As youth around the world transition into adolescence, they often face health risks related to gang violence, sexual exploitation, early marriage, unemployment and lack of skill-training, and risky travel and migration to escape danger at home. No longer seen as cute and innocent children, adolescents may instead encounter suspicion, hostility, and social ambiguities from adults at a time when they especially need understanding and support for healthy brain development and social maturation. If teens are to have a chance to fulfill their potential and thrive, a human-rights-based framework is needed for policy and action so that adolescents can learn to use their agency wisely and take a coherent place in shaping the world of tomorrow.

This is the message of a new book, *Human Rights and Adolescence*, recently celebrated at a November 2014 book launch and panel discussion co-sponsored by the François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights and the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI). Edited by human rights lawyer and professor Jacqueline Bhabha, FXB Center Director of Research, the book draws on the expertise of 25 research scholars, activists, and educators across multiple disciplines to explore the process and meanings of adolescence; the role of trauma, stigma, and resilience in youth who group up with violence; and opportunities to engage in strategic social interventions to realize and advance adolescent rights. The book reflects research that was first presented at a 2011 international conference to explore adolescent transitions to adulthood, “Adolescent Rights: What Progress?” which marked the coming of age of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the 21st anniversary of its ratification, and was co-sponsored by the FXB Center, HGHI, UNICEF, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

With Bhabha as facilitator, the November book launch featured a panel discussion with three of the book’s contributors currently engaged in research at the FXB Center: Orla Kelly, a human rights lawyer with a business background who works in India on empowering adolescent girls; Elizabeth A. Newnham, a clinical psychologist who studies mental health outcomes in children affected by disaster and conflict; and Margareta Matache, a Roma human rights activist from Romania.

All three speakers identified ways that adolescents across disparate cultural groups may share much in common that can benefit from new research and action. Whether in South Asia, Europe, or Africa, for example, adolescents may face discrimination and stigma rooted in misplaced “respect” for cultural difference that in fact disempowers by perpetuating traditional but unhealthy views and practices related to early marriage and education. Yet at the same time there is much reason for hope, as youth typically manifest a powerful resilience in overcoming adversity. A rights-based approach to health and agency can engage this hope with specific models that support adolescent voice and community engagement for positive change.

Learn more about the book