Book Reviews

Susan Mapp, ed.


This is an interesting book which approaches children’s rights rather differently from most, and is all the more valuable for that. It adopts a perspective which starts with perceived threats to the child. There are many threats to a child’s well-being and the book is therefore necessarily selective. Seven subjects are considered –

- child labour
- child trafficking
- child soldiers
- children affected by war and conflict
- child maltreatment and adoption
- educational issues
- particular threats to the girl child

There is an introductory chapter which outlines the UN Convention. There is nothing new in this chapter, but there are even so half a dozen errors, silly slips like getting s.1 of the English Children Act of 1989 wrong and even calling it the Children’s Act. And where did she get the idea that the 1959 UN Declaration was ‘updated’ in 1989 and ‘renamed’ the Convention? And how gullible to believe that no child has ever been punished for conversion to another faith! She also insists that a right only becomes a right if people are aware of it. Don’t babies have rights? Does Article 6 not apply to them? In fact, the whole Convention does, including Article 12 (and see Alderson *et al*, 2005).

The chapter on child labour is information-packed – this is one of the best chapters of the book. It discusses street children, child workers on farms and in factories, child prostitutes, children in mines etc. Surprisingly, there is no discussion of the growth of working children’s social movements and organisations (*Liebel et al*, 2001; Freeman, 2009).
There follows a comprehensive chapter on child trafficking. But there is no discussion of the concept of guardians for separated children (Stoyanov, 2012). The complexity of defining a trafficked child is also glossed over.

The chapter on child soldiers is graphic and heart-breaking, the section on the experience of girls involved with armed groups particularly so. And 40 per cent of child soldiers worldwide are girls. There is a separate chapter on children affected by war and conflict, on the impact of genocide, for example. The impact on education is most underestimated. Thus, Somalia has the lowest educational attendance in the world (12 per cent for boys and 10 per cent for girls).

There is an excellent chapter about child maltreatment (to which adoption is oddly appended). It emphasises the cultural underpinning of abuse. The obvious point that families who use physical punishment lie at a higher risk of committing physical abuse is also stressed.

The chapter on education adds little to what is generally known: the emphasis on girls is especially significant. The case of Malala only came to attention after this book was published. The welfare of girls is a thread running throughout the monograph.

So, it is not surprising that the last case study (in chapter 9) is devoted to issues which particularly affect girl children: sex-selective abortion and infanticide, female genital cutting, early marriage. CEDAW is briefly – too briefly – discussed. This is yet another treaty not ratified by the USA.

One theme of this book is the partial implementation of the CRC worldwide. Even countries which have ratified – and only Somalia, South Sudan and the USA have not – often have reservations. Another theme of the book is that change needs to be multi-systemic. It has to take account of many variables (and stakeholders). A further theme of this book is that implementation of the CRC can have unintended and unforeseen consequences. For example, making primary education free, as mandated by Article 28, is a noble ideal – it is also a Millennium Development Goal – but it can lead to pressure on the system such as overcrowding, too few teachers and books etc.

This is a challenging book. It is packed with information, much of it not readily accessible. As such it is going to be an invaluable addition to student literature. It is particularly strong in excavating data from the developing world. The absence of a concluding chapter is a serious defect – there is as a result nothing which draws the themes of the book together or points to the future. This can be easily rectified in future editions of this book. In short, eminently recommendable.

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