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CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE RURAL WAGE LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT

Normally children's economic value in peasant economy is analysed in terms of their contribution to family farm production. But fcr households with small or no land holding and few assets, opportunities for realizing the economic value of children are restricted. Children from thesee households can make an economic contribution to their families by participating in the wage labour market. Amongst a sample of one hundred poor rural households, fifty-four had children of working age. In thirty-seven of these children worked for earnings off the family farm and contributed thirty-four percent of households income; in the other seventeen, households children did not work. This difference in participation is analysed in relation to economic need of and opportunities for child labour participation in the wage labour market. Finally, the need for a more informed understanding of how landlessness or near landlessness may affect fertility *is* discussed.

I. INTRODUCTION

Conventional analysis of peasant farm economy explains unrestricted fertility in terms of the value of children for their labour power and as a source of security, in old age and in various situations of family distress. More children are valued not only because of their economic importance but as a means of expanding their families' local power as well. John Caldwell (1978) has termed peasant economy as familial based economy. He shows that in the familial mode of production, material advantage and advantage in terms of power are associated with large family size. The latter again is significant largely for its potential in securing material advantage. More children facilitate division of labour, allowing families to utilise their labour most efficiently. They also improve their families' economic welfare by enabling them not to hire paid labourers. According to Caldwell, "High fertility is advantageous to the peasant family as a whole and to its most powerful members. As long as the internal relations of the familial mode: of production remain intact, marital fertility will not' be restricted for the purposes of limiting family size."

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It is widely agreed that children make a significant contribution in the peasant economy but it is difficult to measure it as their labour is often unpaid. From an early age, children by taking care of cattle, looking after younger sibings, collecting fuel and fetching water, release their adult family members for more productive (or anyway less menial) work. Mead Cain's study in two Bangladesh villages has shown that children become economically useful from as early as six years and by age twelve the average male child becomes a net producer (Cain 1977). In this cross-class analysis Cain has shown that children from richer households start working at an earlier age than children from poorer households. This was more evident in the case of activities that reuquired some assets. This implies that households with more assets particularly of land and livestock, are in a more advantageous position to utilise their child labour than poorer households without such assets.

In fact there is a close statistical relationship on aggregate data, between farm size and family size and this is thought to be related to demand for family farm labour. However, a major explanation of this apparent relationship (Mellor 1978) lies in socio-economic related differences in fertility, infant mortality and patterns of family nucleation rather than any specific plan, for planned parenthood is still very uncommon (Bangladesh Fertility Survey 1978). Nevertheless, even if family size itself is not explained by farm size, the opportunities for realization of the economic value of children are more readily available when the farm unit can absorb them. Children are cheap to raise in all rural households but may be cheaper in farm households which have the capacity to absorb their child labour power. Whilst the material advantages gained by family farms through exploitation of child labour are a well established fact. There are many rural households that do not have sufficient family farm opportunities to absorb their child labour. Children from poorer households on farms without the capacity to absorb their labour power have to be found wage employment to realise their economic value. In this paper a preliminary attempt has been made to understand when and how these families realise their children's economic value through wage and other non family farm employment.

II. THE BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Data presented in this paper is from that collected in relation to the IDS project research on women (see Appendix). Our sample consisted of one hundred households drawn from the lowest strata in eight villages (four from Chandina thana, Comilla and four from Modhupur thana, Tangail). Information on income earning activities of all family members from these households was collected on a weekly recall basis over

a period of one year during June 1979 to July 1980. The sample was designed to undertake a comparative study of differences in female wage labour participation amongst the poor rural households. It contained an equal number of households with and without female wage labourers and our basic approach to the comparative analysis was to look at the labour-consumer balance as the chief determinant of participation rates (Begum and Greeley 1979).

In a situation of increasing landlessness and falling real wages that decrease the consumption value of labour effort the consequence must be either reductions in consumption or increases in labour time. However, if the previous labour-consumer equilibrium was in fact a point of minimum subsistence production then the family has to provide more labour, albeit at a lower rate of return, to maintain that subsistence equilibrium. This increasing labour participation, following the simple principle of labour-consumer balance, is a natural consequence of the process of poverty deepening in Bangladesh and increasing female demand for wage employment is inevitable. There are obvious parallels between child labour participation and female labour participation when the labour-consumer balance is made explicit ; it explains when and why they seek work. Children participate in wage employment to supplement their families income when incomes of adult members become grossly inadequate to meet their consumption requirement. Our examination of differences in child labour participation supports this relatively simple approach to explaining different participation rates although we draw special attention to the influence of regional variation in population density, skewness of land distribution, employment opportunities and infrastructure development.

Children are economic actors for a short period in the household's life cycle. We have considered all children from nine to fifteen years old to be in the working age group, because our data showed nine years as the minimum age at which children were hired by others and for the same task they were getting a lower daily wage than adults upto the age of fifteen or sixteen. In Cain's villages measurable economic activity started from the age of six but this was in family farm activities and, as both he and Miranda (1980) point out, poorer households enjoy their children's earnings for a shorter period than richer households. According to Cain (1977) "A child's productive life cycle can be conceptualized as having four distinct phases. First is a period when the child is completely dependent. Second, there is a period during which a child is increasingly economically active but produces less than he or she consumes. Third is a period during which a child produces more than he or she consumes but less than an adult. Finally, a child becomes an adult or an adult equivalent worker". It is during the second and third phases that child wage labour may occur.

In fact in our one hundred sample households, forty-six households did not have child wage earnings because there were either no children or children were too young, or there were only grown up children. However, the remaining fifty-four households had children of working age and all these households were in similar positions in their life cycle. The mean age of children of both sexes was a bit more than twelve years.

Amongst these fifty-four households only thirty seven had child wage earnings. Children from these thirty-seven households constituted forty-three percent of their families total labour force and contributed thirty-four percent of their households total income ; a major contrast to the seventeen households with children of working age that had no child earnings (Table 1).

TABLE 1 MODAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH AND WITHOUT CHILD WAGE EARNINGS

		Comilla		Modhupur	
Total Households		50		50	
No. of HH with working age children		28		26	
		Child off-farm earning		Child off-farm earning	
		with	without	with	without
Total No. of Households		14	14	23	3
No. of children of working age	Male	17	11	30	1
	Female	7	13	17	4
No. of children working	Male	13	—	24	—
	Female	3	—	14	—
No. of HH with Adult Male present		12	12	19	3
Average annual HH labour earnings (Taka)		2860	2357	2694	2955
Average HH earnings by children (%)		29.57	—	36.51	—

III. INTER-AND INTRA-REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTICIPATION

A significant difference was observed between the two regions regarding the proportion of households with children of working age that had child wage earnings. In Comilla villages, twenty eight households (56%) out of fifty, had children of working age and of these fourteen reported a total of sixteen children working, thirteen male and three female. In Modhupur villages twenty six households (52%) out of fifty reported children of working age and of these twenty three reported a total of 38 children working, of which twenty four were male, nearly double Comilla, and fourteen female, nearly five times greater than Comilla. Within regions, we felt that differential rates in participation may be explained by differences in land rights, crop earnings, and type and level of participation in the adult labour force but first it was clearly necessary to explain the difference between regions in participation. Noticeable differences were observed between the regions in the type of child labour activities. In Comilla, female children did household and post harvest work, gleaned paddy from the field and did other field work such as guarding the wheat field during daytime and harvesting Kaun and Mustard. All male children in the Comilla villages were involved in agricultural work and they worked on a very regular basis. There was not a signle case of permanent or yearly labour. In Modhupur villages three girls were working as yearly labourers and eleven girls collected firewood from the forest four miles away and sold it in the village or in the market. They sold fruits and vegetables in the market place as well. Amongst male children out of twenty four, seventeen worked as yearly labourers and the remaining seven were involved mainly in non-agricultural activities such as in the brick field work or as a carpenter's helper, warehouse coolie or rickshaw puller. The higher rate of participation and the availability of more regular jobs such as yearly labour in Modhupur implies that more skewed distribution of land generated increased remunerative child labour opportunities. In Comilla villages land distribution is less unequal with seventy eight percent of households owning land as compared to sixty one per cent in Modhupur village and population density is one third greater than in Modhupur. The irregularity of work and low participation rate in Comilla seems to imply that as most households own only small amounts of land, their family labour utilises most productive labour opportunities on the family farm. It is only during peak seasons like transplanting, weeding and harvesting that households hire extra labour. More equal distribution of land and small land holdings generate increased family labour time and reduced hired labour opportunities.

Out of seventeen households that had no child earnings three were from Modhupur and fourteen were from Comilla. In the three Modhupur households, two had a village artisan and one a rickshaw puller as their heads, who brought sufficient income to the

family ; two of these households had two twelve year old girls and one had a fourteen year old boy who was physically too weak to work. These cases are exceptions, probably largely due to their slightly higher and more stable male labour earnings, to the general pattern amongst the poorest in Modhupur of regular participation of children in wage labour. Children's wage labour opportunities appear relatively stable and common in Modhupur and it is in Comilla that the marked differences in participation need further analysis.

There were fourteen households in each category i.e., those with and without child wage earnings in Comilla. We compared differences between these categories in five factors : crop earnings, land rights, size of the adult labour force, female participation and heads' occupation, each of which might explain to some extent the differential in children's participation rate (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 COMILLA HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN OF WORKING AGE

Type of Household		Working	Non-working
Average Annual crop earnings (Taka)		716	722
Average land owned (Decimals)		41.60	26
Average Land operated (Decimals)		35.66	31.55
Average adult male per household		1.21	1.50
No. of Households where women are wage labourers		12	6
Heads' Occupation (where male present)	Skilled	—	7
	Unskilled	12	5

We were seeking to explain why households with non-working children had adequate means of livelihood to meet their consumption requirements or at least reached a standard which the working households failed to achieve without child labour. First, on crop earnings we were disappointed for although households with non-working children had relatively higher crop earnings than households with working children the difference was not significant. Second, households with working children operated fourteen per cent less than they owned and households with non-working children, operated twenty one per cent more land than they owned. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusion from this although it does suggest—since adult males were present in all households that leased out and therefore shortage of labour power is unlikely to be the reason—that previous economic distress had forced the mortgage of family farm land in the one case and that, in the non-working households where net land operated is larger than land owned, sufficient assets remained to lease in land on mortgage or share-crop. Third, the more adequate income of the non-working households may be further explained by the fact that they have a larger adult male labour force ; fourteen working households had seventeen working males as compared to twenty one in the identical number of non-working households. Fourth, the difference in number of women working for wages from these two categories of households was significant. Twelve households out of fourteen with child wage earnings reported adult female labour as compared to six from households with no child wage earnings. This one might expect given the relative shortage of adult men but it implies that households with child wage earnings were worse off as more households from this category relied on women's earnings to provide part of their income ; whilst women's wage labour opportunities may be less seasonal than men's their real wages are considerably lower. Fifth, there was a noticeable difference between working and non-working households in the occupation of the head. Fifty percent of non-working households had a skilled labourer, such as a carpenter, a fisherman or a rickshaw puller as their heads as compared to none in the working households. These households with a (relatively) skilled male as their head had a larger and more stable income coming to the family and thereby did not need to hire out their children.

Finally, we should note that these factors explain differences in male more than female child participation for the better status households in rural Bangladesh enjoy if their female members do not need to go out to work applies equally to female children. In Comilla, only three out of sixteen households with female children of working age had female child wage earnings. In particular household will, if at all possible, avoid sending their mature but unmarried female children to work because of subsequent difficulties they may face in arraging these girls' weddings and because of their sexual security. Female children are hired out only when their income becomes necessary to

obtain even stark minimum needs. We had two households in our Modhupur villages with three grirls of eleven to thirteen years old who used to go to the forest regularly to collect firewood for sale. In one case the father was dead and in the other case the head was abnormal and was away from his family most of the time ; effectively, in both cases no adult male was around. In both households, even though their income was very important to their family, their mothers were very much concerned about finding out alternative ways to bring income to the family so that the girls did not need to go to the forest. This observation supports the view that the maintenance of the social norm of 'Purdah' and other socially expected behaviour, though strongly desired, depends very much on the individual household's economic condition.

IV. CONCLUSION : IMPLICATIONS FOR FERTILITY POLICY

Our explanations suggest that child wage earnings become increasingly important where adult earnings are less stable. This implies that increasing landlessness may provide stronger reasons for high fertility, a substitute for land security. Arthur and McNicoll (1978) argued that social and economic pressures are determining factors of current high fertility levels, though fertility behaviour varies some what by class. For the poorest households lack of economic security overrides all other concerns. To these households children are profitable as an investment although, as Mead Cain (1980) pointed out, even if in a cost-benefit analysis, high fertility is a bad investment in terms of the income that children bring to their family, it has got further positive value for parental support during old age and as an insurance against distress sale of assets.

Any discussion of fertility behaviour must take into account the socio-economic setting within which individual demographic behaviour takes place and conventional analysis of peasant farm demographic transition does not deal adequately with these landless and near-landless households who are rapidly becoming a massive majority of all rural households in Bangladesh. As pointed out by McNicoll (1978), "One direction of fertility policy is the effort to separate the environment of fertility decision making from that of economic life in gneneral." Arthur and McNicoll state that, "The pattern of social organisation in rural Bangladesh...runs through such lines of social influence as kin and patronage groups...whose chief concerns are in serving the economic and political interest of the dominant families within them. High fertility poses little threat to those interests." In fact, poor households with many children are in a better position to secure their patron-client relationship in a highly competitive labour market. It is very doubtful that, woithout some alternative security, these households will be encouraged to limit their family size for children are very often their only instrument to attain a degree of security. With the huge contribution that children make to

their families' incomes it is likely that stable employment and (thereby) a degree of economic security to the adult work force are prerequisites for reduced family size and mere provision of contraceptives will be of little benefit.

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APPENDIX

The IDS Post-Harvest Project in Bangladesh

The writer is a sociologist working as a Research Officer for the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex on a research project concerned with the need for and consequences of technical change in rice processing at village level. The research, a three-year project which started in July, 1978, is based in the Ministry of Agriculture in Dacca and is being undertaken in collaboration with the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.

The team is addressing itself to three inter-related tasks.

A. The estimation of food losses in traditional post-harvest practices and comparing them to the losses incurred in so-called improved techniques, including mechanical milling and thereshing and experimental driers.

B. The evaluation of the income distribution effects of these technical changes. These are largely determined by the cost reduction, the changes in ownership pattern, and employment displacement effects of new techniques. The displacement of poor rural women is widely believed to be a very significant cost of the introduction of rice mills. The team has undertaken a study including a year long incomes survey of differences in female wage labour participation amongst poor rural households. The sample contained an equal number of households with and without female wage labourers. The team has also completed a technical and economic evaluation of the rice mills.

C. Examining the need for intervention in response to the social and economic implications of the existing pattern of technical change. A major area of concern here is the institutional requirements for the organisation of programmes to promote more egalitarian ownership patterns of the new machines by giving particular attention to poorest rural women, who are being displaced by new technologies, as a "special target group".