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Contract Farming in India: Impacts on Women and Child Workers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globalisation in many rural parts of the developing world is leading to an increase in contract farming arrangements. Under these arrangements, landowners or tenants have contracts with agribusiness marketing and/or processing firms who specify prices, timing, quality and quantity/acreage of the produce to be delivered. Workers employed by contract producers tend to experience poor terms and conditions, especially women workers, and there is an increasing incidence of child labour.

This paper draws on case studies of hybrid cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh and vegetable farming in Punjab to examine the labour conditions in contract farming in India. It argues that agriculture is becoming increasingly 'feminised' as men move out of the sector more quickly than women, and as women become the preferred labour type for many employers. While these new labour arrangements have led to marginal increases in real income for some women workers, they have also changed relationships between workers and employers, workers and work, and led to differentiation within labour. Women's wages are generally lower than men's, working conditions poorer and their bargaining power more limited. Of greater concern is the issue of child labour; one of the major problems in contract farming throughout the developing world. India is one of the main users of child labour in the Asian region, with almost 80% of working children employed in the agricultural sector. The majority of these child workers are girls; preferred by employers for their docility, obedience and 'nimble fingers'.

The cottonseed case study reveals that children, mainly girls, who might be as young as six, work from 8.30 am to 6-7 pm. These children might be continuously employed for six to nine months a year. Yet their employers or contractors have no requirement to take care of them; if any health problems arise, the children are simply replaced with a new group. With no social security obligations, there is hardly any cost involved for the employers. Children miss out on their schooling to work in the fields, yet child labour under contracting is not subject to any legal or public disapproval.

The author argues for the need to take a gender perspective to address the whole question of a changing agrarian production structure under contract farming, especially issues associated with transfer of skills, choice of technology, organisation of labour, working conditions and terms of work. He suggests that banning child labour is not the answer; instead conditions for these children need to be made more tolerable, and their education and skills need to be built so as to release them and their families from the vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation. He also calls for industry-regulated codes of conduct, along with legal provisions, to increase the voice and influence of contract labourers.

CONTRACT FARMING IN INDIA: IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND CHILD WORKERS

Sukhpal Singh

Globalisation and liberalisation are likely to have the greatest impact on the rural poor through their influence on the agricultural sector, terms of trade, availability and cost of inputs, and new investments in the agribusiness sector. Technological progress in farming can help the rural poor by raising farm productivity, lowering food prices, increasing employment, and reducing farming risk. But the role and influence of multinational corporations (MNCs) in food production and trade will, as an institutional mechanism, determine the exact impact of globalisation on the rural poor, who are mostly from the labouring classes. Contract farming (described below) promotes participation of domestic firms and MNCs in farming, and is seen as the ‘new investment’ aspect of globalisation (Ramamurthy, 2000; Killick, 2001).

Under contract farming, landowners or tenants have contracts with agribusiness marketing and/or processing firms, who specify prices, timing, quality and quantity/acreage of the produce to be delivered. The arrangement may include the supply of inputs by the agribusiness firm, who may even control and supervise farm operations in some situations. Contract farming has been practised for some time now in parts of India and there have been a few recent studies of its impacts on contracting households’ incomes (Haque, 1999; Rangi and Sidhu, 2000; Singh, 2000).¹ However, these studies rarely examine the impact of the contract farming system on labour conditions and labour relations in India. There have been only three case studies of contract farm labour in India, including one by the author, all in the last three or four years (Ramamurthy, 2000; Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001; Singh, 2003). However, lessons from many other developing countries are that employment in the agribusi-

1. This paper relies heavily on these studies for analysis and insights.

ness sector (farm production and processing/packing plants) is characterised by a lack of contracts, piece rate payment, insecure seasonal employment, gender bias, use of child labour and disregard for labour rights such as collective negotiation (Torres, 1997; Barrientos *et al.*, 1999; Barron and Rello, 2000; Saravanan, 2002).

In this paper I draw on case studies of hybrid cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh and vegetable farming in Punjab to examine the labour conditions in contract farming in India. I then make suggestions for improving working conditions and terms for those working on contract farms.

CONTRACT FARM LABOUR AND WOMEN

There have been many studies of conditions for women workers and gender discrimination in export-oriented industries across the world during the past 30 years (Lim, 1990; Pearson, 1998; Barrientos *et al.*, 1999; Balakrishnan, 2002). While some (e.g., Lim, 1990) see the employment of women in such enterprises as a natural economic process driven by business dynamics and labour family needs (as demand and supply factors respectively), others view it in more gendered frameworks and have been critical of the way female labour is treated and paid in these factories. The latter studies term the whole process of industrialisation as not only *export-led*, but also *female-led* (Pearson, 1998). However, female labour conditions in the farm sector under agribusiness expansion have not yet been subjected to similar analysis.

Agriculture is becoming increasingly 'feminised' globally as men move out of the sector more quickly than women. The reasons for increasing female representation in agriculture vary from voluntary and involuntary withdrawal of men from farming, to growing wage opportunities for women in export-oriented non-traditional crops and activities. While these new labour arrangements have led to marginal increases in real income for some women workers, they have also changed relationships between workers and employers, workers and work, and led to differentiation within labour. For example, women's wages are lower and stickier (i.e. do not rise as fast) than men's, working conditions poorer and bargaining power more limited. These are, to some extent, the result of structural factors (Mehra and Gammage, 1999). Others argue that labour markets are not only bearers of gender, they also reinforce gender inequality (Elson, 1999).

Women have increasingly been employed to do more delicate work because of their supposedly feminine traits, such as docility, obedience and nimble fingers. But these

are not natural or innate skills; rather they are social skills embedded during girls' upbringing as part of their socially defined subordinate position within society. In fact, the expanding employment of women in agribusiness has many parallels with female employment in industry, where women are also preferred for their so-called nimble fingers, and their work is insecure, badly paid, and flexible. In agribusiness, some of these aspects are the result of the nature of production in a sector characterised by seasonality, mono-cultivation and natural risk (Collins, 1993; Barrientos *et al.*, 1999; Elson, 1999).

Though there have been studies of gender impacts of contract farming within producer households (Carney, 1988; Bulow and Sorensen, 1993; Porter and Phillips-Howard, 1997; Jayaweera, 2002), such studies of labourers' households are more unusual. In many cases, rural women working in processing plants and related activities reported that employment had given them greater self-esteem and power within the household (Glover and Kusterer, 1990; Dunham, 1995). However, contract farming does lead to gender inequalities in the quantity and quality of work, as well as wages for women and children, who work longer hours as they are considered better workers, but are paid less (Collins, 1993; Porter and Phillips-Howard, 1997). Employment on contract farms is also temporary and sporadic. Some activities, such as pruning, spraying, thinning, pinching out, tying and harvesting of grapes, are reserved for women, and this work differentiation extends even to the processing sector (Torres, 1997; Barrientos *et al.*, 1999; Rath, 2003). Such 'gendering' of tasks is a problem as it can exclude women from activities that are better paid, less strenuous or less hazardous.

CHILD LABOUR AND GENDER IN INDIA

Child labour is one of the major problems in contract farming, and this is the case throughout the developing world (Porter and Phillips-Howard, 1997; Torres, 1997; Reynolds, 2002). However, no data on its global or regional magnitude are available because contract farming is practised in small pockets in each developing country. Similarly, there are no estimates of the magnitude of child labour in contract farming in India.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated there were 250 million working children in the world in the age group of 5-14 years in 1996 (cited in Nielsen and Dubey, 2002). The work participation rate of children between the ages of 10 and 14 years was as high as 14%, and in some parts of the world, such as central Africa, it was more than 32%. India is one of the main users of child

labour in the Asian region. The 1991 Census of India reported that there were 12.6 million full time and 10.4 million marginal child workers in India, with Andhra Pradesh having the highest number of child workers (15% of the total child workers in India; cited in Kar, 2002). In the 1990s, about half the child labour in rural India was concentrated in the five states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Tamilnadu (Lieten, 2002b).

Any kind of work by children under the age of 18 is often considered exploitation in developed countries. In India, however, the term ‘child labour’ applies only to children aged between 5 and 14. The *Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986* states that no child below the age of 14 shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or in any other hazardous employment (cited in Mishra, 2000).² The disaggregation of child labour into different occupational categories reveals that almost 80% of working children are in the agricultural sector (Gayatri and Chaudhri, 2002). Since child labour tends to be concentrated in agriculture, it may be reasonable to expect that the incidence of child labour will be higher in agriculturally less developed regions. But, that is not the case; Bihar state, usually referred to as an underdeveloped state, has one of the lowest child labour ratios in the country. On the other hand, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, more advanced agriculturally, have the highest incidences of child labour. Also, there is a significant correlation between child labour and economic participation rate, especially female participation rate. The states with the highest incidence of child labour are also the ones with a high per capita income and a much higher female work participation rate than many other states (Lieten, 2002a). This is because in contexts where there are extended labour opportunities yet a low degree of labour empowerment, poor families are tapped for additional labour power. Since adults usually have some form of alternative employment in such regions, child labour is more likely to be used (Lieten, 2002b).

A slight gender bias favouring employment of young girls can be seen across all states. In 1999-2000, the work force participation rate for rural female workers in the age group of 10-14 years was higher than for rural male workers in the same age group (96 per 1000 for rural females, compared with 91 for rural males). But the overall participation rate of rural females was much lower than for rural males (Sundaram, 2001). Employers/contractors prefer girls for a number of labour supply traits like docility, obedience and stability; a phenomenon which is well

2. However, agricultural work is not covered under this Act.

documented in the literature. Most of the girl labourers belong to the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe households, poor backward castes and other such communities. The lower status assigned to girls in Indian society, where male preference rules, further propels their employment in a number of activities. Even if parents do not wish to exploit their children, they are often trapped in a vicious cycle of indebtedness, bondage and other obligatory relations which compel them to send their daughters to work. Yet the employers or contractors of girl labour have no requirement to take care of these children; if any health problems arise, they are simply replaced with a new group. With no social security obligations, there is hardly any cost involved for the employers or contractors (Rustagi, 2002). Child labour under contracting is not subject to any legal or public disapproval.

CASE STUDIES

The states of Andhra Pradesh and Punjab have been pioneers in contract seed production and contract vegetable production respectively in India. These case studies bring out the gender and child labour dimensions in the practice of farm labour under the contract farming system. The case studies from Andhra Pradesh, mainly drawn from Ramamurthy (2000) and Venkateshwarlu and Corta (2002), are based on intensive field research by these authors on the labour processes, conditions and households involved in hybrid cottonseed production. The Punjab case study is mainly based on my own interactions and observations in the field as part of a larger study of contract farming in the state (Singh, 2003).

Contract cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh

In 1999-2000 Andhra Pradesh had the highest incidence of child labour in India, with 25% of children aged between 10 and 14 in the rural areas working, compared with only 9% in India as a whole (Lieten, 2002b). This was also accompanied by the highest rural female work participation rate in the state (48%), compared with only 30% in India in 1999-2000. Furthermore, 47% of the total rural employment in Andhra Pradesh in 1993-94 was casual compared with 36% for rural India as a whole. The proportion of casual employment was much higher for female labour (53%) than male labour (43%) (Dev and Mahajan, 2001). Contract farm labour is generally casual labour, though workers may be tied by advance loans.

This sets the context for the first case study: labour in contract farming of hybrid cottonseed. Three districts of Andhra Pradesh (Kurnool, Mehboobnagar and Rangareddy) account for 70% of India's cottonseed production and 97% of the

total area (28,000 acres in all) under cottonseed production in the state. About 60% of the state's seed production is destined for sale in other states of India or abroad (Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).

Contract farming for hybrid cottonseed production is practised by the MNCs, as well as national and local seed companies, who arrange contracts for seed production with local farmers either directly or through middlemen called 'seed organisers'. These companies or seed organisers supply seed to the farmers, set the price of seed before harvest, and supervise the cultivation of the crop. They also advance capital to the farmers, thus linking markets for output and credit. Hybrid cottonseed production is highly labour and capital intensive. It requires four times more capital and nine times more labour per acre than ordinary cotton production. Labour accounts for 60% of the total cost of cottonseed production, and the most labour intensive operation is cross-pollination (Box 1), which has to be done manually. It involves about 90% of the total labour input and 45% of the total capital input (Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).

Box 1. Cross-pollination

Cross-pollination begins one week after flowering and involves two separate tasks: emasculation and pollination. Buds which are expected to open the next morning are gently removed by hand, and the petals removed with the thumbnail without damaging the stigma, style or ovary. The emasculated flower is covered carefully with red plastic paper bags. Pollination has to be carried out in the morning with pollen from the male parent flowers. Crossing needs to be done as soon as flowers blossom but before the female flowers bear fruit. About two months after sowing, the plants start blooming and continue growing for seven months and throughout this time the cross-pollination tasks (emasculation and pollination) need to be done each day without fail (Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).

Most of the cross-pollination work is done by young girls who work daily from July to February. Cross-pollination and harvesting (picking cotton) are carried out for six months and four months each by the girls, with some overlap between the two tasks during November to February. The predominant task is cross-pollination, which takes 95% of their time. The involvement of young girls in cottonseed production is so high that it is estimated that 0.25 million girls are employed in this activity throughout Andhra Pradesh. In one case, on a 70-acre cottonseed farm dispersed over 14 different villages, 560 girls were employed and were monitored by 14 supervisors. The girls and their parents are contacted well in advance of the crop season and credit is extended to the parents who agree to assign their daughters to the cottonseed farmers for the season (July-February). This credit (cash/grain) advance, which ranged from Rs. 100-3000 in 1997-98 and was

obtained by more than 90% of the girls' parents, serves to interlink the credit and child labour markets; this has become an important part of the MNCs' contract farming strategy (Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).

Generally, 10-15 children are hired for 100-150 days per acre of cottonseed production. Children as young as six years old work from 8.30 am to 6-7 pm; some boys even return to the field again from 9-12 at night. The cottonseed production calendar has been standardised by companies for seed certification and marketing. This has resulted in the regimentation of children's work schedules, who are continuously employed for six to nine months a year. Children's labour is extended well beyond the standard workday (9-10 hours a day with a one hour lunch break). They are paid a piece rate of Rs. 10/- per 25 kg cotton for delinting (separating cotton from seeds), and Rs. 0.05 per pest/worm caught. Many girls also accompany their mothers for casual work. They are paid daily wages or piece rates (Ramamurthy, 2000).

Girls are preferred in cottonseed production because their wages are lower than adults', they work longer hours and more intensively, and are generally easier to control. It is reported that one girl can do the work of three adults. Though the agreement obliges these female children to work for only one season (six-nine months), in practice they tend to work for several years for the same farmer. Children are given incentives in the form of chocolates, biscuits or snacks, or prizes and bonuses like a stainless steel tiffin carrier every two years for better and faster work. They are even taken to a cinema twice a month and allowed to watch television or videos while separating cotton from seeds (a task for which they are paid on a piece rate basis). In some cases, girls are brought in from outside the local area and made to stay in the employer's house and cattlesheds throughout the season (Ramamurthy, 2000; Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).

Whilst young girls are the most popular labour type on cottonseed farms, women are also employed, though for much less of the time and for fewer tasks. The most common labour arrangement for women in contract farms is daily casual work. Though this work ensures instant wage payment, in practice the wages are held back till a task is completed. There is also increased micro management of labour time and supervision of daily wage labour by landowners, who may threaten women workers with losing their jobs or withholding their wages. Labour time is controlled by the landowners in various ways, such as going to workers' homes each morning to fetch them early for work, ensuring that lunch is brief, prolong-

ing the work day, and insisting on workers making up for any tardiness in work. Often, even the supervisors are women. In order to reduce the need for supervision and control, another labour arrangement (the piece rate system) has emerged, especially for cotton picking and weeding. The piece rate system leads to workers lengthening the workday themselves, magnifying the pace and intensity of work and even monitoring each other's performance. Daily wage labourers pick about 10-15 kg of cotton a day; those working under the piece rate system can pick as much as 20-30 kg, with some even reaching 40 kg. This leads to a change in the relationship between efficient and less efficient workers and creates a hierarchy of workers. As individual wage earnings become more uneven, average wage costs for producers are reduced (Ramamurthy, 2000).

Since the 1980s the cross-pollination work in cottonseed farms has shifted from daily adult labour to almost entirely labour by girls, who are fully bonded i.e. obliged to work only for the contract grower who advanced the loan. In fact, adult women are discouraged from cross-pollination work, and girls over 14 or those who have reached puberty at the time of agreement are not permitted to work in contract farms by the seed producers, organisers or companies. Many rumours are spread to discourage women from undertaking such work, such as that post-pubescent girls working in the fields will cause crop failure. This is no different to countries like Japan and Korea, where until the 1980s married women were prevented from working by law or strong social customs (Tzannatos, 1999).

The employment of female children in cottonseed farms has had many impacts on gender relations at the household level. For example, girls have more responsibility for household provisioning, and with more money coming in, men may withdraw from work and often resort to drinking. There are also health implications for girls involved in cottonseed work; higher levels of pesticides are used in this crop than in ordinary cotton cultivation. Girls working in cotton fields for many years have been reported to suffer menstrual problems (Venkateshwarlu and Corta, 2001).³ Further, more and more girls are being taken out of school to do such work (Ramamurthy, 2000).

3. This is similar to the conditions of grape farm workers in Maharashtra; major problems faced by women grape workers included lower backache, neck pain, headaches and menstrual problems. The women working on grape farms had the highest morbidity rate among all groups of women agricultural workers. More than 60% of the women working on grape farms reported health problems, compared with only 32% for all women workers (Rath, 2003).

Figure 1: Women pick tomatoes on a contract farm in Punjab

Contract tomato and potato production in Punjab

Agricultural labour accounts for as much as 88% of the total rural labour in the state of Punjab (Gill, 2000). More than two-thirds of the agricultural labour in the state, including contract farm labour, is casual. Major reasons behind the casualisation of farm labour in the state include mechanisation of major farm operations, inflow of migrant labour, slowdown of agricultural growth, and non-viability of small and marginal holdings (Rangi *et al.*, 2001).

Women's labour participation rate in agriculture in Punjab has been extremely low (4.5% in 1991), though higher than their participation rates in the national, rural and urban workforce (2.8%, 2.2%, and 4.3% respectively). Only 1% of cultivators (farmers who own or lease land) were female in 1991 (Gill, 2001). Punjab also has had one of the lowest incidences of child labour (2.7%) in the country (Lieten, 2002a). However, Punjab has been a pioneer in India in the contract farming of perishable produce, a sector which tends to rely on women and children's labour.

Fruit and vegetables require more intensive labour than other crops. Contract farms under company supervision are little more than 'factories in the fields' (Figure 1) from the point of view of labour. Their labour system resembles the industrial sector

because of timing, quality and standardisation requirements which cannot be met by mechanical methods. This requires 'quality labour', i.e. efficient, timely and paced; 'flexible labour', that is readily available and cheap; and 'docile labour', in other words politically trouble-free labour. These conditions are met more easily by women, who are perceived to be homemakers and, therefore, low cost, sincere and more obedient workers. This amounts to manipulation of the cultural understanding of gender (Collins, 1993).

Contract farming of vegetable crops has been practised by both MNCs and local firms since the early 1990s in Punjab. The contracts specify quantity/acreage, quality, timing and price of the produce. The companies also provide seedlings on part credit and specify the production practices and inputs to be used. That contracting has led to more and better employment opportunities for labour, especially women, is true and acknowledged by the labourers (Singh, 2003). The labour intensity of vegetable crops, except potato, is much higher than for traditional crops like wheat or paddy. The labour intensity is 3,600-4,000 hours per hectare for tomatoes (depending on whether it is a summer or winter crop), compared with only 740 hours per hectare for paddy (Gill, 2001). This has created a big employment boom in the contract production areas of the state, especially as the mechanisation of sowing and harvesting operations of paddy and wheat crops has reduced manual work to almost nothing.

While employment has grown as a consequence of the labour intensive nature of the crops, accompanied by the emergence of some employment in processing, wage levels have been pushed to subsistence levels as a result of the increased competition. This has come about through in-migration and the cessation of out-migration because of the higher incomes available locally. At the same time, those in work have to deal with insecure employment and poor working conditions.

According to Gill (2001), during the mid-1990s, three-quarters of all workers employed in the state's vegetable production sector were hired labour. Further, female labour accounted for 58% of total labour hours, compared with 34% in paddy. And 49% of all those working in the vegetable production sector were hired female labour, compared with 25% in paddy. In tomato production alone, female labour accounted for almost 60% of the total labour hours. Child labour accounted for about 3-4% of the total labour hours in vegetable crops, as part of family labour. However, a woman's wage is only 75% of a male worker's wage; a child worker receives only half that of a male worker (when paid a daily wage rather than a piece rate wage).

Figure 2: A small girl looks after a baby while their mother picks tomatoes on a contract farm in Punjab



Labour in tomato fields

Women and girls mostly transplant and harvest tomatoes as such workers are more available, cost less, are more honest and better suited to picking and transplanting jobs (Singh, 2003). Mothers with infants also work in contract farms and infants and children remain on the farm throughout the day, with implications for their health and nutrition (Figure 2).

There is a piece rate system of wages linked to output, i.e. Rs. 2-2.5 per crate of tomatoes picked (a crate contains 20 kg of tomatoes). Thus, the more a woman or girl picks in a day, the better she gets paid. Harvesting one acre of tomatoes takes 15-20 women two days as one woman can pick only 25-30 crates a day. Wages go up when tomato harvesting competes with that of potato and wheat in some areas (Singh, 2003). But wages soon become depressed with the large seasonal inflow of migrant male labour to the state. In fact, migrant agricultural labour accounts for 25% of the total agricultural labour force in the state (Gill, 2000). The daily wage rate for female workers is only two-thirds of that received by men. In tomato harvesting, half-day wages are also common as harvesting should be completed before noon (Singh, 2003).

Labour in potato fields

Potato cultivation, especially under contract, has increased women's employment; a large number of women can be seen picking and grading potatoes during harvest time, though in general, female labour accounts for only 38% of all labour used in this crop (Gill, 2001). Generally, female labour is preferred for these jobs as they require patience and care, yet women's pay amounts to only two-thirds of that received by men. A lot of child labour is also used, especially for grading. Even mothers with infants can do such work, which is generally in one place and under the shade of some tree or in a shed (Singh, 2003). Daily wages are generally paid for harvesting; usually Rs. 40/day for women and Rs. 20/day for girls. Groups of workers may receive a fixed payment contract to harvest an entire potato field;⁴ this was Rs. 500 per acre in 1999-2000. Bagging potatoes is a separate labour activity and is paid at the rate of Rs. 5-10/bag (Singh, 2003).

In some cases, women members of the contract grower households supervise potato grading, especially when the produce is graded at the grower's farmhouse. This is preferred as most of the grading labour is female, and it is easy and more effective for a female member of the farming household to control their work.

CONCLUSIONS

As shown in these case studies, contract farm production is primarily carried out by female labour, and increasingly by young girls. There is a need to address the whole question of a changing agrarian production structure under contract farming from a gender perspective, especially issues associated with transfer of skills, choice of technology, organisation of labour, working conditions and terms of work.

There has been a variety of corporate responses to the problem of child labour, ranging from withdrawing operations from affected countries; dismissing child workers, thus abruptly affecting people's lives; abandoning the factory-based mode of production in favour of contracting work to home-based producers; to adopting a code of conduct for child labour; and finally, acknowledging child labour as a problem and working to eliminate its practice (Bissell *et al.*, 2002; Frenkel and Scott, 2002). Instead of banning child labour as proposed by some of the international agencies and the agribusiness players in the developed world, a better approach would be to improve conditions for working children, as such work contributes to the family income on which the child's well-being depends. A ban

4. Group labour contracts were also noted for seed cotton weeding in Andhra Pradesh (Ramamurthy, 2000).

on child labour in Bangladesh, for example, only aggravated the problem as the children went from jobs in garment factories to much worse jobs, such as breaking bricks in the hot sun or even prostitution. Thus, a ban on child labour under pressure can be counter-productive (Kar, 2002).

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and government agencies need to monitor working conditions and wage rates in contract farming in order to prevent long hours of work, temporary employment, exposure to hazardous pesticides and below minimum wages. The employer should make provision for childcare, such as creches; and both NGOs and government should provide education and skill building facilities. If the education level of these children improves, they will be able to get out of these fields and escape poverty and exploitation. The literacy of both girls and women seems to have a bearing on the incidence of female child labour (Rustagi, 2002).

There have been many programmes at the state level to eradicate the practice of child labour. For example, there were more than a dozen such government programmes during the 1980s and 1990s in the state of Karnataka and there are also a dozen NGOs working to eliminate the practice of child labour in various districts of the state (Gayathri, 2002). The NGOs' strategies, in general, include supporting the children with health and education facilities and offering income compensation for children and their parents. But, while NGOs are doing good work at the micro level, it does not add up to a major strategy to address the huge problem of child labour. This is partly because of a piecemeal approach, lack of scale and sustainability, and high costs, as well as the dominance of donor demands and competition between NGOs. What is required is an holistic and integrated approach focusing on all the activities which involve children in a given area, followed by replication of programmes on a larger scale in a sustainable manner (Wazir, 2002).

The organisation of labour is another important measure to prevent or eliminate some of the ills of the contract farming system. For example, associations of contract farm workers could be used to monitor wage and work conditions. There have been some cases of women workers becoming empowered by women's collectives in India (Elson, 1999). Legal provisions to involve labour representatives when companies and growers/growers' groups discuss labour and wage issues would also be a step in the right direction. As a civil society intervention, codes of conduct could guide farmers' use of labour; these could be enforced by contracting agribusi-

ness firms. These firms should also constantly work towards more ethical and humane labour standards. Such improvements would help these firms compete in the international market, especially as the international trade and labour agencies have now put labour standards higher on the agenda. Agencies like the World Trade Organisation and the International Labour Organisation could promote better labour standards and codes of conduct among agribusiness firms and farmers. It is important to realise that improving women's labour conditions and narrowing down gender differentials can increase the output and welfare of both women and men.

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