

# Throwing Down the Gauntlet

CAROL BELLAMY



President Barack Obama has thrown down the gauntlet with his call for “a better way to welcome the striving, hopeful immigrants who still see America as a land of opportunity.” It’s a bold move for a mainstream politician. Across the world, and particularly in rich countries that are bobbing in the wake of the global financial crisis, politicians are running scared on immigration. Cat-calls about immigrants sound especially tuneless here in the United States, where some 40 percent have at least one ancestor who arrived at Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954. Indeed, the wealth of this country has been built by risk-takers who had the courage to launch themselves into the unknown.

Today’s migrants are no different. On every continent, they are prepared to stake everything on the chance for a better future. The forces that have driven immigrants for centuries fuel global migration today—

the quest for freedom, to escape war, and to provide a decent standard of living for their families. People are both pushed and pulled into migration. Pushed by poverty, violence, or oppression; pulled by the siren call of wealth and opportunity offered by the world's richest countries and growing cities. This dynamic is seen most vividly along America's border with Mexico—the push of a country where many people face poverty and lawlessness, combined with the pull of the richest country on the planet.

It's not easy to leave everything you know, and there is rarely a warm welcome waiting for you. The world over, migrants face discrimination that often extends to their children. Most distressingly, they often see their children denied the opportunities and basic services that other children take for granted. As chair of the Global Partnership for Education, and as former executive director of UNICEF, I have met migrant children who trail their peers through no fault of their own, particularly when it comes to schooling.

Their very status as migrants may be the first and greatest barrier to their education. They can become ensnared in institutionalized exclusion that sets rigid registration requirements for migrant workers. Portrayed as a means to gain services, registration often does the opposite, denying services to those without the right documents.

Migrants from China's rural areas to its cities have found it difficult to send their children to school as a result of the *Hukou* registration system. Schools have only admitted children registered as official

inhabitants with a permanent home in the school district, and school budgets have been set accordingly. End result: Schools can't afford to enroll unregistered migrant children, and migrant parents can't afford to pay the fees to make up the difference. The Hukou system is now being reformed, but it illustrates a wider problem.

In our increasingly urban world, slum populations are growing by more than 20 million people each year—larger than the entire population of the Netherlands—and rural poverty and the allure of the city create a steady stream of new arrivals. Many wind up in illegal settlements that are invisible in government plans and budgets. In Kibera, one of the largest slums in Africa, many children, who live a short walk from Kenya's finest primary schools, lack even the most basic schooling. If their parents can scrape the money together, they pay for poor-quality private education, while children outside Kibera get state education for free.

Keeping migrants on the margins of society by using (or abusing) strict registration rules or denying their children basic services is often a ploy to deter future migration. There are valid fears that legal entitlement to education and other services would accelerate rural-urban migration, putting more pressure on already over-stretched services. But depriving children of their fundamental right to education is no solution. For migrant children who make it into the classroom, the quality of the education they receive is questionable. They often struggle to learn in a second language and an environment where they are seen as

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different. Migrant children are more likely to drop out of school—a result, in part, of the failures of many education systems to meet their needs. Those who stay in school often fall behind. These problems are not confined to the poorest countries. In OECD member states, first-generation immigrants typically lag 1.5 years behind their native peers. In several countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, immigrant children failed to reach the basic level of proficiency in mathematics at least triple the rate of native students, according to a 2006 assessment.

The lack of access to education and the poor quality of education are serious enough challenges for children who migrate with their parents. For children who migrate alone, the prospects can be dire. Like adult migrants, these children may be fleeing poverty or violence. They may well be hoping for a better life, including an education. But those who arrive in big cities with dreams of educational advancement often find their dreams evaporating as they struggle to survive, as studies in Bangladesh and Ghana have confirmed. The risks that confront children who migrate alone go far beyond the lack of education, to include exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.

Similar risks face the children of refugees who may end up stateless—barred from the rights enjoyed by full citizens. And again, those who are on their own are in the greatest danger from traffickers and exploiters, with their emotional and physical well-being under threat. For all migrant children, education can help close

the gap between their own lives and the lives enjoyed by children around them. For refugee children, education restores a sense of normalcy in a world gone mad. But getting migrant children into school is not enough. We must go further, offering migrant children an education of good quality—fulfilling their hopes and tying them into their new communities.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE), has found that migrant children are overrepresented among the 61 million

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primary-school aged children who are not in school. And like many of the other children out of school, they lose out because of who or where they are, and because the education offered is simply not good enough. Such exclusion, which prevents marginalized children from getting the education they need, must be

ended—by partnerships between national governments and organizations like GPE, developing sound education plans and mobilizing and coordinating the resources needed to put these plans into action. Put simply, education systems in every country must be strengthened so that they can do their job for every child.

Having the initiative to migrate, when necessary, is part of what makes us human. It is hard-wired into our DNA alongside our abilities to reason, plan, and collaborate. Crossing even dangerous borders is not a threat. It is a rational human response to poverty, war, and lack of opportunity. As such, it demonstrates both courage and optimism. It is only fair that migrant children reap the rewards. ●