When 97 boys, rescued from factories where they had been locked in and forced to work 18-hour days, arrived at a train station junction in northeast India in January 2014, Harvard Professor Jacqueline Bhabha was on the platform with the anti-trafficking NGO that would try to return them safely to their distant villages. "I will never forget the sight," recalls Bhabha, who is Director of Research at the Harvard University FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, where she also directs the Program on Human Trafficking and Forced Labor. "They were huddled together, in the same clothes they had worn in the factories. Their faces were ashen; their skin looked dry. I wondered what would happen to them."

"No one asked the boys what they wanted," she continued. "No one asked the parents how this happened." As a human rights lawyer and an expert on issues of transnational child migration, refugee protection, citizenship, and children's rights, Bhabha knew that as many as 50 percent of those "rescued and returned" in this way were often re-trafficked within a year. How effective are human rights protections in such circumstances, and what is the role of youth voice and agency in making a difference for those at risk?

Bhabha shared this compelling story to open the February 3 "Informal Conversation" event, part of a roundtable discussion series hosted by the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI) to offer faculty and students the opportunity to engage in dialogue on cutting-edge, cross-disciplinary issues. Past speakers have included Yale Professor Thomas Pogge, UNAIDS Founding Director Peter Piot, Sophie Delaunay of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), HSPH Malaria Scholar in Residence Regina Rabinovich, economist William Hsiao, and Harvard Divinity School Professor Ahmed Ragab. Professor Bhabha is Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, the Jeremiah Smith Jr. Lecturer in Law at Harvard Law School, and an Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Before coming to Harvard in 2001, she directed the Human Rights Program at the University of Chicago, and has also served as a practicing human rights lawyer in London and at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Youth is often imagined as a time for freedom and exploration, said Bhabha. But many youth across the world lack this "right to adolescence," pressed by family poverty and social expectations to leave school, work long hours in
Despite existing laws against child labor, and, for girls, marry young. Stigma and gender discrimination further increase risks to young people, often stunting their educational hopes and dreams. In her research on adolescent agency for the Roma—the most stigmatized group in Europe today—Bhabha found that less than 20 percent of all Roma youth were enrolled in secondary school, and less than 2 percent attend college.

Variations in how countries define this transitional period challenge the global development of effective policies. In a recent UNICEF report, Adolescents: Current Rights for Future Opportunities, Bhabha noted that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is intended to provide international legal protection to children and youth up to age 18; the World Health Organization and UNICEF define adolescence as the time period between age 10 and 19; and countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor Leste count as "youth" all individuals up to age 25 or 30.

Shifts in family relationships and social expectations also play a critical role in the ability of youth to succeed. In India, Bhabha and her colleagues are currently interviewing daughters of illiterate parents who have overcome immense social barriers to succeed and are now in their second year of college. The girls, identified as "champions," offer exciting role models for the "positive deviance" of success for vulnerable youth. What made the difference for them? It was not the government programs or stipend incentives (although these were important), the girls told Bhabha. Rather, they said, mentorship—of parents, teachers, brothers who cared about their quality of life—was the most significant factor. "Resilience, drive, grades—and something about the mothers’ sense of her own missed aspirations," were all factors the researchers identified for such positive deviance. Read more about The Champions Project.

Bhabha's stories and remarks led into a lively discussion around the table and across disciplines. "What can undergraduates do to help combat trafficking?" asked a freshman. "First, learn to ask the right questions," said Sue J. Goldie, MD, MPH, the HGHI Faculty Director and Roger Irving Lee Professor of Public Health at the Harvard School of Public Health. And think local, Bhabha added. One in four children in the United States lives in poverty, and trafficking goes on here in the Boston area; students from Harvard Law School and the Graduate School of Education are actively involved in local intervention efforts.

"How do we prevent unintended consequences, when what we try to do to help backfires and makes the situation worse?" asked Lynn Black, MD, MPH. Dr. Black is a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital whose international work has focused on women’s health and gender–based violence, access to care, and disaster relief for academic institutions, FEMA, and non–governmental organizations. There are no rescue shortcuts, agreed Bhabha. It may be hard to walk away from a situation without doing something, but be conscious of the potential domino effect and "think three to five steps ahead before you do anything," she insisted. Resources for the welfare of youth are poorly supported. The rescued boys, for example, live in such remote and rural areas that existing social services may not be able to provide detailed home studies and legal accompaniment to ensure their successful "return." Yet new laws, such as India’s requirement that all companies donate 2 percent of post–tax profit to corporate social
Responsibility (CSR) projects, could help build opportunities. Effective responses need systematic thinking.

"Why is youth voice missing in global policy?" asked a graduate student in education. Youth clearly have voice in collective action, replied Bhabha, pointing to the Arab Spring as one example. Adolescent boys have also been effective in developing community arts- and sports-related efforts to address, for example, violence related to gender and sexuality. But integrating youth voice in formal policy decisions in a non-tokenistic manner continues to be a challenge.

"What good are human rights?" wondered some participants. After all, said Frank Nyonator, MD, MPH, "when the law doesn't work, there are no rights." Dr. Nyonator is the acting Dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Health and Allied Sciences in Ghana and a key advisor to the Ghanaian government; he is at Harvard this semester as the Gro Harlem Brundtland Senior Leadership Fellow in the Division of Policy Translation and Leadership Development at Harvard School of Public Health. Indeed, Bhabha agreed, youth face daunting discrepancies in legal access, and human rights law creates a roadmap that often fails to be followed in real life. But it's important to know the map, she insisted. Systemic, modest contributions from across many disciplines can make a difference. "Rights are a set of tools to shame and galvanize," she concluded. "They are just the beginning."

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