign tourists some of whom visit annually. Although prostitution allows children to earn significantly more than other occupations, many are physically damaged by this experience and need medical treatment.

Similarly to Thai families living outside the slum, the role of kinship and social obligations are important values in Baan Nua. Although it tends to be

peers or siblings, rather than parents, who facilitate their children's entry into prostitution, most of the children engaged in prostitution explained their involvement in terms of their cultural obligation to support their parents and their sense of filial duty. The young people wished to be perceived as in control of their own lives and able to make choices. However, the reliance of many Baan Nua children on drugs and alcohol could be interpreted as a sign of the struggle they face in coping with their occupation. Although children felt pleased to be able to fulfil their kinship obligations by helping their families, their poverty and marginal social and economic status means that their agency in this situation is limited.

There is no question that child prostitution is physically harmful to children and that governments should try to put an end to it. Article 34 of the UNCRC grants children the right to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation. However, this case study draws attention to difficulties in prioritising the multiple rights provided to children by the UNCRC. In the case of child prostitutes of Baan Nua, unless wider social and economic changes are made in Thailand, realising children's right to be free from sexual abuse would result in violating their

right to live with their families and community. This conflict highlights the need to understand the local context when considering how to uphold children's rights. In this setting 'it is only by acknowledging that children have a right to live with their families and to be protected from sexual exploitation, whilst simultaneously recognizing the cultural, historical, social and economic factors that have allowed child prostitution to flourish and taking steps to eradicate them, that children's rights can be practically implemented'.<sup>cixviii</sup>

### Key questions

- What are the rights that children enjoy and the duties they are expected to fulfil in this context?
- Is the distinction between independence- and interdependence-oriented cultures useful in interpreting this situation?
- How should children's own interpretation of their actions be balanced against adult concerns for their best interests?

3. This case study is based on Heather Montgomery's anthropological research with child prostitutes in Thailand (2001).

## Case study 2

### Agency and choice amongst girl soldiers in Mozambique<sup>4</sup>

When other European colonial powers were granting their colonies independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Portugal continued to hold onto power. The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) fought for the country's liberation from Portugal. Alongside men, girls and women were recruited by FRELIMO to resist the colonial power. Girls, often aged between 10 and 15 years, who had undergone female initiation rites (e.g. body scarification), but had not yet had sexual relationships and become mothers, were considered good candidates for the movement. They were viewed by FRELIMO leaders as energetic and free from the responsibilities of caring for children.

Some girls and women received similar training to their male counterparts, including in socialist ideology, and joined the Destacamento Feminino (the DF). The DFs participated in a range of activities. They staffed FRELIMO bush schools where they taught adults and children to read and write. They treated casualties of the conflict in bush hospitals, and cared for children in orphanages, who had lost their parents in the war.

Some women were also engaged in covert operations to gather information on supporters and enemies, while others were involved in combat missions.

The rhetoric of FRELIMO linked girls' and young women's involvement in such activities to their emancipation from traditional gender and age hierarchies, and women's liberation was presented as fundamental to the revolution. Although some girls likely experienced pressure to join FRELIMO, they were presented by the movement as volunteers engaged in 'acts of heroism' for the revolution. In interviews conducted by West twenty years later, many former DFs described themselves not as victims of this conflict, but as active agents contributing to epic events taking place in their country. Additionally, through their engagement as combatants in the war, these girls were able to increase their autonomy from elder relatives, without immediately becoming dependent on husbands and having the responsibility of children. Although some young women suffered long-term illness and 'exhaustion' or struggled to come to terms with their role in others' deaths, for many DFs, their commitment to FRELIMO ideology appears to have contributed to their wellbeing under the challenging conditions of war.

For some former DFs, the experience of empowerment has lasted beyond

the end of the war, with a number of women holding important positions within the FRELIMO party at local and national levels. However, in the post-independence period many former DFs have become disillusioned with FRELIMO's failure to live up to their promise of women's liberation. Many of them report that even men who were former guerrillas remain sexist and patriarchal in their marriages and personal relationships with women. Now that many former DFs live with the unforeseen outcomes of decisions they made as children, some question the ideological convictions that sustained them through the conflict itself.

#### Key questions

- Can young people make informed choices to engage in political struggle?
- Can the experience of political conflict transform gender and intergenerational hierarchies? If so, what impact does this have on young women's agency and autonomy?
- What are the long-term consequences of decisions made during childhood and youth?

4. This case study is based on Harry G. West's (2004) research with former young soldiers in Mozambique.

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UK Registered Charity No. 229476

Published in February 2012 by the  
International Planned Parenthood Federation

This Right to Decide series of papers was initiated by IPPF to learn more about young people, autonomy and sexual rights from experts working on these topics in various fields. We wanted to understand the theory behind the laws, policies and practices that both facilitate and restrict young people's autonomy as well as the key factors contributing to the development of young people as autonomous decision-makers.