

Children Combining Work and Education in Cottonseed Production in Andhra Pradesh

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The topic of child labour and children's cottonseed production in India has received considerable attention from researchers, non-governmental organisations and policy-makers. Much of this literature focuses on cotton pollination, however, while other aspects of children's work have been overlooked. Furthermore, while recent interventions have targeted children who have dropped out of school, those who combine school with work in the cotton fields are not covered by existing programmes and receive little policy attention. In parts of rural Andhra Pradesh, children work in the cotton fields for two to three months of the school year. These children are enrolled in school, but miss classes and are unable to meet their school requirements during the peak agricultural season from the end of August to November.

Background

Studies during the 1990s in Andhra Pradesh showed that the majority of workers in cottonseed pollination were girls between the ages of 7 and 14. Cotton pollination is highly labour intensive work, and cultural ideas held that pre-pubescent girls were suitable for pollination work because they had not yet begun menstruation, which is considered impure for all important religious and land-based activities. Because of labour shortages, however, this belief is no longer widely held and older girls also work in pollination today. The local reasons given for child work in cottonseed production are mainly economic and pragmatic, based on children's height and dexterity. Children are a cheap source of labour, and previous research has found that many children engaged in cottonseed production are debt-bonded labourers who work to repay loans taken out by their families.

Although India has not ratified the two ILO conventions on child labour, it has numerous laws relating to child labour. As in most countries, however, national legislation restricts the formal employment of children, but is not effective in many circumstances. Child labour thus needs to be seen in the context of local understandings of childhood and the contributions that children make to their families.

Methodology

This paper examines the effects of cottonseed production work on children's schooling and health, and its implications for children's rights. The findings are based on Young Lives research with children in one site in Andhra Pradesh, and interviews with their parents, health workers and teachers. The authors present case-studies of two girls, aged 12 and 13, drawing on their views, accounts and descriptions of their work roles, their domestic tasks, and the difficulties of combining work and school. The paper also draws on interviews with their mothers, their teacher and a local health worker. The authors analyse two prevalent approaches to child labour, based on children's needs and children's rights, and consider the implications of each of these approaches to inquiry into child labour in India.

Findings

The evidence from Young Lives research in Andhra Pradesh reveals pronounced distinctions in children's labour activities based on gender and age, as well as tension between labour and school attendance. Accounts from the girls in the two case-studies show that children place great importance on attending school, and see farm work as a major obstacle to their ambitions. The findings also show that child work is not necessarily directly caused by poverty and is instead often linked to expectations about children's activities. The accounts of both girls indicate a clear understanding of their contribution to the domestic economy, and the interdependence of family members. The accounts also reveal the dilemma for children of trying to balance school and work as they attempt to fulfil their obligations in both arenas and to please families and teachers.

Few existing studies have attempted to talk to children about their views on their work. A child-centred perspective allows for improved understanding of the effects of labour on children's well-being and development, and balances these effects with child and family perspectives on the advantages of work.

