SAHR Working Group Discussion  
February 27, 2015, 10:00am EST

The Figure of the Child in Today’s  
Development & Human Rights Regime

Participants:
Sara Bergmaschi  
Kirthi Jayakumar  
Nishma Jethwa  
Shakiba Muhammadi  
Helena Zeweri

Texts and Video Clips Discussed:

• Malkki, Liisa 2010. “Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace.” In In the  
Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care. Feldman, Ilana and Miriam Ticktin,  

• “Time for Global Action 2015”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTlHZ-SaZkA

• "Child Beggars in New Delhi, India": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejFl6JcVsLA

• "Free the Children": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx88LEhNneM

Summary:

Malkki, Liisa 2010. “Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace.” In In the Name of  

Contemporary imaginaries of a common humanity and a world community entail particular  
representations of children (children themselves, images children have made, words they  
have written, songs they have sung or created) (59). Malkki asks why children’s images are  
used within humanitarian discourses and notions of international community, how do they  
become efficacious, and what are the consequences of these images? Malkki argues that  
children are evoked in five different capacities: “(1) as embodiments of a basic human goodness  
(and symbols of world harmony); (2) as sufferers; (3) as seers of truth; (4) as ambassadors of  
peace; and (5) as embodiments of the future (60). A key point that Malkki makes is that the  
ways in which humanitarian discourses treat children is as apolitical beings who exist outside  
of the social or the political, whose specific life histories and narratives are obscured in order to
assert particular qualities that it is assumed all children possess. They are the bearers of wisdom, truth, and innocence, the ability to see things with a sense of purity for what they are (and yet they are not able to serve as witnesses at legal proceedings as expert witnesses of any sort, since they are also outside the realm of rational reason) (70-71). How the child is depicted resonated a great deal with how various organizational discourses depict the Afghan woman, provoking me to think more about the role of infantilization in the creation of the figure of the victim as well as the role of innocence as a sustained assumption for intervention to be made.

**Working Group Discussion:**

**Kirthi:** I was able to relate to [Liisa Malkki’s argument] because a lot of organizations here in India do operate as political fronts or initiatives that are backed with a different agenda but they collect money for something else and the easiest way to make people give is to guilt trip them into giving. And I do believe that images of children of this kind are being exploited to the advantage of organizations trying to make a quick buck.

**Helena:** That’s really interesting...How the mobilization of children is oftentimes used to fund different kinds of purposes.

**Nishma:** I was going to touch upon something you said—I think she said something...near the end, if we are presenting children or seeing children within this innocent framework and...as representing peace and embodying innocence and knowledge and universal knowledge, having that inherent knowledge about what is universally right, we are almost taking away from them their ability to exist independently from that. And I think she gives the example that on the one hand we endow them with this inherent knowledge and ability to know universal rights and all of that, but then we also take away from that within our more practical structures and the legal sphere...We don’t allow children to testify in court and...they can’t really be trusted witnesses...

She went on to talk about how that takes away from the children’s ability to actually act in a meaningful way and impactful way if that’s something they want to do. And the reason I brought that up is that that actually triggered for me the video that we shared [about the young man, Craig Kielburger who formed Free the Children in Canada]...There was something in that video that made me uncomfortable even though he seemed quite happy to go out and act upon his own. But I think it was because he was then feeding into that idea of children’s innocence and children’s universal good and all of that so it’s a whole thing that made me uncomfortable so I’m quite interested if people had the chance to see the video, how they reacted.

[...]

**Helena:** The video showed him touring the world giving speeches about how he started the organization, and what it meant to liberate children from...the global South. And it was troubling to me on a lot of levels as well...I think Nishma what you were pointing to that also
appeared in the chapter but also made its way into this video was this idea that...children would not be selected to be expert witnesses in a legal case or something like that because children are seen as not having rational reason. It’s the adult that is seen, at least in Western thought, as the person who holds rationality and the person who has reason. But the child is looked to more as a figure who can see through all of the contradictions, the silliness of adults, of adult human beings but they don’t have the rationality or the reason to be able to serve as expert witnesses and that’s what she’s arguing.

But I think it’s interesting because in the Free the Children video…this figure…Craig Kielburger—his goal was to help children around his age, and yet he was the one situating himself as a figure of rationality and reason, and education, and of knowledge. So, I thought that was really troubling also, especially since it was a situation of children helping children. But of course, I think the video showed that who is a child is never a universally understood thing. [For example], he’s considered a child in his own context in Canada—he’s under 18 so he is considered a child legally. But the children he is helping are also considered children…he, as a child, is going to be interpreted very differently by other people than the children that he’s helping. [Thus], his notion of what a child should be or how they should develop to help the rest of the world is very different than in other contexts […]

I’m wondering what you all think about this idea of the universality of what childhood is supposed to look like. Do you think that in different cultural or national contexts there are very different ideas of what it means to have a childhood or is the concept of childhood even operative in other contexts that you’ve worked in or that you’ve lived in? Because in the US, I think there is a very particular idea of what childhood should be or what a normal childhood should look like, but I’m sure it’s very different in other places and I’m wondering how it has been different for any of the contexts you’ve seen or lived in?

Sara: I think Helena is right. I think there is a very distinctive way of thinking about childhood here in the US. And even in Italy, there is more freedom and even the physicality of it—in the US here it is difficult to just go and give a hug to children. In the Middle East and other societies, it’s different—you can just go up to children and talk to them, you know, it’s different in a good way. In the US, because of privacy and barriers, it’s not really the same. It also goes along with this whole idea of childhood—children have to be super-children and they have to take all these classes when they are 4 or 5 or 6. I think there is an idea imposed on childhood and how it should look like. But sometimes this really prevents children to develop other skills they might have by not having structure because creativity and fantasy needs space. You don’t need so much structure really, because as you were saying children have this intuition and this approach to life that we don’t have and that’s why they need the space and time to do it.

[...]

Shakiba: Yes just to add something about the different contexts and different things nations have produced, a different definition or explanation of what childhood should be […] Every
country has its own culture, their cultural traditions are different, so definitely childhood is different in different parts of the world. [...] My observation is that the western world does try to introduce the notion of children’s rights, freedom of speech, and development. I don’t know if that is contextualized enough in the developing world, and that is one of the barriers that still [exists] in the developing world. The child’s rights [are] not moving forward.

Let’s take an example in developing countries—children do go out, and they have to work for their families, there is no option. But the West goes and says, no they are children, they are not 18 yet, they are not supposed to work. But is there any other option or something practical the children can contribute to his/her family [and] at the same time have their childhood? [...] 

Helena: [...] I think that the point you just brought up about the economic demands that are often placed on children is so important and it makes me think about that video about the child beggars in New Delhi. And I think one of the things the child was saying in the video was that the police are always getting in their way and they are always telling them to stand back off the street but they said that they need to find a way to gather money for their families. That’s not to say that children begging is something to be condoned or reinforced…but it is to speak to your point that oftentimes in these conceptions of the child, we ignore the sort of real economic constraints that so many people face.

[...] In Afghanistan, there’s the issue of underage marriage. The degree to which that is shaped by the financial and economic challenges that families face is something that I think should be more willingly thought about in order to come up with a better solution…because then when you frame the issue as not an economic or political one, when you frame it, let’s say as a cultural one, or say that children in this society are just not valued or they are just not treated well, to me that doesn’t enable policy people or people who are trying to come up with a solution to really get at what would be the best solution because it doesn’t get them to understand the complexity of the problem. The fact that it’s not just that people don’t value children in this society, and in fact they may value them a lot…It’s just that there are these other real systemic challenges that people face. Some people are just trying to survive and trying to find ways to make that happen....

Did anyone else watch the videos of the child beggars in New Delhi? I thought that was a really interesting and telling video—I thought it was telling because I thought that it created a narrative where the parents of the children were seen as the culprits of the children’s suffering—[according to the video], it was the parents who were not doing their job. It also put a little bit of blame on the state but for the most part it was saying that the parents were the ones who were to be blamed for allowing their children to be street beggars. So maybe that’s another thing to talk about, is in depicting children in particular ways, what kinds of narratives are we also bringing to the fore? Do we put the blame just on parents—is that what is happening when we depict children in these ways? Are we creating a story of victim and perpetrator—children as victim and the perpetrator is the parent or the state or some other person or institution, and what are the effects of creating this kind of narrative?
Sara: Yeah I think it’s a very good point. I think many times this is what happens when we see these situations. For example I was just in Brazil twice and I’ve seen many projects for children. I mean Brazil is a huge [country] and [the] majority of children are on the street because of social and economic conditions. I mean besides the major cities, all over the country, it’s basically almost a continent, it’s huge. They live with nothing—salaries are like 200 dollars a month and for children, there are no possibilities. Usually the parents are blamed and the parents are not there anymore and the children go on the street. So I think it’s true, it might be kind of dangerous to depict the situation like that and put the burden on parents.

But on the other side, the grassroots are different. They come from social and economic contexts in the country and [from] what I saw, it’s difficult to break the cycle. And of course for little girls, there is a lot prostitution, and sex tourism […] And there is no awareness that it is not a choice over there—when you see a street child or a girl on the street selling herself for 15 dollars, like it’s not a choice, but that’s the consequence and end result of a chain of factors. And yeah parents take choices and send children to the streets but they are desperate…I don’t think it’s useful to charge the parents because we don’t really know what the situation is.

Shakiba: I just want to ask how much does the politics or government play a role in Brazil, what are the politics? What are they doing? How much are they involved in it?

Sara: That’s a good point— we all know that the solution should come from the government, there is a central government, and it’s very difficult for the central government to control what’s going on, in its small region. There are no jobs and we know it starts with that. In these very poor regions there is one big multinational company giving jobs for 18,000 people for $5/hour and it’s not enough so people resort to other stuff. And then for example, the organization I was visiting, they offered children a recreational space or something where they can express themselves to give them perspective—it’s not about giving them money but to give them perspectives to try to bring out their creativity and so on. And now the local government likes the idea because the central government doesn’t do that. The government in Brazil they think about expanding their market and they don’t really look at their people or invest in their people because there is not this idea that you should give education to children because one day they are going to be adults. […] It’s an emerging country, an emerging market too, and they still have to understand how everything works plus they are elites governing the country […]

Shakiba: I just have an idea to share—what if there is a very compact child survival program in a country which means that the child survival program contains all aspects that protects the child to the age of 18? That compact program…should [involve] all sectors, all departments, in order to run this child survival cycle throughout [the country]. […]From education, from agriculture, from food industry departments, let’s say from human rights, health, everyone [could] just join and run that child survival program cycle. If there is anything like that, it could play a good role rather than just keeping child issues to the hands of human rights and to just keep blaming them and expecting them [to do all the work]…to protect childhood. I think it’s
more practical if everyone is involved because [a] child needs growth, food, education, health, employment.

**Helena:** It’s the idea that [children’s rights and welfare] shouldn’t just be in the sphere of human rights, it should be shaped by political and economic institutions and other kinds too.

**Shakiba:** Yeah like Sara mentioned, [children oftentimes] don’t have adequate income so they resort to things like sex, etc. We have very rich food industries who outsource their companies from the richer world to the less richer/poor world. They are producing tons of food—they can just participate, they should participate in the welfare programs and development programs. Sometimes I feel like such industries, if they are lending [to] the developing world, they should be obliged to give 10%, 20%, some percent, they should be obliged [to contribute to] welfare programs for children...Developing countries should reform their policies in allowing this.

[Do you remember] the incident that happened in Bangladesh so many women died, what were they doing? They were working there for these multinational companies. So they were working for these multinational companies and we buy [that] stuff here in the developed world for 5, 10 dollars, and look [as a result children] lost all their lives. [It is] so sad, so sad. I think if the government does not [protect children], let’s work with activists, students, and all these people, let them be aware of this...

There is so much injustice going [on] in our world. It’s not just okay, it’s not just women’s rights, not just child’s rights, this links to climate change, how they are ruining our climate in Bangladesh, they spilled oil tanks in Bangladesh, they are drinking toxic water in Bangladesh, so many people are having physical abnormalities. [There] should be [a] good system in place—like the developing world should just rethink, reform their policies and if the developing world is looking for money, this is the best way, just be strict. If you work in my country, these are my policies. If you want to pay taxes and work here, these are our policies. And I love Brazil—when it comes to food, Brazil has some good food policies and recently Mexico came up with some food policies but just recently Brazil released its food guidelines that protects human beings from industries, so this is a very bold step Brazil has taken. So I think every country should start with doing it—that is only possible with activists working with human rights, they should bring all sectors together.

**Helena:** Those are such rich insights, thank you...I think it’s this idea of...looking at...what we have deemed to be children’s problems as also larger problems about politics, the economy, climate change. I think that’s a new way and probably a more productive way of thinking about the challenges that children populations globally confront. So I like this idea of saying that this is not just a child’s problem, this is multiple things all at the same time because it has bearing on all of those spheres of society.

**Nishma:** [...] One of the things that occurred to me, and it’s a question so I’d be interested to hear your views. The difference between the genuine consideration of inter-generational justice,
(like genuine consideration or concern with how we act today will be impacting the future and therefore the children of today and their lives and the way they will be living), compared to what I think... the last video... does, where it uses the basis of children to support the 2015 onwards agenda in a very generic way of [looking at things.] [...] Environmental justice, legal justice, really generic terms, no specifics, just using young people-- look they are acting and involved. I’m sure there is something behind that and there’s a program and much happening, but I’m just wondering what you thought about those two things being different things and how they manifest?

**Helena:** Was the video the one with the Time for Global Action video?

**Nishma:** Yeah

**Helena:** Yeah I thought... it’s the kind of video you see often, and when you take a step back and try to make it strange for yourself it can come across as quite bizarre in a lot of ways. I think what you just mentioned, it’s one of the reasons I found it bizarre/interesting. ...You have to look at it in the context of [the fact that] they are producing a 3 minute video [and] they have to say things quickly, there’s the whole media aspect, [but] it does bring to mind this idea of, do we gratuitously just throw out these tropes? I’m just reading off the signs each young person was holding: they would hold up a sign, and say eliminate poverty, fight disease, tackle climate change, eliminate discrimination, use energy efficiently, so it just made me wonder, just the holding up of the signs like that, is there a gratuitous use of these tropes, and what does it mean to have young teenagers, young adolescent people be the ones who are pinpointed as helping to carry on these struggles into the next generation?

The other thing I found interesting about the video—it was so fast-paced, just the way the camera was moving... when they show things moving really quickly... a quick time-lapse, and it felt at the beginning like a video for a fast-paced corporation. Things are happening quickly, we are moving, we are getting things done. All these things are coming together and it made me think about to what extent do you think organizations that work not just with children, but development and human rights in general, ... have they become their own industries, like a corporatized industry and to what extent have these tropes become commodified in a way? To what extent have these phrases become their own sort of commodities I guess?

**Nishma:** I think that’s a really interesting question because I was just thinking about the Trust Women conference last year I attended and right at the end, I think they had already arranged for Kailash Satyarthi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner to attend and speak [...] They did a whole thing around children and what they had established was the equivalent, what they were launching was “The Elders” but for young people... it was called “The Youngers.” If you heard of the elders... it was the equivalent of that for young people. I don’t normally engage with young people, it’s not the group of people I come across a lot in any context, so it was quite surprising to me to watch young people speak on stage about the causes they are working on, and I hate this word and apologize for using it but it was genuinely inspiring and energy-giving
in that you felt their investment and real investment in whatever issue they were looking at, and advocating for and it really came through, and that felt very genuine. And that’s why I asked that question as well—[…] I have seen these rare moments of genuine youth based involvement. That was shocking for me because I don’t come across young people in my work or any other way but it’s quite interesting, I don’t know if anyone else works with young people a lot—just not something I’ve had experience with.

[…]

Helena: I think that’s interesting what you said Nishma. I think all the contexts that we’re talking about…we do see a lot of genuine commitment to these issues among a lot of people. I guess even the guy in the other video, Craig Kielburger, well I cheated, I went and looked at other videos he has done.

[ […] There was a video of him and his brother hosting the opening of one of these WE conferences and it’s just about bringing young people into the conference to talk about social justice and global issues and these are young people who are trying to be activists or in human rights and working in development so now that’s the kind of thing that they are working on.

[ […]

The thing is, it’s amazing he’s been able to do this. I looked at a one-on-one interview he did with a journalist and he’s clearly genuinely committed to all of this. It’s part of his being, his life, his humanity, it’s part of it. But at the same time, I find that he seems--maybe I’m wrong, I could be totally wrong, so I don’t mean to indict him--he seems blissfully unaware of the sort of power relations, historically, and the colonial relations that have enabled him to do the kind of work that he does. He is clearly a privileged white heterosexual male from Canada who was given some kind of resource to start this organization at the age of 12 and there’s no addressing of that in any of the stuff I’ve seen…so far, and so there’s so many class and racial issues that plague his involvement in these other contexts and it seems like he hasn’t recognized it publicly—I mean I don’t know if he thinks about it. It just got me wondering even with children helping children, because when he started he was 12. It’s not like every child is on the same playing field. It’s not just a child from here helping a child from there. It’s like a white privileged child from probably a middle class, upper middle class family is [getting involved in a particular way].

Nishma: That’s really interesting. That made me think of, in the article when [Liisa Malkki] [says] it’s not inherent, it’s taught to the children, it’s a cycle. We are saying they have this inherent knowledge of universal values, but in fact we have taught them that they have inherent knowledge of universal values and it goes round. And that makes me think of how the figure of the child has been juxtaposed next to the evil figure. So one of the examples that popped into my mind was the Kony video where he used kids at the beginning and compared them to Kony. It’s very good marketing and PR, but that’s happened a lot as well. […] It’s
actually, like you say, this kid who is running this conference and so many other people in this sector, who as you mentioned are so genuine and so invested, but still so blissfully unaware of these things. If you think about it, it’s a bit mind-blowing.

Helena: [...] I guess maybe the question becomes, if we do recognize there is not a universal idea of what constitutes a normative childhood or a normative child’s trajectory, what will that enable us to do in terms of addressing or explaining global challenges that affect people on a global level? So maybe the question is what is at stake in making the kind of argument that Liisa Malkki makes, in revealing the fact that there is no such thing as a universal idea of childhood? Or maybe it’s about trying to figure out what is universal about children? Maybe there is something that ties all children together? But maybe it’s not the things that certain institutions have pinpointed are the things that tie them together. Maybe there’s something else that is universal about being a child but maybe it’s not the things that we think they are and maybe that’s more productive rather than constantly pointing out what are the differences. (i.e. saying this culture has this way of looking at the child, this culture / context has this way.) Is there something that is universal about it or maybe there’s not, I don’t know, it’s something to think about.

Sara: Can I connect our topic to something interesting that I came across yesterday? The website you just sent, WE-day, the WE conference speaks about young citizens and really empowering young people, and I don’t know if you know what’s going on in Ecuador but the President of Ecuador, he was elected 8 years ago and he started a citizen’s revolution.

And everything is based on him being the main interlocutor of his citizens. He gives free education to all children and that’s really one of the basics. [Also], quality healthcare and he really tried to make sure everything really works. And it’s really one-to-one direct and...maybe one of the most important progressive political projects in the world right now. Why people started to talk about this issue is because—I don’t know if you know John Oliver, he is a British comedian—he mocked the President for attacking a few people who criticized him on his Twitter account ([The President] had named them—for example saying you, Juan, why did you criticize me? And so the comedian was mocking him and the idea is that taken out of context, [the President’s actions] don’t make any sense. Again it’s the effort of the Western media to portray Latin America in a certain way, where all these things and powers are in place. That’s why it’s so complicated...It’s the way we depict a situation, it’s the contextualization by our media and it’s gonna be always more difficult. And now with the President that tried to affect change and then he’s mocked, then his own citizens were really angry and they said to John Oliver, why don’t you come and see Ecuador and see what we are really doing. So...it’s not really affecting a system (changing the system it’s really difficult and of course it goes against the interests of all the major powers in the West). His revolution is the Citizens Revolution and I feel there’s a little bit of hope that one day we will be able to…I mean look, there are different forums and different political projects. On the other side it’s difficult—the media really portray and contextualize whatever they want.
Helena:

One thing I thought was really interesting that Liisa Malkki argues is that in order to really understand some of these issues, we have to analyze the making of peace, not the making of war. So I think that’s really interesting and important. I think the idea that in order to understand the complexity of a lot of the social issues, that we attach ourselves to and that are so important to us, sometimes it’s even more telling to look at how societies and countries and nation-states engage in peace efforts rather than how they engage in war efforts or in acts of very explicit violence. Oftentimes the most telling things of how we are as a society is in the way that we forge and try to construct peace, and I thought that was really provocative and really interesting. I think one of the things that is really interesting to me is this paradox in a world where you have so many organizations emerging that are based on compassion and care and benevolence and global humanity, [you also have such an] increase [in] militarization of both the nation-state itself but also the nation-state militarizing other nation–states and foreign occupation, you have…the longest war in American history still going on in Afghanistan even though they say it’s stopped, it hasn’t. You have the continued occupation of Palestine.

It’s so interesting to me that you have such an increase in organizations based on compassion and care, and you have an increase in all [of] these other [forms of violence]. So I think that’s why her provocation to look at the way nation-states work toward peace could actually be more telling because maybe they are reproducing certain ideas that have not been…very helpful in trying to create a new kind of humanity or alternative way of what humanity could be. I appreciated it that about her article…

Nishma: I like her point about…peace and infantilizing it, relating it to the figure of the child and also the same…when she talks about universal values and relating that to the child. The child as a figure who isn’t really to be trusted who doesn’t know what they think. Taking peace, universal policy values and relating them to…the figure of the child, then almost diminished efforts by adults…to look seriously at…what our universal values are. I think somewhere in there, there was a quote about the Convention on Culture and Economic Rights, and it [analogized it to] a letter to Santa [Claus] or something like that, it gives certain institutions and people that ability to say you are all about peace, you’re not being realistic or pragmatic about the reality of life and politics…That I thought was really interesting. That is something that I encounter in conversations a lot, not specifically about peace, but in other ways if I’m talking, other topics associated with children, the idyllic figure...

Helena: That’s a really important point, and also what you were getting at was what kinds of stories do we have to tell ourselves about who is the victim and who is the perpetrator in a situation in order to validate a particular course of action? Do we, even in human rights and development work and in humanitarian work (which is so premised on ideas of care, compassion, empathy in the sense of understanding the struggle of another)...still work with
these narratives of you’re the victim you’re the perpetrator, you’re the good guy, you’re the bad guy? Is that productive? We don’t just do it when children are involved, we do it with everyone. Is that a productive way of going about the work? Is there a different way we can think about it where we don’t construct stories of pure victim and pure perpetrator? Or can it be very productive in certain situations to have this kind of narrative because maybe in some situations it’s very necessary to say this is the institution or the person who is at fault. Maybe that could be a political move and it’s important for political struggles. But it’s something I think about a lot and I don’t know if anyone has thoughts on that? I don’t think it just applies to children, it’s in these organizations.

**Nishma:** You might be interested in, she’s an ex-lawyer, ex-defense attorney and still practicing at law and she looks at restorative justice points of view as a complement to the legal system...It’s really interesting about the victim-perpetrator stories we need to tell ourselves, especially as lawyers.

**Helena:** I wonder to what extent these narratives we use are based on Western legal thought, how we identify who the victim is and who is the one who committed the violent act, the criminal act. To what extent is it based on those juridical systems? Is there a way to do something more nuanced, something that looks more at the systemic forms of disenfranchisement, oppression, these kinds of things? I think the risk may be that just looking at things systemically, and not having that linear accountability is that then you can blame it on everybody and everything. You can kind of say that everybody is responsible, we are all responsible in some way, we each have a little bit of responsibility. Is that a productive way of trying to amend or trying to deal with the things that people suffer through? I don’t know, but it’s a question I struggle with a lot. But...the child as a window into looking at how that works is helpful.

[Concluding salutations]