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# Introduction: Rethinking the crisis of children's rights: multidisciplinary and transnational perspectives

*Salvador Santino F. Regilme*

Children are not responsible for diseases, natural disasters, political conflicts, and wars; yet, children generally suffer the most.

(Levy et al. 2022, 1085)

## Introduction

In 2023, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the world's preeminent intergovernmental organization dedicated to children's welfare, estimated that at least 657 million toddlers (under the age of five) and 1.3 billion adolescents (between ten and nineteen years of age) constitute 25 percent of the world's total population of nearly eight billion people (UNICEF 2023). Hence, UNICEF indicated that there are approximately 1.9 billion children in nearly 256 countries as of 2023. Across many contexts, children are generally considered more vulnerable to harm, damage, or abuse than most adults. In terms of human rights, vulnerability pertains to persistent exposure to the risks of undermining one's well-being. A child's susceptibility to harm increases when their socio-economic and physical well-being, cultural and political identities, and abilities are marginalized or undermined. This condition of vulnerability haunts children, in general, because of their young age, deprivation of political power, and limited life experiences and competencies to recognize and meaningfully assert their own rights. However, the persistent condition of vulnerability calls for stronger protection of children's rights by formulating and implementing transnational and domestic public policies that ensure that everyone can assert their rights based on the principle of political equality.

Children's well-being and dignity appear to face difficult challenges in many countries (Becker 2017; Cavallera, Nasir, and Munir 2020; Health 2020; Hiskes 2021; Levy et al. 2022; McIntosh et al. 2020; Park et al. 2020). In 2022, the global food crisis dramatically worsened to the extent that an extra 260,000 children—equivalent to one child every minute—were

experiencing severe wasting in fifteen countries that were most affected, such as those located in the Horn of Africa and the Central Sahel (UNICEF 2022). This further deterioration in acute malnutrition was added to the already existing levels of child undernutrition, which UNICEF had previously cautioned were very dangerous, likening the crisis to a “virtual tinder-box” (UNICEF 2022).

War and armed conflicts, as well as hostile policies on the part of refugee destination countries, gravely undermine children's well-being and human dignity. Since the 2022 Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, the armed conflict has generated severe and distressing effects for children residing in institutions in Ukraine, including being coercively relocated to Russia and being separated from their families in Ukraine (Human Rights Watch 2023). The damage caused to children living in Ukrainian institutions underscores the urgent and compelling need to move them out of coercive situations created by Russian aggressors. Human Rights Watch (2023) called on the international community to mobilize children who were coercively relocated to Russia to be repatriated without delay. Since 2016, disturbingly large numbers of refugee and migrant children have disappeared or been killed in Europe, with the suspicion that they had been exploited for labor and sexual purposes (European Parliament 2022). Consequently, the European Parliament underscored the urgency of resolving the issue, which coincided with the conflict in Ukraine. More than eighteen thousand migrant children disappeared or were killed in Europe between 2018 and 2020, with their disappearance attributed to inhumane conditions in their residence, inefficient procedures for family reunification and appointment of guardians, fear of detention and deportation, and an interest in joining family or trusted friends in another country (European Parliament 2022). According to the children's organization Save the Children, one in fifty refugees and migrants die or go missing on Mediterranean routes to Europe, and children face extreme violence and inhumane conditions upon arrival in European countries (Save the Children 2023). The treatment of child refugees from Ukraine, however, in 2022 suggests that such tragedies are avoidable. Owing to the absence of legal and safe mechanisms for children to seek asylum in Europe, nearly 90 percent of refugees face the only choice to traverse dangerous migrant routes. From 2019 to 2022, nearly eight thousand individuals have died or disappeared on the dangerous Mediterranean routes, while 20 percent of those were children who eventually reached Europe (Save the Children 2023). Besides these challenges, refugee and migrant children encounter other difficulties, including linguistic, social, and cultural challenges. It is notable that the EU Parliament did not mention that the racist policies of EU member states caused the deaths of refugee children who were desperately seeking refuge in Europe (Augustová 2022; Isakjee et al. 2020).

Moreover, many boys and male minors are coerced into military conscription in the context of armed conflict (Haer 2019; Regilme and Spoldi 2021).

Child marriage also poses challenges to the protection of children's human dignity. In the US, the self-proclaimed promoter of liberal democracy and human rights, nearly 232,000 minors (below eighteen years old) have entered into a legally recognized marriage; these marriages usually involve a minor girl and a much older man. In 2023, forty-three states in the US allowed child marriage, and only seven states, including Delaware, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island, have set eighteen years as the minimum age for marriage, with no exceptions (Equality Now 2023). In addition, twenty states in the US failed to set a minimum age requirement for marriage, but marriage was permitted with a waiver granted by either a parent or judicial authority (Equality Now 2023). Child marriage, which pertains to marriage before the age of eighteen years, is widely considered a human rights violation that poses a substantial risk to the health and overall well-being of children worldwide (Koski and Heymann 2018). In many global South countries, girls face the prospect and pressures of early marriage, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment, while they are also deprived of various social and economic opportunities that are vital for character development: nutrition, education, parental care, and shelter. According to the 2022 Worldwide Assessment of Modern Slavery, the largest percentage of the world's minors has been involved in coerced matrimony, which accounts for nearly nine million children (Anti-Slavery International 2023). Approximately half of the children engaged in forced labor, which accounts for 3.3 million children, have been subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, while nearly 40 percent have been exploited in slave-like labor conditions in the private sector of the world's economy (Anti-Slavery International 2023).

The list of contemporary challenges facing children's rights is long, and the challenges mentioned earlier are just a few. In September 2022, the UN Child Rights Committee (UN CRC) published its findings concerning the plight of children's rights in several countries (UN Human Rights Office 2022). In the report, the UN CRC highlighted the wide variety of abuse against children across many different countries: pervasive sexual exploitation and online violence in Germany; non-Kuwaiti children who are systematically discriminated against in access to fundamental social services and are often targets of hate speech in Kuwait; alarming acts of violence committed against children in conflict zones in the Philippines (especially on the southern island of Mindanao) through conscription in armed conflict, sexual abuse, imprisonment, and violent attacks on educational institutions and medical facilities.

Despite these challenges to children's dignity, their rights have been formally and universally recognized by the international community. In 1989, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and introduced the document for signature to member states (LeBlanc 1991; Schaaf 1992; Vandenhole 2022). In September 1990, the CRC was ratified, and as of 2021, 196 states (or all members of the UN) formally recognized and signed it, except the United States. Since then, many global governance institutions, domestic state institutions, civil society activists, and other corporate organizations have invoked the importance of human rights and the dignity of children—or human individuals aged eighteen years and below—in various policy actions, government strategies, organizational missions, diplomacy, and public advocacy (Regilme 2021, 2022a, 2022b). It has become increasingly clear, however, that the degree to which children's rights are effectively observed and respected in global governance and national government strategies varies greatly within and between countries, as well as in policy issue areas. In public international law, the CRC's main addressees are states, yet the global and transnational dimensions that facilitate local problems fundamentally challenge not only the state's formal mandate, but also their capacities. For that reason, policy challenges concerning the rights and dignity of children should not be understood as mere outcomes and causes of domestic governance failures, but also as shortcomings of global governance, if not the normative structure of the contemporary global order. Often, contemporary policy problems within countries are produced through the complex interactions of local and global factors, as demonstrated by problems such as armed conflict and wars, labor rights abuses, poverty, extreme material inequality, human displacement from their natural habitat, and pandemics (Beck and Sznajder 2006; Regilme 2021, 2014).

Hence, this multidisciplinary and eclectic human rights anthology asks the following core questions: *Considering that more than three decades have elapsed since the CRC was first introduced globally, how and under which conditions are the rights and dignity of children under siege or in crisis? Why have such crises emerged?*

As such, this multidisciplinary volume examines the causes and consequences of contemporary crises in terms of children's rights and welfare. While various chapter contributors offer nuanced explanations that address the extent to which children's dignity and well-being are under siege depending on their chapter's empirical focus, this volume contends that systemic abuses of children's rights and welfare persist despite the existence and widespread acknowledgment of the CRC. Such abuses emerge from the complex constellation of domestic and transnational causes; therefore, an analytically eclectic, multidisciplinary, and geographically contingent explanation

is necessary. Despite the persistence of children's rights crises in various places, the CRC has provided a political framework that offers normative principles and broad aspirational goals that guide state and non-state actors' behavior and generate moral and legal responsibilities for them to comply with. Similar to other international legal instruments, the CRC serves as a tool for advocacy and mobilization of human rights advocates, civil society organizations, state actors, and intergovernmental organizations to protect the dignity of children (Howe and Covell 2021; Kilkelly and Bergin 2021; Miljeteig-Olssen 1990; Tobin and Cashmore 2020; Vandergrift 2017).

### **State of knowledge: children's rights from a multidisciplinary perspective**

The aforementioned puzzle concerning children's rights constitutes a more specific iteration of the broader question in the social science of human rights: do international treaties (or, broadly conceived, the global regime of human rights) improve human rights outcomes within a signatory state's territory? If so, how? Notwithstanding the proliferation of international human rights treaties, the scholarly literature is unsettled concerning the effectiveness of international human rights law in the prevention of state-perpetrated abuses (Regilme 2016, 2020). For decades, international human rights agreements have constituted a key and compelling concern at the global level. These agreements, conventions, and treaties attempted to provide a broad normative framework for the advancement and safeguarding of human rights. These treaties and other instruments of the global regime of human rights mandate states to uphold and ensure their citizens' rights and well-being, including that of children. Scholars, policymakers, and human rights activists have questioned the efficacy of these treaties.

Treaties and other instruments of international human rights law can have a significant impact on state behavior, both directly and indirectly. International human rights agreements facilitate the emergence of a global human rights culture that can transform societal attitudes toward human rights and create a supportive environment for human rights advocacy. Political scientist Beth Simmons (2009) contends that states' commitments to treaties may generate a conducive political climate for human rights. Simmons (2009) concedes, however, that her research only shows a correlation between treaty commitments and improved human rights practices and acknowledges that human rights violations often arise from complex domestic political and economic factors. Furthermore, another study affirms that these international human rights agreements often serve as superficial signaling measures of goodwill for signatory states, but human rights

activists use them to rally against abusive regimes (Merry 2006; Tsutsui and Hafner-Burton 2005). Sally Engle Merry (2006), an anthropologist of human rights, argues that international human rights law is insufficient in combating gender violence because of its detachment from local realities. She proposed a strategy that merges human rights principles with local norms and practices to create a more effective response to gender violence. Merry (2006) contends that this localization approach can bridge the gap between international law and local justice and consequently generate better human rights outcomes. Kathryn Sikkink (2017), a political scientist, challenges the claim that the international human rights movement is solely a Western construct; instead, she argues that political actors from both the global North and South have contributed to its emergence. Sikkink (2017) underscores the effectiveness of the human rights regime by pointing out a significant decrease in overall violence and human rights violations, which can be attributed to increased respect for human rights over the past four decades, including the ratification of the UN Convention against Torture, as suggested by Farris (2019).

Other scholars, however, expressed doubts concerning the effectiveness of international human rights treaties and agreements. Samuel Moyn (2018a, 2018b), a historian and legal scholar, contends that the current international human rights regime has neglected the essential goal of material equality, which has historically addressed people's demands for material security. The rise of neoliberalism in conjunction with human rights has generated a shift toward minimum material sufficiency, which has led to greater material inequality and precarity. Stephen Hopgood (2013), an International Relations scholar, argues that the global human rights regime is in decline, partly because liberal states use human rights to advance their interests, and non-Western powers challenge the US's dominant view of human rights. Legal scholar Eric Posner (2014) adopts a legal rationalist-realist perspective and emphasizes the challenges of enforcing often conflicting human rights values in international human rights treaties. In addition, the proliferation of human rights agreements in international law poses a significant challenge to the principle of state sovereignty, irrespective of their effect on actual human rights outcomes.

In view of the scholarly disagreement concerning the scholarly literature on international human rights regimes' effectiveness, this volume suggests that the challenges to the dignity of children require a more nuanced, geographically contingent, and empirically rigorous analysis of a specific instantiation of crisis or policy problems.

Meanwhile, the core questions of this volume invoke the concept of crisis. What is the crisis in the context of children's rights? Considering the wide variety of standpoints adopted by the chapter contributors, I adopt

a broad definition of crisis for the purposes of this volume, which involves scholars from various disciplines and with varying regional or area expertise. Although its definition depends on the chapter contributor's positionality concerning a particular children's rights situation, crisis refers to the acceptance or diagnosis of a situation in which there are pervasive, systematic, and persistent violations of children's rights, thereby causing various forms of harm to dignity as well as the current and long-term well-being of children and the communities where they belong (see also Regilme 2023).

Several key propositions are worth considering based on the definition of a crisis. First, accepting that a particular situation constitutes a crisis suggests that the current condition "could possibly be otherwise" (Gilbert 2019, 10), which implies a yearning for a much more preferred condition in the past than in the present. Second, the construction of a crisis is a highly politicized act, considering that the features of any given situation could possibly be represented as *problematic*, thereby implying that crisis construction is highly contingent upon the normative interests and political commitments of those enacting the interpretation (Walby 2015). Third, the notion of crisis pertains to the political process of narration, or the discursive construction of a particular problem that requires transformative intervention. A crisis forces leaders and other relevant stakeholders to formulate "high-stakes decisions under conditions of threat, uncertainty, and time pressure" (Lipsy 2020, 99). As Hay (1996, 254) argues, a crisis is a social process that involves an object and a subject; the narration of a crisis may involve the target of a transformative intervention and the actor that enables the intervention. In 2015, for example, many officials of the EU and its constitutive member states described the comparatively large influx of refugees from Syria to the EU as the so-called European migrant crisis—also known globally as the Syrian refugee crisis—a highly challenging period when at least 1.3 million people claimed refugee status, and approximately one out of four of those was an underage individual or a child (UNICEF 2015). The emergence of the dominant term *migrant* instead of *refugee* as well as the construction of *crisis* to describe that phenomenon reflects the collective political choices and discursive acts that were dynamically enacted upon by political elites and other stakeholders in Europe. Fourth, the concept of a crisis also suggests prevailing uncertainties concerning the persistence of preferred norms at a particular moment (Koselleck 2006, 399). Since the late 1980s, and the introduction of the CRC, an expanding global movement advocating for children's rights has emerged. In cases of pervasive violation of these rights and systemic deterioration of children's well-being, the widespread dissemination of information and awareness building could serve as a catalyst for activists, scholars, and policymakers to recognize the gravity of the situation and immediately take steps to address it as a crisis

in need of resolution (Becker 2017; Butler 2012). In doing so, the goal is to stop violations and consequently address the structural and agential causes of human rights abuses toward children. This desire for transformation confirms what Koselleck (2006, 399) calls critical juncture, another term used to refer to a crisis, which includes the presence of numerous potential courses of action for the future, leaving pertinent parties with challenging decisions to make (Koselleck 2006).

In this book, chapter contributors analyze the various challenges to children's rights across diverse geographical spaces in the contemporary period, from the start of the twenty-first century until the era of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2023). Despite the actively expanding scholarly literature on global human rights, children's rights remain a topic that is relatively within the margins of scholarly and policy debates on global governance and policymaking. As such, this anthology distinguishes itself from current scholarly literature on human rights in several ways. First, while children's rights are often studied within disciplinary silos, especially the dominance of legal scholars on this research front, this volume upholds an analytically eclectic and multidisciplinary outlook in examining contemporary crises that systematically violate the dignity of children. Second, this volume investigates the causes and consequences of understudied crises on children's rights, particularly thematic and policy blind spots that remain marginal in mainstream scholarly and public discourses. Third, rather than focusing on crises on children's rights as mere outcomes of local and national factors, as demonstrated by the methodologically nationalist bias of previous studies, this volume advocates a global and transnational perspective in understanding the challenges faced by children. As such, the book focuses on understudied topics on children's welfare in the American continent, the Asia Pacific region, and Africa. The overarching logic of the volume focuses on world regions that remain relatively understudied in terms of children's rights; therefore, a focus on crises of children's rights in the Americas, Asia, and Africa is more appropriate. The relevant scholarly literature has actively engaged with the crises of rights in Europe and some parts of the global South, but no other existing volume (except this volume) provides a thorough examination of children's rights in the US vis-à-vis other parts of the world, with a considerable scope that covers the substantive challenges to the dignity of children. Our approach is geographical diversity, but with a focus on the US, as the latter's aim is to demystify the limitations of the US as the most dominant state actor in international human rights.

This book seriously considers both the empirical scope and analytical diversity of children's human rights politics and practices; in doing so, we provide a much-needed space for examining how our current state of knowledge concerning global human rights protection and promotion can

be interpreted and theorized. Thus, while a variety of single-author books and several edited volumes cover some of our issues, this book is differentiated from other competing books in that it provides a broader range of themes, geographical coverage, and disciplinary approaches concerning the rights of children in the twenty-first century. The anthologies by Ruck et al. (2017), Fenton-Glynn (2019), and Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2013) are good examples of the explanatory strengths of multidisciplinary research on children's rights; however, they do not necessarily examine the deep structural causes of human rights violations in the empirical cases covered in this study. The volumes by Fenton-Glynn (2019) and Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2013) focus only on the relationship between children's rights and the politics of international development, but these works do not showcase the wide variety of contemporary crises in children's well-being across several world regions.

Moreover, it appears that none of the recently published books on children's rights explicitly approach the topic in conversation with contemporary global challenges brought about by enduring armed conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee crises, and other transnational crises. In addition, this multidisciplinary volume examines children's human rights from different disciplinary perspectives other than mere law, politics, or international relations, and that diversity makes it possible to develop a critical and holistic yet realistic analysis that is crucial. The book addresses issues that concern the contestation of children's dignity both in the global North and South, and the roster of contributors represents a balance in gender representation, as well as diversity in disciplinary approaches and intellectual commitments to the academic study of children's rights. Other notable anthologies, such as Todres and King (2020) and Brems et al. (2017), focus on children's rights law, and do not thoroughly examine the multifaceted social, economic, and political conditions that impact the dignity of children (Brems, Desmet, and Vandenhole 2017; Todres and King 2020). Other recently published scholarly monographs and anthologies are written by legal scholars; therefore, law and legal institutions were used as the main explanatory lens for studying the factors that impact children's well-being (Barnett, 2022; Fenton-Glynn, 2019; Peleg, 2019; Tobin, 2019; Türkelli, 2020). As such, the most prominent and recent scholarly works on children's rights come from the field of law, although Hiskes's work is a notable exception. A political scientist and theorist, Hiskes (2021) provides what he claims to be the first comprehensive theoretical foundation for the human rights of children; offers an argument for their full citizenship rights, including the right to vote; and contends that bestowing full rights entitlement to children realizes the promise of universality of human rights. Overall, the works mentioned enrich our understanding of different aspects

of children's rights. However, the aforementioned scholarship has limitations in terms of its substantive scope and disciplinary focus. A more comprehensive understanding of children's rights requires a multidisciplinary approach that considers a range of factors that affect their well-being. As such, this volume is a timely intervention in scholarly literature, providing the first multidisciplinary anthology on children's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic era.

### **Organizational logic of the volume**

The organizational structure of the book is divided into three main substantive parts, in addition to the introductory and concluding chapters.

Part I of the book deals with the analytical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives pertaining to the global context of children's rights. The first part of the volume examines the critical roles of education and policymaking in upholding children's rights. The chapters therein examine the legal, policy, and practical aspects of ensuring that children's rights are upheld in educational settings and during policy decision-making processes. The chapters in this part collectively shed light on the challenges and opportunities associated with such efforts.

Focusing on corporal punishment in schools, Chapter 1 was written by a multidisciplinary team of scholars: political scientist and education policy scholar Lucy Sorensen, political scientists Charmaine N. Willis and Victor Asal, and legal scholar Melissa L. Breger. Their chapter examines why some countries permit corporal punishment in schools, while others prohibit it. This chapter analyzes data on legal restrictions on corporal punishment in schools from 1970 to 2016, covering 192 countries. The dataset primarily emerges from two sources: the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, and country reports from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The researchers scrutinize every country's self-report submitted to the UN for any discussions on societal norms regarding corporal punishment and efforts to alter the beliefs and practices surrounding it. The chapter highlights the finding that over the years, the number of countries banning corporal punishment in schools has substantially increased, with over one hundred countries banning this practice by 2016. The authors deploy logistic regression and hazard modeling to ascertain the most relevant factors that contributed to the implementation of the bans. To determine the causal influence of countries ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on subsequent legal measures to ban corporal punishment, the authors apply regression with country- and year-fixed effects in their quantitative analysis. The authors conclude that the country's

religious, legal, political, and social characteristics were key explanatory variables in determining whether corporal punishment would be prohibited in schools. Countries with comparatively strong democratic institutions and legal systems were more likely to ban corporal punishment, while countries that ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child were more likely to pass legal measures prohibiting corporal punishment in schools. These findings are notable contributions to our scholarly understanding of children's rights protection in educational institutions, thereby offering potentially useful insights into children's rights and educational policy debates.

Written by an interdisciplinary scholar of sociology and law, Pantea Javidan, Chapter 2 focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's rights. This chapter focuses on children's rights to life, health, and safety in the context of education and schooling. This study examines the US (in comparison to other nations) as an example of minimal pandemic response measures. Using an intersectional framework to consider systemic inequities, Javidan reflects on the causes and consequences of policies related to school reopening and pandemic mitigation through an intensive examination of relevant media reports, surveys, statistical data, and public discourse to assess the impacts of the crisis on children's rights. Javidan contends that the prevailing narrative about pandemic schooling created a false dichotomy between different children's rights and allowed inadequate mitigation measures to continue. Various stakeholders uphold contending political and economic interests, including those upheld by policymakers, "expert" contrarians, and coopted technocrats who were supported by disinformation campaigns and moral panic. Such a confluence of factors undermined the well-being of children, scientific consensus, and public opinion, with the most significant impact felt by children coming from working-class families and minoritized racial identities.

Written by political scientist Paola Fajardo-Heyward, Chapter 3 investigates Colombia's challenges in promoting children's rights and access to comprehensive sexuality education and the strategies used by conservative and religious groups to obstruct progress in this policy area. This chapter illustrates how these groups have changed their framing of and used political alliances to gain support for their agenda. This chapter reflects on how the efforts of transnational conservative groups, such as CMHNTM (*Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas*—*CMHNTM*: leave my kids alone, or don't mess with my kids), have undermined the accessibility of comprehensive sexuality education for children in Colombia. The Colombian government was required by the Constitutional Court to improve sexuality education programs in 1992 and 2015; however, in 2015, conservative and religious organizations opposed these efforts, which contrasted with the government's earlier adoption of sexuality education in the national curriculum.

By examining these two temporal periods, Fajardo-Heyward demonstrates how the political influence of transnational conservative networks and the portrayal of sexuality education as part of gender ideology can undermine children's rights to access sexuality education. Colombia's case highlights how internal tensions and disinformation can hinder the implementation of children's rights and the importance of accurate information in shaping public opinion. The chapter also emphasizes the need to protect all children from discrimination and violence, regardless of their background, and to reframe the debate about sexuality education to focus on promoting the dignity of all children.

Another chapter focusing on children's education is Chapter 4 by legal scholar Shani King, who began his analysis of the heated debate in the US over whether schools should require students to wear masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some US states have passed laws barring schools from mandating masks. This policy dilemma exposed conflicts between different levels of government in the US as well as at the local level where school policy decisions are made. CRC includes rights related to health, education, and the well-being of students with disabilities, which could influence decision-making during the pandemic. Although the US has not ratified the CRC, local advocacy and civil society groups have expressed support. The protection of children's rights in a federalist system like the US can be complicated. King examines this policy issue, including the history of the US and the CRC, debates over school mask mandates, and the challenges of implementing international treaty obligations in a federalist context. King also emphasizes the necessity of balancing national oversight with local control over education and suggests that implementing the CRC will require addressing federalism and local governance in education.

The second part of the volume explores the challenging terrain of children's rights in contexts marked by armed conflict and vulnerability. Through the contributions of Amy Risley, Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Elisabetta Spoldi, and Allyson Bachtta, the chapters herein confront issues such as the rights and well-being of child migrants, the plight of children in armed conflict in Somalia, and the protection of children's rights in the face of violent attacks on education in Cameroon. The chapters here explore the unique challenges faced by children who are caught in situations of violence, displacement, and instability. The chapters in this part provide insights into the efforts to safeguard and uphold the rights of children who find themselves in precarious circumstances while also underscoring the complex interaction of transnational and local factors that impact the well-being of children.

Chapter 5 focuses on the impact of the Trump-era immigration policies on child migration. Written by political scientist Amy Risley, this chapter

contends that the CRC remains an aspirational document, and that the consequences of Trump's immigration policies were catastrophic to the dignity and well-being of children. Risley refers to Trump's "zero tolerance" policy, which gained traction between April and June 2018 and involved the forcible separation of three thousand children from their parents and caregivers at the US–Mexico border. The policy deviated from previous practices and earned the nickname "zero humanity" due to its cruel and degrading treatment of families, inadequate record-keeping, and squalid conditions. Risley observed that anti-immigration hardliners maintained that child protection policies and asylum law loopholes motivated unauthorized migration from Central America. The separation and related policies violated children's rights and well-being, leading to a human rights crisis that killed children in the name of the government's bid to appear tough on immigration. This policy stance reflects the longstanding patterns of US immigration policy, where children are excluded from the benefits of the global rights regime.

In Chapter 6, Elisabetta Spoldi and I examine the causes that facilitate the deployment of children in armed conflicts, particularly in Somalia. Despite well-established international laws protecting children's rights during armed conflicts, armed rebel groups and state forces persistently continue arming children amid bloody conflicts in Somalia. This part presents two key arguments. First, commanders often recruit children under duress, and these adult commanders emphasize that there is no other source of income or livelihood than fighting. By participating in the conflict, the children receive temporary material security and a sense of belonging. Second, many Somali children have grown up in an environment of pervasive violence and material insecurity, which has normalized violence and led them to see joining armed groups as necessary for their survival. The absence of social support and means of survival in a war-torn environment, combined with propaganda campaigns by armed groups that promise false benefits, drives some children to participate in armed conflicts. Our analysis highlights the two structural factors that make child recruitment prevalent in Somali conflicts. The deteriorating public goods provision system, extreme poverty, malnutrition, water scarcity, economic decay, and environmental devastation have contributed to the traumatization of children, making them more susceptible to joining armed groups.

In Chapter 7, education policy researcher Allyson Bachta examines how violent attacks in educational institutions undermine children in the global South. Bachta underscores that children's rights to access quality education free from discrimination and violence is protected by various international conventions and principles. In conflict-affected areas, especially in the global South, millions of children are prevented from accessing education and are targets of violent attacks. Monitoring systems have failed to protect children

or hold perpetrators accountable. Bachta maintains that current monitoring mechanisms are insufficient and reactive, and that attacks against education should be deemed as serious acts of violent extremism. The international community must respond with urgency, and academics must identify early warning signs to predict attacks on education. The author seeks to understand the lack of accountability for such attacks and how civil society can formulate a more effective mechanism to protect children's rights to education.

Part III of the volume underscores the sociocultural dimensions that influence and shape children's rights. It explores how cultural norms, societal attitudes, and enduring traditions impact children's well-being and dignity. The chapters in this part examine the complexities of ensuring that children's rights are respected and upheld while considering the sociocultural factors at play.

In Chapter 8, legal scholars Hoko Horii and Mies Grijns investigate the ethical, legal, and political dilemmas concerning child marriages in Indonesia. Horii and Grijns underscore the CRC principle of "evolving capacity," which is important and analytically useful but often neglected in global debates that draw a sharp line between childhood and adulthood at age 18. In Indonesia, various factors, such as cognitive, familial, material, bodily, mental, and spiritual development, contribute to the transition from childhood to adulthood, highlighting the often-overlooked category of "adolescent" or "youth." While global movements such as "Stop Child Marriage" aim to ban all marriages under the age of eighteen, a more flexible standard like *akil baligh* may be more consistent with the principle of evolving capacity, especially in societies where marriage is socially required in case of pregnancy. Horii and Grijns argued that a balance needs to be considered between protection and autonomy, assessing individual cases, and considering wider factors such as political economy, cultural-religious norms, and accessible education, including sexual and reproductive health education. They added that it is important to prevent forced marriages and ensure that the rights of the child and marriage laws provide a safety net, while also enabling progressive autonomy for adolescents to make decisions about their lives.

Focusing on the difficulties of implementing CRC principles, legal scholar Daniel Ogunniyi in Chapter 9 acknowledges that despite the formal global abolition of slavery, child trafficking remains prevalent in West Africa. This chapter investigates the role of neoliberal economic policies such as structural adjustment programs (SAPs) promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Accordingly, these policies perpetuate poverty among rural populations and indirectly induce child trafficking in postcolonial West Africa. Corruption and the poor training of judicial officers also contribute to this problem. Ogunniyi evaluates

the scope of child trafficking in the Gambia and Benin Republic, two West African countries selected based on linguistic considerations (Anglophone and Francophone countries) to reflect the dominant trends in the region. It also provides specific recommendations for improved anti-trafficking governance at regional and national levels. Ogunniyi contends that the CRC obligations on child trafficking are not fully implemented in West Africa and calls for a rethinking of the current neoliberal world order to address economic inequality in the sub-region and the political willingness to address child trafficking.

In the concluding chapter of this volume, I reflect on the central question: How have children's rights and dignity faced crises just over three decades since the CRC was introduced globally? The key argument is that safeguarding children's rights is challenging because of the complex governance issues rooted in the interplay of local and global factors. These challenges include dynamic political disputes, resource inequalities, norm conflicts, and cultural beliefs. Cultural norms can either hinder or support children's rights, while severe disparities in material resource distribution within and among nations can hinder children's access to education, health, and social protection. I underscore the volume's approach, which goes beyond state-centric and legalistic views and emphasizes multidisciplinary perspectives and geographical specificity. Moreover, I identify common themes among the chapters and discuss scholarly and political implications for ensuring a more dignified life for children worldwide.

This edited volume provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities related to children's rights and dignity in crisis situations. It offers a multidisciplinary and globally oriented perspective, ensuring that readers gain a holistic understanding of the diverse issues affecting children's rights across different domains and regions. Through these three parts, this volume aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how to address the complex and evolving landscape of children's rights on a global scale. Each of these chapters, in a diverse variety of forms, addresses the challenges and crisis conditions pertaining to the rights, welfare, and dignity of children. This book highlights challenges such as in the policy area of children's education: the legality of corporal punishment in schools, the safety of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, violent attacks in schools, and access to comprehensive sexual education. Moreover, this book underscores the crisis in border regions, whereby state agents forcibly separate children from their parents in the context of overtly militarized and coercive migration policies. There are also important policy challenges that remain understudied in mainstream scholarly and policy discourses, and those problems include the deployment of children in armed conflict, the trafficking of children across borders, and the idea of the "evolving capacity" of

children in the context of child marriage. Taken as a whole, the perspectives offered by bringing these chapter contributions together, I hope, are much larger than each chapter considered individually. The chapters illustrate the explanatory benefits of combining empirical rigor and a multidisciplinary space, which makes conversations on children's rights more nuanced, productive, and insightful. Considering the wide diversity in the academic positionalities of the chapter contributors, I do not claim that chapters, taken together, fully complete the picture of children's dignity under deep crisis, despite the introduction of the CRC a few decades ago. What I do offer, however, is a book that functions as a multidisciplinary platform that helps us paint a more complex but meaningful analysis of the diverse challenges faced by children's rights in the twenty-first century. I hope that this anthology inspires readers to go beyond the traditional and legalistic appreciation of children's rights. As such, this anthology recognizes the socio-economic inequalities that underpin these policy challenges and encourages readers to consider them in their pursuit of effectively understanding and achieving the emancipatory promise of children's rights.

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