

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE BRITISH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES FROM ST HELENA TO THE TURKS AND CAICOS

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Abstract

All children have the right to protection, the blueprint to which is found within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and extends to all British Overseas Territories (BOTs). However, understanding how children's rights, including their right to protection, exist to support children's rights is less clear within the BOTs. This article contributes to the very small body of literature that explores childhood within the BOTs. There is first a need to journey through their foundations to see how current lived experiences have been forcibly evolved and positioned through historical violence and unique events shaping the context where human and child rights converged to the here and now. Understanding historical and recent concerns about children on some of these territories, this article will then focus on the territories of St Helena and Turks and Caicos. In doing so, the complexities of historical neglect and abuses show how tensions and forced dependencies remain to limit children's and families' rights, most clearly demonstrated through their restricted rights to protection. In practice, agencies to support rights and social development occupy a fragile position, balancing economic challenges and social welfare needs (Midgley, 2014; Hugman, 2016), where limited resources lead to vulnerability and the resetting of priorities by local social agendas against global events.

Keywords, British Overseas Territories, Turks and Caicos Islands, St Helena Island, remote childhoods, colonial childhood, children's rights.

Introduction to the British Overseas Territories

There are 14 BOTs, from the Turks and Caicos Islands, Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Monserrat (in the Caribbean) and Bermuda (in the West Atlantic) to the Falkland Islands, St Helena Island, Tristan da Cunha and Ascension (in the South Atlantic). Additionally, there are British Antarctic, Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia (Europe), Pitcairn Islands, and lastly the British Indian Ocean Territory, referred to herein as the Chagos Islands (Pacific). All bar one (Akrotiri and Dhekelia) are islands. In total, these territories are home to over 250,000 British Overseas Citizens (Royle, 2001; Clegg *et al.*, 2016; Cohen, 2017), with additional diasporas spread across the globe most notably in the UK and USA.

While the initial speed of decolonisation saw many previous colonies become independent countries, the 'rush to decolonisation has slowed to a stop' (Royle,

2010, p 204). For those territories remaining, the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization (UN General Assembly, 2021) continues to push for the UK to increase awareness of independence. Though having unique histories and legal ties to the UK, there are also many differences in constitutions, with the balance of power between each territory affecting how childhood, and so children's rights, are positioned against different cultural backdrops (Dunn, 2017; Clegg *et al.*, 2016). As Royle (2010) described, many islands remain in a colonial relationship, being simultaneously colonial and postcolonial, although having tended 'to slip the net of postcolonial theorising' (p 203). Some appear close to the UK, such as in the South Atlantic (*ibid.*), while others appear to have diverged, seeking cultural distance (Jones *et al.*, 2008). For children growing up across these territories, this produces very different childhood experiences (*ibid.*).

The history of childhood is always a history of ideas and concepts of childhood (Liebel, 2017; 2019). Through this, childhood is seen as a form of both being and discourse (*ibid.*, 2019). The colonisation of these territories created individual fusions of culture and, therefore, the position of children within this is central, but often shifting in local prioritisation (Wilson, 2011). At the birth of colonisation was the position of children as incomplete, imperfect, and developing. Therefore, children from outside of Europe were seen as primitive or uncivilised (Said, 1979; Freire, 1970). The need to establish a hierarchy of difference, alongside the idea of the child as diluted, offered justification for imperial dominance (Liebel, 2017; Spyrou, 2018). This is important, as modern childhood and the social position of children can be seen to have been constructed through the development of children as separate from adults. For children of these territories, this is compounded by their status as 'different', or 'other' (Said, 1979). Disclosing their current lived situations provides a platform for positioning them globally and challenging their unequal status as many territories are becoming more globally visible through tourism and access to their islands (van Middelkoop and Hogenstijn, 2018).

The remaining territories

Scattered across the globe, some BOTs have permanent populations, while others, such as those on Ascension Island, lack the permanent right of abode, with the island never having had an indigenous population. To live on Ascension requires a work placement, although generations of islanders have remained, working on the island (Royle, 2004). On other islands, displacement has been linked to direct

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