Book Reviews

Invernizzi, Antonella, Liebel, Manfred, Milne, Brian and Budde, Rebecca (eds.)

Colleagues of the late Dr Judith Ennew have presented 14 chapters that celebrate her life and work in this liber amicorum (book from friends). For decades, Judith combined research and advocacy for and with children and young people around the world in what the book generally terms the Eurocentric Global North and also the Global South. She constantly showed how greatly we can all learn from the different perspectives, and we therefore publish two reviews of the book, the first from India and the second from the UK.

‘Why did you people rescue me, I did not want to be rescued!’ was what a child sex worker said after she was extracted from her place of work. While working with an international anti-trafficking organisation in India that faithfully followed the “rescue” modus operandi towards children in labour, such instances were common. Whilst one cannot deny that many of the young people were certainly living in a condition of near-slavery, others were shouldering economic responsibilities for their large families; ‘I left school against my parents’ wishes because the family needed an earning member’, yet another 13-year old goldsmith informed me. Not surprisingly, these raid and rescue efforts often led to no discernible change in the lives of the children and their communities; the children often went back to work after their release or in worst case scenarios were re-trafficked.

Later in life, when I did encounter Judith Ennew’s views on working children and their agency, my views and experiences felt somewhat vindicated. This review takes a look at the various ways in which Ennew and her colleagues have, in a sense “written back” to the systemic hegemonies embedded within the theory and praxis of children’s rights. It focuses on the lives of “out of
place” children with “ambiguous childhoods” that do not fit into Eurocentric and normative forms of childhood, like the lives of street children and working children, for example.

Through her work with children in the global South, Ennew sought to challenge the Eurocentric perception of the global South as a site of the “pathological childhood”. As a researcher and child rights advocate from India, I find it starkly evident that the dominant global perception of southern childhoods is that of a stage ‘fraught with difficulties’ (Mieltieg and Ennew: 28). Data on “normal” children and childhoods is very scarce. Chapter 3 on the right of children to be properly researched by Miljeteig and Ennew explores this epistemic violence within child rights discourse. They criticise the gaps in available disaggregated data on children and how scientific data is still unavailable in spite of technological advances.

In a similar vein, some of Ennew’s colleagues further attempt to “depathologise” childhoods in the South in this book. Drawing on her criticism of liberal international development efforts, Nandana Reddy takes a look at working children’s movements and how they were systematically dismantled when the dominant narrative of the child as “victim” began to be globally challenged by the children and their supporters. Liebel and Budde take it further in their chapter on the Eurocentrism prevalent in discussions on children and children’s rights; they stress the need to analyse the term “out of place”, taking it further to understand out of place children as those who do not need mere reintegration into the existing machinery (like that of compulsory schooling) but a different social structure that understands and respects their ambiguity.

Alejandro Cussianovitch’s chapter takes on the issue of power relations and how it is instrumentalised through hegemonic legal thought emanating from dominant power centres. Using the example of applying the Eurocentric model of compulsory schooling as a policy remedy for “out of place” children in Southern countries, it talks of an insidious erasure of indigenous experiences and perspectives. He applies Ennew’s concept of unwritten rights to the rights of indigenous people and how these are gradually being ‘depoliticised’ by Eurocentric hegemonic legal thought manifesting itself through legislation that does not grasp the nuances of lived realities of communities.

Ennew was very critical of development reform carried out by the state and international development organisations. She called fundraising campaigns a ‘pornography of misery’ (Liebel and Invernizzi: 2). Both Nandana Reddy and Liebel in their respective chapters support this critique. Liebel discusses how the language of rights is used to further the agenda of philanthropic donors and relief organisations. These agendas are often removed from the indigenous