Article

Shifting Vulnerabilities: Exploring Experiences of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper draws on research on independent child migrants from Zimbabwe conducted in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, in challenging the dominant narratives that inform the vulnerability and agency dichotomy in childhood studies. Through in-depth interviews, observations and a life histories approach, the daily experiences of the young people selected for participation in this study (between the ages of 13 and 19 years) highlight the shortcomings of the vulnerability and agency lens in capturing the nuances of independent child migrants. I challenge the idea that children are passive, vulnerable and incapable of defining and shaping their migration trajectories without overemphasising their agency. The intention is to show that children are not only passive victims at the mercy of adults, but are also capable aggressors in determining their experiences of migration. To capture this complexity, I coin the concept of "shifting vulnerabilities" and suggest that the vulnerability of the independent child migrants is always shifting and being shifted. These children are involved in social relationships as they make their journey to Johannesburg, which shapes and shifts their vulnerabilities. They meet people who make them feel and react in certain ways, and what they are experiencing are not always feelings of gratitude, but sometimes fear and pain. Even with the odds stacked against them in some of these relationships, the young people are not just docile players in this interaction, but they direct the outcome of these associations in creative ways.

Keywords: children; migration; shifting vulnerability; Johannesburg

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Introduction

This paper moves beyond the vulnerability-agency dichotomy that occupies studies on child migration in Africa. It seeks to achieve this objective by tracing the journey of unaccompanied migrant children from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg. In essence, it explores the ways in which the vulnerability of the children "shifts" between spaces that young people pass through, including the relationships they engage in from the beginning of their journey to their destination. The paper attempts to provide insights and to make a contribution to an understanding of childhood and migration that has been dominated by rights-based perspectives, from which independent child migration processes are conceptualised in child-trafficking terms. These narratives put forward an understanding of children that is more universalistic and informed by Western biases on childhood that portrays independent child migration as a sign of social decay and family crisis. On the other hand, there is a counter concept that tries to demystify the universalistic, legalistic, and Western notion of childhood by dismissing the representation of children as passive victims in need of rescuing; with ideas that seek to bring agency and individual choice into child migration studies (cf. Bourdillon 2006; Dalhbeck 2010; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Spittler and Bourdillon 2012). In my intervention, I argue that categorising children as either vulnerable or having agency does not fairly represent the complexity of unaccompanied migrant children's own representations of what the migration process means to them. I have coined the concept "shifting vulnerabilities" to demonstrate that neither vulnerability nor agency is static—rather, these are continuously fluid, depending on different spaces and relationships encountered by independent migrant children.

When it comes to the anthropology of migration and the anthropology of childhood at the juncture of children and the state, the Western universalistic vulnerability perspective is more celebrated. More emphasis is placed on the vulnerability of young people, rather than on how the young people deal with vulnerability, which some recent anthropological and childhood studies have made attempts at addressing (cf. Cheney 2008, 2010; Kamp 2001, 2015; Reynolds 1996). This view of vulnerability is highlighted by the emergence of organisations aimed at assisting unaccompanied migrant children in Musina, a town at the South African and Zimbabwean Beit Bridge border post, especially since mid-2000 (cf. Palmary 2007). Many independent child migrants were crossing the border illegally, and most used the illegal and dangerous hidden forest routes and crossing the Limpopo River to make it to the South African side. The organisations and shelters established to assist these children were heavily dependent on the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which in many ways failed to acknowledge and realise independent migrant children's migratory interests.

Hess and Shandy (2008, 768) highlight this in "New Barbarians at the Gates of Paris? Prosecuting Undocumented Minors in the Juvenile Court," illustrating how the state, when faced with an influx of children as primary migrants, attempts to manipulate and transform the category of "child" to detain, discipline or protect individual children.

Failure to recognise them as migrants with interests (just like the adults) forces most of the children to continue their journeys to Johannesburg, where a significant number end up at the central Methodist Church and Albert Street School. These two places, the church and the school, are more flexible in allowing the children to realise their migrant interests and retain some form of "childhood."

It is at the school in Albert Street where I met migrant children in 2012, who became my participants in this study. Their accounts inform the conceptual understanding in this paper, in which I took their subjective voices seriously as equally invested migrants with the ability to represent their own interests.

Shifting Vulnerabilities

Shifting vulnerabilities is a concept that allows for the reinforcement rather than subverting the agency of independent migrant children in efforts to capture their interests. It does so in a way that does not over-romanticise agency, which is one extreme that needs to be avoided. Applying the concept of shifting vulnerabilities enables us to find a balance and to better understand the experiences of independent child migrants, as demonstrated in this paper.

This paper contends that the vulnerability of these young people did not stay constant, disappear or end, but *shifted* within different spaces and in different relationships. These young people experienced less vulnerability in some circumstances but more in others—and this is what the concept of "shifting" vulnerability conveys. The shifting was experienced by the young children who took well-calculated risks and positioned themselves in ways that would not jeopardise their interests, although it was not without challenge because the migration process is very political and highly contested.

I use the term *shift* rather than *change* because of what the two terms imply, though the difference between the two terms is complex. The term "change" implies that there is something new, which is fixed, that differs from the original state, which is not what I want to bring into this discussion. In this paper, I take "shifting" to imply something that is there but always fluctuating. The vulnerability of these young people is always oscillating within the different relationships and spaces. This is similar to shifting weight from one foot to the other; the weight is still there—it does not change. Children are vulnerable because they are children. Children on the move experience their vulnerability as "shifting" within the different places of their journey and in different associations they are engaged in. Vulnerability in children has no single centre, but various or multiple centres, which shift or fluctuate but remain. In focusing on young people in this paper, the concept of "shifting" vulnerabilities brings a better understanding to the experiences and perspectives of children. "Shifting" vulnerability as a concept challenges the more generally accepted discourse around vulnerability, which takes it as something that is removed and, in some instances, brought back. Vulnerability and children are inseparable, but their vulnerability is always fluctuating

or being fluctuated, as the experience and perspectives of young people in this study showed.

Navigating Social Relationships: The Journey towards Johannesburg

The journey across the border to Johannesburg, for the unaccompanied migrant children that I spoke to, was complex due to encounters with different people in different spaces. In most of the relationships that these children experienced, there were two positions. In some instances, and depending on the spaces, there were relationships based on mutual, genuine respect for each other, as opposed to some very abusive relationships. Starting from the border and their encounters with the *guma gumas*, all the children who entered into agreements innocently ended up being abused and or having their belongings taken away from them.

The *guma gumas* are illegal border-crossing agents who ask a fee to assist migrants who do not have the required documents to cross into South Africa. These are well-networked agents who operate like gangs in an "invisible" space (using the river and forest areas to cut through the security fence) of the border, which is a place far and excluded from the public sphere. Such spaces are dangerous and risky, as in most cases there are handover groups working with *guma gumas*, and they turn against the illegal migrants, robbing them of their possessions, assaulting them and sometimes raping women and young girls. Most of the unaccompanied migrants interviewed in this study used the *guma gumas* for their border crossing, as the legal border officials considered them minors who needed adults to accompany them and to have the correct official documents.

There is a complex relationship between the unaccompanied children and the *guma gumas*. The children who place themselves in the hands of the *guma gumas* are undoubtedly like helpless prey, as they are at the mercy of these gangs. The encounter exposes the children's vulnerability because there are no rules of conduct. While each child had a unique experience, there were certain similarities in their narratives that show how the *guma gumas* operated. This part of the journey usually takes place during the night. In that space they are not familiar with their surroundings and do not have time to think or do anything, as there is a lot of rushing, action, and panic, which creates fear. Such risks that the independent child migrants take, result from them being considered vulnerable and having no right to use the official border in making their journey across the border. Some of the child migrants had the following to say:

> When we had crossed the first fence we were handed over to another group, they led us deep into the bush, and more of their associates appeared from the bush carrying knives and all sorts of weapons. I was scared not knowing what was happening, they took away all our money. I could not even do anything because these people were fierce and looked dangerous (Tapiwa).

> I thought my troubles were over when I met the *guma gumas* who said they would take us to South Africa. I never anticipated that these guys were there to rob us. I had thought

> that from the border into South Africa things were going to be glamorous but the people we met changed the whole picture I had … [heard]of the nice country I was running to (Mike).

> We had heard about people who had their things stolen by some of the *guma gumas* but we were just lucky because we had many women with us who just protected us and said these are children whilst their belongings were taken away. Women were fondled as the *guma gumas* searched, even touching their private parts (Memory).

The other alternative, which a few independent migrant children used, was paying to be smuggled by truck drivers. There was a lot of risk for the drivers, which is why only a few agreed to assist the unaccompanied children. This made the option of using the *guma gumas* more popular. The truck drivers put themselves at risk of being accused of child trafficking, especially in border towns like Musina. They assisted some young people to cross the border by hiding them in their trucks and bribing the immigration officers and the police. One of the study participants noted:

> While at the border the police officers were asking for passports. I despised the sound of the word passport as I did not have one. The driver told me to hide under the bed. I heard someone saying he wanted to search inside the truck and the driver promised to pay three hundred rand. There was no search conducted and we safely crossed the border (Innocent).

Hashim and Thorsen (2011, 17) note that the Palermo Protocol distinguishes between smuggling and trafficking, in which smuggling refers to the movement of individuals where the individual has consented, while trafficking involves the threat and use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception or abuse of power. The danger that truck drivers put themselves in is great, because they face charges of trafficking. The Palermo Protocol states that those under the age of 18 cannot legally give consent. O'Connell Davidson (cited in Hashim and Thorsen 2011) states that the implication is that those under the age of 18 are incapable of exercising a meaningful choice, in the process inextricably linking the status of "child" with that of "victim" or "potential victim." This does not, however, save truck drivers from the law as they are regarded as traffickers in assisting these young people.

Negotiating Johannesburg's Socio-spatial Relations

Johannesburg is a city that presents a fascinating concentration of wealth and human suffering, also known as one of the most violent cities in the world (cf. Murray 2008; Scorgie et al. 2017). It is in such a city that the independent child migrants of this study also had to make a living and look out for their own interests, competing with other adults. The stories about how their school (in Albert Street) defied the odds attracted a lot of attention as there was extensive media sensation about how such a poor school (with unaccompanied migrant pupils) had produced such excellent academic results. The British Broadcasting Corporation and an eNCA programme, 3rd Degree, were

among the top media houses—including many others and researchers—that made headlines with the stories of these vulnerable, unaccompanied migrants.

The relationship of the children with the researchers of this study had become that of a reciprocal rapport in which they negotiated payment to tell their stories. What they were doing was shifting the centre of power, as they quickly understood the value of their stories, which became commodities sold to the highest bidder—with the power to decide vested in them, the migrant children. The first time I arrived at their school, the headmaster introduced me to the young people, instructing them to cooperate with me. They listened to what the principal had to say, but afterwards, not all of them agreed to what he said. Some set their own conditions. This is what shaped the relationship between these children and the researchers. The fact that many of the people who were flocking to the school had agreed to pay them, shaped the way in which they positioned themselves in relation to the researchers. This supports the view of our research that the children "shifted" their vulnerability in order to create opportunities for themselves. The centre of power is not fixed, but is always shifting; and so is vulnerability embedded in the social relationships that these young migrants encountered.

It was the prolonged time and visits I made to the school that enabled me to gain the trust of some of the young migrants. Shepherd was one such informant who took his time until he trusted me and could give me accounts of his experiences, including how other children created stories that presented them as weak, vulnerable and in need of assistance. He warned me about some of the stories his peers were using. "You should know that not all these guys know what crossing the border through the forest is like. They just lie to people like you. Some of them crossed the border with the assistance of the truck drivers." He warned me of young people who preyed on researchers. He told me that they could tell researchers well-calculated accounts, even when they did not give true accounts of their lives. He also told me about the popular stories about crossing the border through the forest. These stories proved very marketable to the researchers who were coming to the school because it is not every day that people get a real story of a real child surviving a raid from a dangerous group.

The young people drew upon limited structures of feeling and the possibility of actions. They were powerful negotiators and holders of knowledge about themselves. They made sure that they got what they considered to be adequate value or compensation for giving out information about their experiences. In most instances, the young people presented horrific experiences, portraying themselves as innocent and vulnerable, especially to journalists who (to them) were more generous in terms of gifts and compensation for the time rendered. The way in which the young people perceived the researcher or the journalist determined the way they presented themselves, which was either as "innocent and vulnerable" or "powerful negotiators" and "holders of knowledge."

In some of the relationships, negotiating was not their best option, but they also worked in their numbers to protect their own interests. They found strength in their numbers and

used their unity to shift their vulnerability. Most of the young people told of how they united to deal with the problem of gangs and thieves who were robbing them of their possessions. They said that they just looked for weapons, organising themselves and going after all the gang members they knew because most of them were staying at the church. They beat them up, and from that day, they became feared and had no further problems with the gangs at the Central Methodist Church, which was home to many illegal migrants. This was not the only incident, but they also organised themselves in the same way in Soweto where they were moved to after raids from the state police and social workers threatened to place them in shelters. They beat up rowdy groups of people who were coming to their flat making noise, drinking and throwing stones at them. Such acts and others, which included negotiations, demonstrated that the young migrants had multiple ways of dealing with the complex experiences in their daily lives. They learnt throughout their journey that they needed to unite for their own benefit in order to survive.

> I owe my life to my friend. He fed us and looked after us. He had to go to town every day, work and bring food for us to eat since we looked older than him which meant that going into town we risked being deported. We found him at the show ground already, he came 10 months earlier than us and he was very familiar with the town. He just could not get asylum because he was too young, just like us. He just looked younger in appearance than us. He had already built a little shack using cardboard boxes which he invited us to share the place with him (Bright).

Bright speaks not only of the unity amongst the child migrants, but also highlights how their physical vulnerability was positioned in a way that advanced their interests. Amongst the migrant children they have very close relationships that are cemented by their shared experiences from back home to the way they crossed over to South Africa. This was evident when, during lunch, most of the young people shared their toiletries and food with those who did not have. They also mentioned that they regarded each other as brothers and sisters. They called themselves a family consisting of brothers and sisters in mutual relationships, protecting and providing for each other. The more experienced young people took care of the needs of the new ones coming in to join them.

Government Social Workers and Independent Child Migrants Stand-off

Government social workers' approach and relationship with the independent migrant children were informed by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which presented them as vulnerable and in need of saving. Their encounters were marked by hostile relations in which the young people resisted because they felt their own interests were not considered. What the government social workers regarded as the solution to the young people staying at the Central Methodist Church, was actually acting against the young people's interests. What they (the social workers) did not realise, was the fact that the young people had established relationships that they could live with and did not want any disruption to. Being moved to other shelters meant cutting

ties with a group of people who had become the source and strength of their identity. A verbatim account (by Tendai) gives insight into the actions of social workers:

> So, what these people were saying was that they would separate us taking us to different shelters and we had to do matric. During that time all they were doing was so complicated for us and the way they were telling us about this was not even a nice way but was rather a very painful way. They even took other children saying that they were going to show them the shelters they were supposed to go to but as soon as they got into the vans they were taken to places where they did not even want to go and never to come back. The other thing was that the schools were about to close and were happy that we [were] about to travel to Botswana since we were the winners of the inner-city arts festival. There was a paper, which the people from social development were supposed to sign for us to make this trip since we were unaccompanied minors, but they refused to sign the papers because we had refused to go to the shelters. The social workers came with their vans whilst we were at school three days before the trip, whilst we were preparing to go for the competitions. They told us to get into the school hall where they started telling us of the conditions at the shelters and informing us that they were leaving with us to the shelters. They were told to go and sit in the office of the principal to give us time to have our lunch. This was a plan made by our teachers and the principal since they loved us and were from Zimbabwe, they just opened the door at the back which the social workers were not aware of. We all ran away jumping over the barbed wire. We spent the whole day away from school and the church because we only used the church for sleeping whilst we had our lunch, supper, studied and bathed at school. When it was evening, we wanted to go to sleep at the church, but we were informed that they are already waiting for us at the church. We were taken to SAWIMA then to Rivonia because the bishop did not want us to be found and taken by the social workers to places, we did not want to go. That is how we got to be taken to Soweto by the bishop and then a curator was appointed to investigate the interests of the children, although I did not see what exactly he did, but we were happy that we were not taken away (Tendai).

All the young people I spoke to who were at the church during the time when the social workers raided the church building at dawn, mentioned this invasion. The children were not happy with the actions of the social workers or with what they intended to do. The hopes and aspirations of the children were predicated on both the school and the relationships they had established within the city. They trusted their teachers more than the social workers, and this was expressed by most of the informants. Memory stated the following:

> Our teachers are good to us though they are tough when it comes to schoolwork. They stood by what we wanted and what was good for us when the government social workers came for us. They created an opportunity for our escape. They come from our country and most of them are asylum seekers as well, so they understand us better.

The teachers at the school all came from Zimbabwe and some of them stayed within the confines of the church. They came from a country where the education system is like the Cambridge system, which the teachers were more familiar with. In my conversations with the teachers they revealed that their school made headlines for achieving good

grades and for defying the odds. The children had a good relationship with the school and the teachers who helped produce the best Cambridge examination results in the country, coming second only to St Georges, a well-resourced, private institution. The children, therefore, placed faith in their teachers and the Cambridge examination system, which to them was a ticket to success. Though the young people came to South Africa with the hope of success through work, education was always a source of inspiration and a means to realising success in the Zimbabwean context from which they came.

In contrast to the teachers, the young people saw the government social workers as individuals whose focus was to make life difficult for them. The children felt that social workers had placed them in a difficult position by demanding their relocation to shelters. They could not trust the social workers because they were coming from a nation where their own government had failed to protect them from the negative impacts of political and economic conditions. Such mistrust was worsened by the fact that the social workers were denying them the right to take part in the competitions taking place in Botswana; an opportunity they had rightly earned by winning the arts festival competition in South Africa. Tendai, one of my informants complained that:

> We had packed our bags ready for the Botswana trip and competitions. We had worked hard to earn the position and we thought this was going to be a new beginning in our disrupted lives (Tendai).

The fractious and distrustful relationship the children had with the social workers shattered the vision the children once had of South Africa as a land of opportunities where they could realise their ambitions. One of the only good and positive things to ever happen to them after crossing the border was taking part in the regional competition, and the failure to realise this dream complicated their relationship with the social workers. Hence, they did not want to leave the church for the shelters. Shepherd, for example, stated that:

> The government social workers wanted to take children by force. They were unreasonable and very ignorant of what was happening; we stay in different floors with [away from] the adults and girls.
>
> We were staying in the vestry and had adult care givers who made sure we had no one who bothered us; we were inside by 7:30 and had time to study without being disturbed. Some of the students had already registered, were about to write their exams and moving them to go to other homes meant going a step back and one had to start doing matric which is different from Cambridge which we are familiar with, even at home we have such a syllabus. They only wanted to force us into doing what they thought was the right thing for us (Shepherd).

The complex relationship the children had with other people and their surroundings was important to them. It was important for the young people to continue being among people they shared similar experiences with. One of the main objectives many of the

children had in moving from their homes, was to seek work. The intervention of taking them into institutions away from the city also meant new rules, which meant there was a possibility of being separated from the opportunities they had managed to create within the inner city. At the show grounds and within Musina in general, schools admitted unaccompanied migrant children and provided them with basic amenities such as shelter and food. While this seemed favourable, the children had still left Musina to get to Johannesburg, where they believed opportunities were more diverse and better. The Central Business District (CBD), where the church and the school are located, was imperative for the children to the extent that they were willing to resist relocation away from the church. Tendai asserted:

> Now came this issue of the 2010 soccer World Cup. This really gave us a hard time because there were campaigns to clean up the cities as they wanted to get rid of all the street kids. It was around November 2009, and we were still staying at the church during the early morning around five when we were still sleeping. The police came with their armoured cars with one of the MECs, but I do not quite remember from where, they were a lot of journalists with their cameras, we were in our sleeping torn garments. I was really embarrassed and afraid because the police were also holding their guns. They just walked straight to where the school children were sleeping and did not even bother to go to where the adults were sleeping but just proceeded to where we were (Tendai).

Their encounter with the police and the government social workers, including the journalist who formed part of the group that invaded the church in a bid to move them, formed part of the traumatic and embarrassing events in their experiences. The children were forcibly taken to different shelters from where most escaped back to the church. These encounters were shaped by a "predominant view of adults as the drivers of migration, this has led to an image of children as dependent and dependants, as victims, or simply not part of the main picture at all" (Seeberg and Goździak 2016, 7). That explains why adults were not bothered during the raid, as their status as immigrants was not in question. In addition, the CBD seemed to have made it possible for a growing relationship of the children with their work at *The Sunday Times* newspaper, which offered a means for their association with the wealthy White people in the affluent northern suburbs. The young boys who were working for *The Sunday Times*, distributing and selling newspapers on Sundays, had essential relationships with the wealthy White people in the northern suburbs, who they say are very generous people. Shepherd attested that working for *The Sunday Times*:

> … Is not about the money we get from selling the newspapers, we get around 80 rand and you must remove the transport cost. It is more to do with the interaction we have with the White people in the suburbs (Shepherd).

The young people regard the White clients as sources of much-needed resources to pay their fees, buy school uniforms, food and clothing. The question of what made their interaction with White customers more special than the relationship between the children and adults at the church, is imperative. The relationship that the migrant

children were concerned about and valued more was one that was productive and beneficial for them.

The children often stated that they preferred going to work on Sundays, distributing newspapers because they met White people who were very kind. The White clients gave the children tips, food, piece jobs and some of their friends were even adopted by some of the White people, who are now paying for their school fees and have allowed the migrant children to stay with them. The girls also got to benefit from these kind, wealthy people because the boys also put in a good word for the girls, so that they were called during weekends to wash, clean houses and iron clothes. In many of the accounts and narratives of the young people, the relationships that they mentioned and were proud of involved people who gave them assistance, and these included truck drivers and female vendors at the show grounds. The adults at the church, who together with the children faced profound hardships and struggled to survive, were rarely mentioned in the accounts given by children. The adults at the church did not have much to offer the children because they were also striving to survive.

This article contends that children who are in this situation place more value on privileged relationships with people from whom they derive material benefits, rather than those with little or no material things to offer. These migrant children mostly came to seek success and they saw it potentially actualised through selling their vulnerability to the people who are able to give something in return. The children in this case mobilised and maximised the self-expressed identities of helplessness. When Bright explained what they did in the suburbs, he called it "hustling," which places them in the position of resourceful entrepreneurs. The phones, uniforms, food and all the other things they needed to survive, they got from hustling in the suburbs.

Hashim and Thorsen (2011) demonstrate how young migrants finance school through provisional work in cases where they perceive better quality education in places; they choose to migrate to increase their chances of better paid employment. That is why it was important for these young independent migrants to present themselves to White people in the affluent northern suburbs of Johannesburg as innocent and vulnerable young people, trying to earn a life in the most respectable way.

For these young people, their interactions were not only about having people to talk to, but there had to be material things attached to the relationships—especially with the Whites from the suburbs. A successful interaction is one in which a thriving material transaction has taken place, which is why *The Sunday Times* job was important to them. Working at *The Sunday Times* is a means to seek surrogate parents, possibly earning a ticket to finish school successfully and getting to college. The government raid meant a potential end to all these dreams. Contrary to the children in Reynolds's (1996) study of the Tonga in Zambezi Valley (in which children used work as a means of gaining respect, recognition, being accorded positions of dignity and worth), these young people were using work as a means of exposing their vulnerability and selling it. They went to work posing as innocent victims who needed care and protection, that is, they needed

surrogate parents to take care of them. This emphasises the point made earlier that, in the context of migration, working, for children, differs from working at home in that in the context of migration it is about survival and not socialisation. Working, for these children, was less to do with the position of dignity and esteem, but more to do with their position of vulnerability. Pursuing a livelihood in the affluent neighbourhoods created much-needed space for opportunities to capitalise on marketing their vulnerability.

Shepherd and Bright became more open about how they portrayed themselves when they were positioning themselves for *The Sunday Times* work, as opposed to when they were doing the work in the Northern suburbs. They had to demonstrate strength, resilience and maturity with *The Sunday Times*, but in the actual work of delivering and selling, they had to present a different outlook, which was that of vulnerability to be able to appeal to the emotions and generosity of the customers. The young people knew their situation well, selling their vulnerability in order to benefit from their relationship with the well-resourced clients. In such instances, the young people viewed themselves as entrepreneurs trading on their innocence and vulnerability, which is how they understood themselves. The legal and child protection approaches "… fail to understand the mix of vulnerability and resiliency of young migrants in its full complexity. This, in turn, ends up exacerbating their vulnerability" (Goździak 2016, 30). Failure to understand the complex ways in which independent child migrants should not be denied their suffering and vulnerability, but at the same time acknowledging and accepting their resilience and capacity to make decisions, does more harm than good.

Conclusion

Understanding the vulnerability in the lives of these young people is not simple but rather complex and requires that vulnerability be viewed as shifting rather than fixed. Viewing vulnerability as fixed may obscure some of the things happening in the lives of the children. Allowing the children the space to speak and explain the relationships they have had throughout their journey, gives a better insight into their lives. Their vulnerability is not stable but always shifting, as has been shown by the kind of relationships these children have encountered and continue to encounter. The other thing is that children are not only recipients in these relationships, hence the need to follow the young people through the constantly shifting positions and centres to comprehend the shifting vulnerabilities. Young people can resist the stereotypical categories by proving that they are active decision makers. Even in cases where the odds are stacked against them, they can fight and shape the existing structures. Failure to acknowledge and accept independent child migrants has not assisted the situation for the young people who decided to move. Ignoring their voices and contribution to their own plight further forces young people into dangerous invisible spaces, and sets them up for exploitative relationships within which they have made significant efforts in negotiating successfully under strenuous conditions.

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