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The dynamics of girls' involvement in agricultural work in Andhra Pradesh, India: combining work and school

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Abstract

Child labour in India has long been the focus of research, policy concern and intervention. This paper presents an analysis of children's involvement in agricultural work, particularly cottonseed production, drawing on evidence gathered for Young Lives in 2007 and 2008. In parts of rural Andhra Pradesh, children have been working in cotton fields for two or three months of the year. Evidence showed marked gender and age differentiation. In the early stages of cotton production in the mid-1990s, there was reportedly a cultural as well as an economic basis for children's work in cottonseed pollination, when it was believed that pre-pubescent girls were preferred, as they were considered 'pure'. This has shifted, and children appear to work in cotton pollination for economic reasons, as well as practical ideas that they are better suited to the work because of their physical height and dexterity. The paper focuses on accounts from two girls involved in such work. They highlighted the importance of work in their everyday lives and its consequences for their schooling. Their situation had changed markedly when the study teams visited the site one year later, and the paper explores some of the reasons for the changes.

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of children's work in agriculture in Andhra Pradesh, drawing on evidence from Young Lives. Young Lives is a study of child poverty, following 12,000 children growing up in Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam, and Andhra Pradesh in India. It attempts to improve understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of child poverty, and how specific policies affect children's lives¹. A qualitative component was introduced in 2007, with a sample of 204 boys and girls across the four countries. The coexistence of longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data provides potential for combined analysis. According to survey data from Young Lives in Andhra Pradesh, school enrolment rates for the Older Cohort have been increasing (Mukherji 2008). However, 26% of the Older Cohort in rural areas report working for pay (Galab et al. 2008). Qualitative data gathered during 2007 with 24 Older Cohort children indicated that by the age of twelve, five of them had dropped

¹ Young Lives recruited in each country 2,000 children born in 2000/1 ('Younger Cohort'), and 1,000 children who were 8 years old at the time (born 1994/5) ('Older Cohort'). There have been three survey rounds (2002, 2006 and 2009). For more information see www.younglives.org.uk

out of school, and most of these children were from rural communities. In general, children work on family farms while attending school.

This paper describes two girls in one study site, who work in family fields while attending the local government school. Qualitative research is carried out in the site with three older cohort boys and three older cohort girls, their parents, other Young Lives and non-Young Lives children and other members of the community. Two girls were selected for a case study analysis because of their involvement in cotton-seed pollination work in the first round of the qualitative study. The paper draws on data from the first and second rounds of the qualitative research, and discusses the tension between work and school-attendance, as well as changes between one year and the next. The paper suggests that in these particular cases, children's work needs to be understood as dynamic, susceptible to numerous influences, and in a wider socio-economic and political context in which children are expected to attend school, while their labour is simultaneously needed on the land.

Background

The topic of child labour and children's work in India is well researched, and highly contested. This paper takes a broad definition of work as the performance of necessary tasks and the production of necessary values (Wallman 1979) to include a range of activities such as housework, domestic labour, and family labour, that are not formally perceived as 'labour' or employment. 'Child labour' is generally understood as harmful and exploitative work. National legislation restricts the formal employment of children, but is not effective in many circumstances, and children's work needs to be seen in the context of local norms and the contributions that children make to their families (Morrow and Boyden 2009). India has not ratified the two ILO conventions on child labour, though it has numerous laws and regulations relating to child labour, and it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 (Ramanathan 2000). While there is a vast amount of academic and NGO research on the topic of child labour in India, much of it does not look at children's multiple concurrent activities or work in context, but tends to focus on single industries (there are many notable exceptions, eg Nieuwenhuys 1994). Much existing research is snapshot, and there is very little longitudinal research. Bourdillon (2006), in a useful review, suggests that 'We need more long-term and detailed studies in different

settings, and incorporating the perspectives of the children, on the place and effects of work in their lives...' (p1221).

Andhra Pradesh and cotton pollination

Over the past decade, per capita income in Andhra Pradesh has grown faster and poverty rates have fallen more rapidly than the national average in India (Murray 2008: 1). However, economic growth is confined to certain sectors and 'questions remain about the real economic impact of the reform process and to what extent progress has been inclusive or 'pro-poor' (Murray 2008). In an overview of child labour in India, Subbaraman and von Witzke (2007) highlight Andhra Pradesh as having had high rates of children out of school in comparison to other states (according to Census 2001). They also note that agriculture remains the sector 'employing more than half of working children in India' (p101). Cotton production is an important agricultural crop in Andhra Pradesh. Hybrid seed production in cotton was introduced in India in the early 1970s. It involves crossing two varieties of cotton to produce hybrid seeds which are more productive, but can produce only one crop. This means that cottonseed has to be purchased, because the hybrid crops are infertile. Male and female varieties are grown separately, and pollinated by hand, which is highly labour intensive (MVF 1998). Cotton flowers bloom for several months, and the crossing needs to be done the day the flowers bloom. Hybrid cotton plants produce more cotton, but are susceptible to pests and diseases, and farmers spray with pesticides up to 30 times in a season (MVF 1998). Genetically modified cotton, 'Bt cotton', was introduced in 2002. This introduced a gene from *Bacillus thuringiensis* (a soil bacterium) which has a natural insecticide.

Cotton pollination work has been done by children in large numbers, and has been well-researched. Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF), an NGO that campaigns for the elimination of child labour in general, has published many reports on children's work in cottonseed pollination in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere in India (eg MVF 1998, 2005; see Morrow and Vennam 2009 for a summary). In Maharashtra state, IKEA has funded a project (2009-2013) with Save the Children to identify and withdraw children working in exploitative and harmful conditions, particularly in the cotton fields. Multi-national seed manufacturers have recently become involved in interventions to eliminate child labour (see eg Venkateswarlu and

da Corta 2005). The general debates are important background to understanding the political economy of children's involvement in cotton production.

Further, in the past, a local belief that children undertaking pollination work resulted in a good crop reportedly encouraged seasonal child labour (MVF 1998). However, the reasons for preferring children are now largely financial. Child labour is cheaper, and the nature of the work means that it is completed more quickly by children. When engaged outside family-owned land, children are paid lower wages than adults. In 2007, parents explained that the height of the cotton plants is also a factor. Children are the 'right height', whereas adults have to bend down.

Research setting

Poompuhar *gram panchayat* is in the rural mandal of Mahabubnagar district of A.P. The population approximately is 2040 (though this fluctuates with seasonal migration for work) (Galab et al. 2008). The dominant social group is Backward Caste (BC) and Hindu,² though there are a number of Scheduled Caste households. The main occupations are agriculture and daily wage labour. In 2007, the main crop was cotton seed. The village is covered by a range of government poverty alleviation policies (see Morrow & Vennam, 2009). Attitudes to girls' education are traditional, and parents, and most elders, including the *sarpanch* (village head), feel that it is not safe to send girls outside the community for higher education (Vennam & Komanduri 2008). So girls' education continues only until Class 10, the level up to which it is available within the community.

Methods

Theoretically, Young Lives understands children as social agents in their own right, whose social relationships are worthy of study. This approach emphasises the diversity of childhoods, acknowledges children as informants in research about their

² Scheduled Castes (SCs) are the lowest in the traditional caste structure and were earlier considered to be 'untouchables'. In rural Andhra Pradesh, SC colonies are located separately, usually away from the main villages. SCs have been subjected to discrimination for years and had no access to basic services, including education. National legislation aims to prohibit 'untouchability' and discrimination. Backward castes or classes (BCs) are people belonging to a group of castes who are considered to be 'backward' in view of the low level in the caste structure.

lives, and moves beyond psychologically-based models that construct childhood as a period of socialisation (Prout and James 1990). It is increasingly acknowledged that ‘research about children’s lives is... essential if policies and programmes are to become more responsive and relevant to their concerns’ (Boyden and Ennew 1997: 10). Methods include conversations, group discussions, drawings and other activity-based methods such as child-led community walks, and subsequent one-to-one interviews with children, their parents or carers, and other key figures in the community (see Crivello et al. 2009). The following themes have been explored: children’s ‘well-being’ translated as *manchi jeevitham* (a good life), ‘transitions’, (explained locally as ‘changes’, ‘moving from one setting to another’, ‘new experiences’), and services children and their families utilise. Collective consent is initially sought at the community level, care is taken to explain the study to children and parents, and verbal consent is obtained. Participants’ willingness to continue is regularly sought with the reminder that they can disengage whenever they want to (see Morrow 2009).

Children’s work in Poompuhar

By the time children are 10 or 11 years old, they are expected to engage in work at home and on farms. Almost all children are engaged in household activities, though the type of work varies according to gender and duration, and girls perceived themselves as doing more work than boys. Girls are involved in washing utensils, sweeping the floor, washing clothes, and cooking, while boys are generally engaged in outside work such as fetching water and provisions. Children consider these as routine household activities and not as ‘work’. During group exercises exploring their time-use, they ranked daily activities: they liked school the most, household activities were second. They liked farm work the least. Children from land-owning households are also required to work on family land during the peak agricultural season. They have to balance school, home and farm work for two to three months, from the end of August to November, when school restarts after the summer break. Unable to strike a balance between the three, they miss school and then find it difficult to continue school. Existing government and NGO services are geared towards children who have dropped out of school, but children who miss school because of seasonal agricultural work receive little attention from policy makers (Vennam and Komanduri 2008).

The next section focuses on accounts from two girls, describing the situation in 2007, then exploring what had changed by 2008. Ramya was 12 years old when first interviewed in 2007, and comes from a family in the fifth quintile (least poor)³. She is one of five children, four girls and a boy. Ramya's father works as the village secretary for the neighbouring *panchayat* (considered to be a powerful position locally, as most decisions about social protection are made by secretaries). Her mother manages the home with support from her paternal grandmother, who lives next door. The father makes the major decisions about the children, though the mother is consulted. Apart from the father's job, the family depends on agricultural production from their land. In 2007, like most children in the village, Ramya worked in the fields from August to November, and the main crop was cottonseed. She described her day as starting at 7am and going on until 7pm. Being the youngest of four girls, she was spared from doing the bulk of the household work, though she described sweeping up, fetching the milk and numerous other chores. Ramya understands the need for her to work on the family's farm, and she is open about her dislike towards farm work, as it is difficult and makes her tired. She also considered it to be an obstacle to her ambitions.

In 2007, Ramya described going to the fields on an 'empty stomach', plucking the flowers for half an hour:

then we cross the flowers from 8 till 12... we usually have breakfast at 11am. My mother gets it, she follows us to the fields with the food, then we eat, and work on flower buds. It will be 6:30pm, we will pack up all the things and return home, all of us come together, mother, me, aunt, brothers, sisters (i.e. cousins) and my sister and three daily wage workers together.

Ramya says:

It is very hard... we walk every day, I feel pain in the legs too... we have to do the same work everyday, even if it is hot. At that time I cover my head with a towel, sometimes I get a fever, but mostly it is only hands and legs that ache.

³ The Young Lives sample is divided into five quintiles (groups of equal size) according to their per capita household expenditure, where the lowest quintile (bottom 20 percent) of families are considered to be the 'poorest' and those in the highest quintile (top 20 percent) 'non-poor'. Household expenditure is considered the most appropriate poverty indicator. It is calculated as the sum of the estimated value (approximated to the past 30 days i.e. a month), of food (bought + home grown + gifts/transfers) and non-food (excluding durables such as furniture, gold jewellery and one-off expenditures). This monthly figure is then divided by household size.

I feel tired of the long day, and do not feel like doing anything after reaching home. Not even studying.

She described watching TV in the neighbourhood, having supper, and then studying for half an hour, then going to bed. 'I try to read, but I feel tired; I miss school, so I don't know what is happening at school.' Her father is too busy to help her with homework. Her mother understands her problems about work: 'If I say "I don't like to go to the field", everyday, she understands it and does not force me. If I want to go to school, she will allow me. But she doesn't let me during the cotton crop season.' She explains that cotton pollination work is a daily job, and involves a lot of labour. 'If it is done by [too] few people, it is of no use, buds remain uncrossed and seeds explode and the crop goes to waste, that's why we have to go everyday.'

In 2007, Ramya mentioned her involvement in tobacco work. Children are involved in harvesting the leaves, then stitching them together to be dried. The family had started growing tobacco the previous year. Ramya said that only two households in the village were growing tobacco. Tobacco work involved going to the field some days and to school on others. The season for tobacco harvesting coincided with the end of the academic year and final exams in April/May, and the season for cotton pollination coincided with the first quarter examinations.⁴ In 2008, tobacco growing had reportedly ceased.

The interviewer asked her about what she thinks about the work she does.

This field work, be it cotton or tobacco work. ... we have raised loans, we will have to repay the loans.... Father took a loan for our sisters' marriage; we performed their marriages at the same time [2 sisters were married on the same day last year]. We have taken a loan of 1 lakh rupees for their marriage. ... I have to work, though it is hard work; we have to clear the loans.

The loans are from the bank and from informal sources. She talks about the family's inability to hire labourers, as this would increase expenses. Ramya had a clear understanding of financial arrangements and why she needs to work.

She also described other activities she undertakes for her family:

⁴ The education system includes examinations on a quarterly basis and children are required to take quarterly, half yearly and annual exams.

I have to do all the small jobs, like going here and there to collect money given as small loan by my grandmother; they will send me to collect that money. I will have to do all that granny asks me to do; ...she will send me to the shop, she will send me to ask if anybody wants to buy blouses. My granny sells these; she has a small shop [next door].

She also takes care of her sister's baby (4 months old in 2007) while her sister does domestic work. In terms of household chores, as mentioned, Ramya helps with sweeping: 'I don't feel bad about it, it's our home, it looks good clean, *it should be clean and tidy and its our job and should be done by us only*, that's why I like to do it, everybody at home *has to take on responsibility*' (emphasis added).

Ramya talked about how obedient girls are compared to boys: 'we immediately go and do the work without being told repeatedly'. She also described how her work load has increased because of her sisters' marriage:

I did not have much work [before] then, as both my elder sisters were with us. I never used to go to the field. Those two sisters used to go; me and another sister did not go. But now they are in their in-laws' houses, hence we have to pluck buds now.

When asked for her views about school, she described how she dislikes being scolded and beaten if homework is not done or attendance is irregular.

I feel very bad when teacher scolds me. I like to be regular in school, do home work, but I can't do it all, it is difficult. But there is no choice, I have to do all the work that mother and grandmother say. Now that my two sisters are married I have to share work; they say I am now old enough to do all this.

When asked 'did [the work] affect your studies and seventh grade examinations?', Ramya replied, 'it affected [them] a lot. I would have been in school regularly, prepared better and scored more marks in the examination'. She also described her plans for education. She wants to study up to tenth grade, and would like to become a teacher, 'if the people in the family let [me], I will study until degree'.

In 2007, Ramya expressed strong opinions about school and work, and said: 'Children of my age should be in school only, no work, no field work. They can help in domestic work at home, because this is petty work and can be easily managed... *We should help* at home, if alone it is very strenuous for mothers at home, we have to share the work with the mother' (emphasis added). She talked about doing her home

work at school: ‘if I have time after the school hours, I will complete it there. All friends do it together, and then return home. We help each other’. She also described how she ‘used to play *thokkudubilla* (local game) but we don’t play much now... , because since last year we have new work of cotton crop’. If a girl looks, or is, ‘grown up’ (which means locally that she has reached puberty) she no longer ‘plays’ but is expected to work.

Harika’s account raises similar themes to Ramya’s, but in 2007 her work roles were compounded by her father’s ill-health. Harika comes from a family in the third quintile. She is the only daughter and has one older and one younger brother. The older brother has been fostered by close relatives, so for all practical purposes, Harika is the oldest child in the family. Being the only girl, she does all the household work. In 2007, her father was immobile due to a leg injury as a result of an accident. Harika’s mother had shouldered the responsibility and spent a large part of the day at the family fields. Harika did most of the household work, while also attending to the cotton fields. Like Ramya, and indeed most children of her age in the village, she missed school during the peak season at the cotton fields. She found it difficult to manage school and work, and she also found it difficult to perform well in examinations. She described feeling forced to attend the examinations to meet the school requirement so that she can retain her enrolment at school – she said, ‘Sir told [me] to write the exam, otherwise my name will be deleted. So, I thought, I have to write.’

In her interview, Harika described her daily routine:

I wake up at 6’o clock in the morning and sweep the floor. I sweep the floor and wash the dishes. I will bring water. After bringing water, I will brush my teeth... drink the tea.... I do study for a while and after studying... I go to the [fields]. After doing the crossing work, I come back at 11 o’ clock and take a bath. I will study for some time and come to school at 2’o clock... after eating lunch. I will come to the school and write the exam and go back home at 4.30 p.m. After going I will press the cotton and sweep the floor and cook the food for night. Aa... I only cook the food for night...

She said: ‘If I go to the fields, I won’t get an education’. Later in the interview, Harika said: ‘children must not be forced to do hard work from childhood itself. If they only study, it’s nice and their lives will be good.’ Like Ramya, Harika wants to become a teacher: ‘I can educate the children and tell them good things’.

Parents' views

Ramya's parents downplayed the amount of time she spends working, explaining that that 'labourers don't turn up' was one reason for children having to work. Her mother, however, considers Ramya's work to be inevitable because of the need to reduce the cost of hiring labour. Her mother complained that Ramya is a weak child and can't work for long, and that it is better if she gets educated. Harika's mother, on the other hand, talked openly about the cotton pollination work. She explained:

It is our work... Who else will teach them? She will learn by watching me. All children are taught by us... and they come along with us to the fields and then they watch us. ..., and then they do it on their own later... She feels sad, going to do cotton work... she says 'why are you making us do the work? You are spoiling our studies...' we don't listen... she will be angry. She does [the work] well.

When asked why the pollination work is done by young girls, Harika's mother replies:

small children will do well. It is child's work.... Older people cannot do it. They don't do it well. The seeds won't come, they won't set, and the fruit will not remain... Older people do other tasks like planting and cutting.

She also described how children 'complete [the work] as play, moving quickly from one plant to the other. Adults cannot work so quickly. The coverage is therefore higher and on time, as the pollination has to be completed each day before noon. As a result of good coverage, the crop is good'. Harika's mother said that while 'people are now more alert and prefer to send children to school', circumstances meant that Harika's work was needed. In 2007, Harika's mother said:

Recently, since two months, she is not going properly [to school]. Her father got his leg fractured, we actually felt very bad since we can't send her to school. He has to be taken care of. When I go to the fields, Harika takes care of him. If she is at the fields, I take care of him. Now she is attending exams at the school.

Harika's mother explained that Harika also looks after her younger brother. Harika also does the cooking:

now she can cook one kilo of rice, but doesn't know how to cook two, three kilos of rice. She cooks well. She can do it now, like getting water, cleaning utensils, and all, she does it well. She cleans well.

In 2007, all children from the Young Lives qualitative sample who were engaged in farm work said they would prefer to attend school full time without missing it for long

periods. However, they did not mind their involvement in household activities and did not consider it to be work. They thought of it as part of their daily routine and saw it as their responsibility to share the household chores to keep the family going.

What has changed in Round 2?

A year later, there had been several changes in Ramya and Harika's situations. Harika had obtained a scholarship of Rs 6,000/- a year, payable conditional on completing school, that is, continuing education beyond Class 10⁵. Generally, children were doing less cotton pollination work. Ramya explained that she still does cotton pollination work but her workload has decreased, and she had only spent a month in pollination work. She confirmed that less cottonseed was grown, and vegetables and groundnuts instead, because they take less water. Ramya's mother explained that most households were now using Bt cotton which produces fewer flowers. Her mother also explained that hiring labour has become more expensive because of increased availability of work with the introduction of NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), ongoing canal work, and railway bridge work. As a result the villagers had to increase wages. They are also required to give an advance of Rs.5000/- to Rs.10000/- (£60-£120) to labourers. Labourers do not want work on farms with low wages.

Harika's situation had also improved, because her father has recovered, and 'he is going to the field now... I used to go in his place every morning'. She says things are much better:

we had a financial problem, we didn't sow anything in the fields as our father was sick. Now we are doing so, we are growing crops all over now, we don't have any problem now.

She is now attending school more regularly, and had missed 15 days of school compared to the previous year when she had missed school for more than two months. She said this was because this year her family cropped half the number of acres for cotton, and they used new cotton seeds. Harika now monitors the workers while attending to work herself, effectively replacing her mother when she is away at

⁵ These scholarships are to encourage education and are given to various groups (SCs, girls) through different programmes. This particular scholarship was based on an aptitude test for which Harika was coached by the head teacher.

market selling vegetables. She explained that she is absent once in two or three weeks: ‘when my mother goes out somewhere, when she goes out of the village. I have to go to the farm ...’⁶.

Discussion

A number of factors need to be taken into account in attempting to explain these changes. Firstly, instructions from state and district government are to ensure that all children are in school. Secondly, the *sarpanch* and the local government were keen on reducing child labour in cotton seed pollination. The Mandal Revenue Officer, the school headmaster, *sarpanch* and teachers went around the village informing parents not to send their children to the cotton fields. The headmaster has also introduced a fine of Rs.5/- for every day of absence at school. Alternatively children had to clean the school premises. In order to avoid this, the children plead with their parents not to send them to the cotton fields. As Ramya explains: ‘Children are now saying, “we will not work, we will go to school”, so this time they have a limited plantation’.

What do we learn from children’s accounts? Ramya and Harika show a clear understanding of their work roles, their domestic tasks, and of the difficulties they face in combining school and work. The girls’ expressed desire to support their mothers highlights the interdependency of family members, particularly mothers and daughters, and the ways in which children contribute to the domestic economy. Ramya describes how obedient girls are, and how housework is ‘our job’, and clearly recognises her own responsibilities to her family, reflecting her agency and connectedness to her family. Child labour/work is conceptualised as problematic by policy-makers because it is perceived as conflicting with the over-riding aim of ‘being a child’, in other words, to become educated. From the point of view of parents’ and perhaps children themselves, attending school in environments where children’s work is required is not straightforward. Harika’s mother recognises that while children should indeed be educated, girls, in particular, need practical skills so that they can manage households effectively. As she says: ‘It’s good to learn [how to work], later on there should not be any complaint that she does not know the work, Being a girl, she should know about everything’.

⁶ However, during the 10 days the team stayed in the village, she missed school for three days to work, as her mother was going to the market

At any rate, girls are clearly an important source of labour, and cotton pollination is but one form of work among many that children describe. Family circumstances affect children's work, and the intensity and amount of work fluctuate. From Ramya's point of view, in 2007, her workload had increased because her two older sisters had married the previous year. Harika's workload had increased when her father could not work because of his injured leg. A year later, their workloads had decreased. However, it would be wrong to suggest that this means that these two girls have successfully made a 'transition' out of work and into school, because they both continue to work. It would also be wrong to generalise from these two cases to all children in the community. Other girls continue to work in cotton pollination in Poompuhar. Further visits to the site in 2010 and 2013 will establish the extent of children's continued involvement in cotton pollination.

Conclusion

What can Young Lives add to what is already known about child labour and children's economic activities? Longitudinal qualitative research reveals how sensitive children's work is to changing circumstances – food price rises, fluctuating or falling demand for cotton, climate (cotton requires more water than vegetables), availability of educational grants, and family health status. Previous attention has focused on children's involvement in a particular sector of agricultural production (cottonseed pollination), rather than on children's work holistically. We have noted the dynamic nature of agricultural production, with a reported decline in cotton seed production, an increase in vegetable production, and an increase in school attendance, at least by Harika and Ramya. Young Lives can explore how children's roles change over time. Further, the involvement of Ramya and Harika in Young Lives may itself have a profound effect on their aspirations and roles.

Finally, a focus on children's individual situation within specific communities should not distract us from a more representative discussion about the situation of children in cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh and other parts of India. The apparent shift in cottonseed production towards vegetable farming needs to be understood in the broader context of shifting global economic processes, though these are not

straightforward to trace in a micro-level study, and much greater attention to the larger political economy of cotton production is required.

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