



# “Hybrid Cottonseed Production is Children’s Work”: Making Sense of Migration and Wage Labor in Western India

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I explore the seasonal labor migration of young people from a tribal community in southern Rajasthan, India. In recent years, hybrid cottonseed production has come to be viewed in this community as “children’s work.” Drawing on nine months of field research, I describe the political economic and social structures and processes through which this migration has become commonplace. I discuss the contradictory nature of young people’s engagements in this work, focusing on shifts in understandings of their own agency and in their patterns of mobility. I employ young people’s experiences and stories, drawn from focus groups and interviews, to show how gender works to mediate these engagements and understandings. The study of seasonal migratory labor, through the grounded perspectives of laborers themselves, sheds light on how young people negotiate their roles within households and communities through their working lives at home and away from home. This case also presents an important example of how school and marriage can be used to organize and frame young people’s work in significant, unexpected, and lasting ways.



## Introduction

When we arrived, the family was in the process of shaking fruit out of a tree. Everyone was laughing, tugging on the branches and collecting the fallen fruit. They noticed our arrival but kept it up until they were satisfied with the harvest. They shared the fruit with us (a small, tart, reddish berry) and we all sat down in front of the house. When I explained to the father that we hoped to talk with the household about young people and migration to Gujarat for cottonseed production, he said “I don’t want to talk, you know everything anyway” and, nodding to his wife, he got up and walked away. The older women told us that they had not migrated in their youth – that they wouldn’t have been able even if they had wanted to - but that had changed in recent years. The younger girls talked about the fun of migrating, saying shyly: “We get to see something different when we go.” Their mother shook her head and said: “Kids are much more independent these days.” Later in the discussion the girls told us that they go to help support the family, and the mother said, “What would they do here, just sit around?”

Adapted from field notes, Dungarpur District, Rajasthan, 2009

Each year thousands of young people from adivasi communities in western India migrate for seasonal work in cottonseed production, specifically for the work of hand pollination to produce hybrid cottonseed (Katiyar, 2006; Khandelwal et al, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. These laborers range in age from roughly seven to sixteen. They travel between their homes in Dungarpur District, southern Rajasthan, and several districts in Gujarat, the neighboring state to the south. The selection above is from one of many conversations with adivasi families, during my research, about the experiences of young people migrating for this work. This conversation illustrates some key changes for unmarried young people in terms of agency, mobility and household and community roles, changes that are particularly significant for girls.

In the above, the father’s response and departure from the conversation is illustrative of the gendered space of the household, in which men are largely absent for long stretches of time, and in which decisions about whether young people will migrate are often made by women and/or by young people themselves.<sup>3</sup> Women play a central role in household reproduction, in subsistence farming, and in the organization of young people’s household and migratory work (Chakravarti and Mathur, 1990; Deshingkar and Farrington, 2006; Haberfeld et al, 1999). The women above refer to a time when girls left their villages only when they were

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<sup>2</sup> The word adivasi means “original inhabitant” and is the word used by research participants to self-identify. The word is often used interchangeably with “tribal”.

<sup>3</sup> Men present in homes were often those unable to work, temporarily recovering from an injury, between jobs, or at home in order to organize cash crop production.

married and went to live with their husband's family. For young boys, too, this represents a shift. While they might have migrated together with older brothers or fathers in the past, independent migration was rare.

This community is based in a geographically remote area of southern Rajasthan, with highly limited access to resources and services. Many families suffer from decreasing land size (due to the generational division of property among sons) of already marginal lands. The community also has low life expectancy, very low school attendance rates and corresponding low literacy rates (Government of Rajasthan, 2008). These factors, along with limited local opportunities for income generation, have made labor migration an important livelihood strategy (Haberfeld et al, 1999; Deshingkar and Farrington, 2006). While adult migration within this community has a long history, the seasonal migration of young people is a recent shift (Katiyar, 2006; Khandelwal et al, 2008; Venkateshwarlu, 2007).

Despite the recentness of this shift, seasonal migration for seed pollination has come to be viewed within this community as "children's work." While both girls and boys participate, their experiences are mediated differently by gender norms and expectations.<sup>4</sup> For example, while marriage is the point at which girls are no longer expected to migrate, boys stop going for this work as they become sufficiently able bodied to do other, more lucrative (and physically strenuous) migratory work. For girls, this is the only form of waged work available outside the household, with rare exceptions.<sup>5</sup> In addition to gendered differences, the conversation above illustrates generational differences - attempts by mothers and daughters to make sense of a radical departure from the past: the migration of unmarried girls, unaccompanied by family members. Though many of these conversations were characterized by ambivalence about this work, the practice is now firmly embedded in the economic strategies of adivasis who are, as they often put it, "just doing what they can to get by."

In this article, I draw on field research conducted over nine months in 2008 and 2009 in Dungarpur District, Rajasthan, just across the border from Gujarat in western India. I conducted interviews with more than forty parents and community members, and focus groups with forty young people, in a mixed adivasi (Bhil/Minas) community of two sub-districts in Dungarpur.<sup>6</sup> The jovial tone of the

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<sup>4</sup> Young people are also doing this work in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, though in the latter two states to a much lesser degree. See for example: Ramamurthy (2010) and Venkateshwarlu (2007). Venkateshwarlu (2007) estimates that more than 400,000 young people engage in this work in India annually, with Gujarat having the highest number.

<sup>5</sup> An example is work through the National Rural Employment Generation Scheme (NREGS). In Rajasthan, the NREGS provides some households with 100 days of paid labor per household per year (note: per household, not per household member, and this is restricted by age). Young people sometimes accompany adults as unpaid helpers.

<sup>6</sup> I also conducted interviews in Gujarat with seed farmers, scientists, union representatives, and government and seed industry officials.

conversation above is illustrative of the many playful interactions my research team and I had with members of the households we visited, which at times contrasted strongly with the stories of struggle and marginalization they spoke of.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I describe the structures and processes through which this migration has become common practice, and I explore the contradictory nature of young people's engagements in this work, focusing on shifts in understandings of their own agency and in their patterns of mobility. I show how gender works to mediate these engagements and understandings. Through the grounded perspectives of laborers themselves, I demonstrate how young people negotiate their household and community roles, and their working lives both at home and away from home. This case presents an important example of how the role of school and marriage in particular places can structure young people's work in ways that do not reflect westernized models of childhood and youth, and indeed, that challenge the notion of adolescence as a time for schooling and not of work. Further, this case illustrates the diversity of experiences of work within a community of young people, calling into question the tendency to frame instances of working young people in limited and generalizing ways.

### **Geographies of Working Children and Young People**

In recent years, human geographers and anthropologists have expanded our understandings of young people's lives, documenting, in particular, the conditions under which children and young people in non-western contexts live (Dyson, 2008; Jeffrey, 2012). Scholars have described the problematic nature of applying western and colonialist conceptualizations of childhood, youth and adulthood to people in the global south (Abebe, 2007; Dyson, 2008; Jeffrey et al, 2008; Katz, 2004; Robson, 2004, for example). Studies of youth in the global south remind us that social constructions of age are not fixed, and that children's and young people's experiences vary across time, space, and axes of difference, thus the definitions of children and youth vary widely (Jeffrey, 2010; Panelli et al, 2007; Wyn and White, 1997).

In light of this variability, scholars emphasize the need for context-specific, place-based studies, from the perspectives of young people. For children and young people are not "human becomings" or pre-adults (Abebe et al, 2009; Kjörholt, 2004; Valentine, 1996), and the idea of a linear trajectory in which agency, competency, and rights increase with age often does not map onto lived experiences (Aitken, 2001; Panelli et al, 2007; Punch, 2001; Valentine, 1996). That young people the world over engage in wage labor, migrate and live independently, and act as heads of households when necessary, suggests that we need geographies of youth based on the stories of young people, in which they are understood as

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<sup>7</sup> I conducted research in Dungarpur with the support of three other individuals, two women and one man. One of the women is originally from southern India but living locally, the other was my research assistant, from Gujarat. The man is a member of the local adivasi community.

active agents of change and significant participants in political economic and social processes (Aitken, 2001; Panelli et al, 2007).

Human geographers studying migration have also called for research in which the experiences, narratives and stories of migrants and young people are central (Chopra, 1995; Lawson, 2000; McHugh, 2000; Silvey and Lawson, 1999). For feminist geographers, there is an important link between the telling of stories and the process of identity formation (Einagle, 2002). Human geographers have also shown that identities are constructed in the process of migration, in which places are not isolated (Silvey and Lawson, 1999). In addition, migration is seen as a culturally significant event or series of events, and as an important site for the study of ambivalence (McHugh, 2000). The expression of ambivalence points at much more than uncertainty. As Lawson (2000: 186) suggests: "Migrant narratives of ambivalence have theoretical power beyond being simply their own unique stories. Their ambivalent stories bring to the surface the contradictions of capitalist growth, which can only be spoken by those on the margins."

Migrants' stories can also illustrate processes and contradictions in changes at and across multiple scales (Lawson, 2000). Drawing on migrants' stories can demonstrate the plurality of experiences and meanings held by migration and interactions with other parts of people's lives (Chopra, 1995), across time and space. Geographers, in particular, are well positioned "to explore and elucidate peoples, places and societal implications of migration and circulation systems" (McHugh, 2000: 85). Finally, a focus on migrants' stories also allows for the recovery of lost and alternative stories (Miles and Crush, 1993), for the experiences of migrant laborers, and young migrant laborers in particular, are rarely heard (Bremen, 1985; Nieuwenhuys, 1994).

Within geographies of youth, too, there has been a growing emphasis on, and resounding call for, the study of young people in the "context of the complexities of local geographies" and the incorporation of everyday geographies (Aitken et al, 2006: 383; Ruddick, 2003: 345). Within scholarship on children in South Asia, Dyson (2008) identifies an important recent trend in which everyday lives are emphasized through ethnographic work with young people, and to which her work makes an important contribution (see also: Nieuwenhuys 1994; Osella and Osella, 2000).

In response to global change and economic restructuring, young people around the world are in search of survival strategies, and many are compelled to go wherever work may be available (Abebe, 2007; Ansell and van Blerk, 2007). This presents an important lens through which to study the meanings of space, place and mobility (Jeffrey, 2012). Young people receive meager sums for their work in capitalist production, and their work is undervalued in other ways as well (Ansell, 2005). While the livelihood strategies of children are linked to national and global economic, social and political structures, the importance of children's economic

participation is given little attention in research and public discourse, and often goes unseen (Abebe, 2007: 82).

Young people are engaged in a wide range of paid and unpaid labor (Panelli et al, 2007). Children have always been at the heart of the family labor force in India, and two thirds of the labor of children is unpaid (Harriss-White, 2003). Thirteen million children between the age of five and fourteen do paid work in India (Harriss-White, 2003). While it is now widely understood that children are an essential part of the reproduction of agricultural and rural households (Ansell, 2005), participation in paid labor is often overlooked. Identifying and differentiating between appropriate and inappropriate paid work for young people, and between opportunity and exploitation in the working lives of young people is incredibly fraught. This has been and continues to be a source of concern, and of fierce debate (Panelli et al, 2007).<sup>8</sup>

The study of young people engaged in wage labor outside of the home presents an important lens through which to understand the negotiation, performance and struggles over agency and mobility, and how these are mediated by gender and generational norms and expectations (Abebe, 2007). According to Robson et al (2007: 135) agency is: “an individual’s own capacities, competencies, and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their lifeworlds, fulfilling many [...] expectations, while simultaneously charting individual/collective choices and possibilities for their daily and future lives.” For some scholars, young people’s agency can be understood as *thin* (acting with limited options) and *thick* (acting with broader range of possible choices) (Klocker, 2007). Recognizing not only constraints, but also various mobilizations and understandings of agency, among young workers is critical to understanding the meaning of work in the lives of the most marginalized. Gender difference among young paid workers is also understudied (Valentine, 2003) even as it is a key element of understanding agency. However, several important studies examine the gendered and generational divisions of labor in income generating strategies for household reproduction (Abebe, 2007; Ansell, 2005; Dyson, 2008; Katz 2004, among others).<sup>9</sup>

Through the case of seasonal migratory labor in hybrid cottonseed production, I show how young people make sense of their work outside of the home, how they both mobilize and recognize the constraints of their agency and mobility, and how this is mediated by gender. Drawing inspiration from these scholars of geographies of migration and youth, and in particular from Dyson

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of child labor has been defined largely in terms of western ideals and, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), is applied to work that is “inappropriate because the workers are too young, or because it has adverse impacts on their well-being or education, or is considered hazardous” (Ansell 2005: 160). The ILO uses a system of classification of child labor, which cannot account for the diversity of norms, experiences and perspectives, strategies for survival and circumstances under which children choose to, or are made to engage in various kinds of work (Ansell, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of schooling and child labor in subsistence economies see: Admassie (2003).

(2008) and Abebe (2007), I focus on the experiences and narratives of young people and their parents, to explore the meanings of this work and migration.

### **Seed Pollination Work in Western India**

Each year in June and July, adivasi labor contractors, referred to as mates, make the rounds in countless villages in Dungarpur, offering an advance (a portion of wages to be earned) to parents, in exchange for signing young people up for work in Gujarat.<sup>10</sup> In late July and early August these mates make trips back and forth from southern Rajasthan to Gujarat, delivering young workers to countless farms across northern and central districts in the state. Since mates make several trips, this means they are often not present to supervise the treatment, conditions and the work of these young people. In late September and October, the opposite journey is made and young people are paid for their work. The average wage in 2008-2009 was fifty rupees (or one USD, half the minimum wage) per day, and the length of the workday was ten hours on average. The wages were the same for both boys and girls, and outside of a few tasks, such as cooking meals and cleaning, they also engaged in the same work. Any expenses incurred, from food to medicine or phone calls home (depending on the terms negotiated by the mate), are deducted from the amount to be paid at the end of the season. This is unfree labor, in the sense that leaving early can mean a breach of the verbal agreement between mate and farmer, sometimes leading to the young worker not receiving wages earned. It is also unfree labor as young people are tied to a single farm for the duration of the season.

The work of hybrid cottonseed pollination is labor intensive; each flower on a plant is hand pollinated by crossing two parent lines. Despite attempts by agronomists and seed scientists in Gujarat to create an alternative technique for this process, hand pollination continues to be the primary means for hybrid cottonseed production. As one seed scientist explained to me, “Gujarati farmers don’t want to lose even one seed” and so have been unwilling to move away from the process of hand pollination. In order to make hybrid cottonseed production possible, let alone profitable, Gujarati farmers need a steady, temporary, source of cheap labor – and farmers look north to fill this need. In other words, the ability to tap into this labor source has led to the foreclosure of an investment in technological improvement.

Breman (1985), in his classic work on the dynamics of labor and circular migration in Gujarat, explains the tensions between local laborers and migratory workers, in which the latter – due to a more precarious status – have been more likely to work longer hours for lower wages, and less able to demand improvement of conditions. Thus, the reliance on the labor of very young seasonal migrant laborers from Rajasthan for work in cottonseed pollination fields in Gujarat can be seen as an extension of the historical pattern of rural inequality in western India.

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<sup>10</sup> Mate is the word used to refer to adivasi men and women that act as labor contractors.

A wide swath of Gujarati industries - from the agricultural sector to manufacturing and processing – depend on the circular migration of adults and families from tribal and landless communities to meet labor needs (Breman, 1985). The out-migration of men from Dungarpur District offers an important source of labor for restaurants, middle-class homes, construction sites and roadside tea stalls across urban and rural Gujarat. Women generally remain home, engaging in subsistence farming, sometimes a small amount of cash crop production, and household reproduction with the support of children, young people and other household members (Breman, 1985; Chakravarti and Mathur, 1990; Haberfeld et al, 1999). This long tradition of adivasis from southern Rajasthan finding work in Gujarat has led to the development of connections between mates (adivasi labor contractors), and Gujarati farmers and mill operators - connections fraught with caste/community power imbalances and difference, but also which provide the infrastructure for addressing labor needs in the industry.

In Gujarat, the Patel community has long established itself as powerful elites in the agricultural sector, whether through land ownership or access to water resources (Prakash, 2005; Shah, 2008). Gujarati Patels fashion themselves, and are seen by many as the “quintessential modern caste” (Gidwani, 2001; Gidwani, 2008). As Shah (2008) describes, Gujarati farming households were able to benefit from the Green Revolution, and continue to benefit from their ability to draw on resources (irrigation, credit, land, access to information, the blind eye of state government to labor issues). High rates of economic growth in Gujarat have had the effect of benefiting the elite, while doing little to reduce persistent socio-economic inequalities (Yagnik and Sheth, 2005; Hirway and Terhal, 2002). In conversations with adivasi labor contractors and others in the adivasi community, these highly unequal power relations were a key element of discussion. Mates and others expressed the desire to have “just a piece of what Gujarati farmers have.” Young people and mates report that the majority of cottonseed production work takes place on the farms of members of the Patel community.

Scholars of rural inequality and development in western India have long pointed to the struggles and lack of freedom among rural adivasi and lower caste communities (Breman, 1985; Gidwani, 2001; Gidwani, 2008; McKinney, 2013). In rural southern Rajasthan the government is relatively absent, and struggling adivasi households rely heavily on labor migration to both cities and rural areas in Gujarat for their income (Nagda, 2004). According to Haberfeld et al (1999) 60% of wages among adivasis in this area come from migratory labor, though among participants of the present study the percentage was nearly 85%. The strong link between adivasi communities in southern Rajasthan and towns and cities across Gujarat, through migration for rural and urban-based work, has been expanded and strengthened in recent years with the engagement of young people in hybrid cottonseed production. Despite these connections and the tradition of adult migration to Gujarat, parents struggle to rationalize and make sense of this shift.

## Parents Making Sense of “children’s work”

As mentioned above, the migration of young people for this work is a relatively recent phenomenon; only the youngest of parents have themselves engaged in this work. In discussions about it, parents wrestled with feelings of ambivalence. Seeking to explain the shift parents cited limited opportunities for income generation, the challenge of supporting households through rain-fed subsistence agriculture and adult male out-migration, and the idleness and “availability” of young people, illustrating the idea that the work done by young people in the household is often undervalued. They also focused on two themes: 1) waged work and school as the two key uses of young people’s time (though with schooling ranking much lower), and 2) mates as providing safety and accountability. These two themes offer insight into how parents make sense of and work through their feelings of ambivalence about sending children and young people outside of the community for work.

First, parents expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with education in local schools. They spoke of the negligible benefits and thus the lack of incentive to enroll their kids. Indeed, parents articulated a sense of alienation from schooling, and this was mirrored in discussions with young people who self-identified as “just laborers,” and for whom school seemed irrelevant. Parents discussed literacy as an important and desirable skill, but one that was only rarely reached by members of the community. An elderly woman pointed to a boy and said, “We sent him to school for many years and he can only write his name” (interview, 2008). In another interview (2009), a man said:

There is no proper education. One person manages 150 children. That boy cannot even write his name after 8th standard. If school was good then we might send our kids. But now there is no point. The other teacher doesn’t teach at all, but sits and does nothing all day. We workers are only paid 100 rupees a day if we do the work properly, but the teachers get the same amount no matter what they do. [...] There are school buildings in every corner but no teachers to teach.

Many parents framed the decision not to send kids to school in terms of the attitudes of young people themselves, saying: “Kids don’t want to go to school, they don’t learn anything there” and “School is not essential, if they do not want to be there, if they will not learn anything, then let them help us or go for work” (interviews, 2009). An elderly man said: “The reason so many children are migrating for this work is that the schooling is no good” (interview, 2008). Parents explained that young people attended school, helped out in the home, or went away for work. Migrating appeared to be the most effective and most highly valued use of their time, while helping out in the home was often equated with remaining idle. This was reflected in the frequent comment, “if they did not go, what else would they do?” Thus seasonal migration does not, in and of itself, interfere with school attendance. Few of these young people attend school for more than a few years, for

reasons discussed above, and even fewer will return to school once that have begun to do waged work. These discussions also show that children's and young people's work in the home is often not recognized as such, and certainly not valued as highly as waged work. Parents framed migratory labor and schooling as the two key options for young people, in which the former is more productive and the latter does little to benefit young people and their households. Such perspectives pose major challenges for those charged with increasing school attendance in rural India.

Second, parents work through their discomfort with the migration of young people, and girls in particular, emphasizing the role of the mate in this practice, saying: "We don't like letting our daughters go, but we have no choice. What will we eat? So we send the girls to Gujarat in the care of mates" (interviews, 2008). Parents prefer for the mate to be a family member, whether male or female (though the majority are male), even if a distant relative. However, many must settle for a mate from the broader local adivasi community in the district. The mate, as organizer and overseer - and as someone who can be held accountable if anything should go wrong - plays an important role in setting parents' minds at ease. Concerns with this practice range from the basic safety of girls and boys to the potential for kids to disappear or choose not to return. Stories abounded of mates not acting responsibly, not returning to the farms to check in on young people for long periods of time, and one story ended with a young girl missing and the mate being subsequently driven out of the community in retaliation. Parents and young people say that, should anything happen with a mate, they will find another for the next season that is trustworthy. This option offers limited solace if something goes wrong.

Gender also plays a role here. While parents discussed the decision to send boys and girls in similar ways, they expressed both trepidation and additional reflection about the migration of girls. Expressions of concern about the welfare and "dignity" of girls did not appear to translate into sending more boys than girls, or keeping girls back. Mates describe taking extra care with the placement of girls, but young people and mates alike recognize that when it comes down to it, the farm manager determines whether they will have a good or a bad experience.

### **Young People Making Sense of Their Work**

Like their parents, young people discussed the shift to labor migration and the work of cottonseed production in multiple and intersecting ways, reflecting a sense of opportunity, of ambivalence, of excitement, of trepidation. Engagement in seasonal migratory labor presents new possibilities and contradictions for the agency and mobility of young people. This is mediated by gender, and is experienced in different, though overlapping ways for girls and boys - as they navigate gendered norms, expectations and household needs. While young people tended to echo elements of parents' discussion on schooling, a key framing mechanism for experiences of this work was the moment at which they would no

longer engage in it. Parents also noted this, saying: “Once a girl or boy is big enough they are no longer right for this work.”

For girls, being “big enough” refers to getting married. According to girls, marriage represents the end of a window of opportunity to “get away from the eyes of the community” and to engage in wage labor - a form of work with recognized value to the household. Marriage acts as a reminder that engagement in this work is temporary. While a young woman might enjoy being away and doing this work, and she might enjoy earning a wage with which she can contribute to the household, when her parents or adults in the community believe that she is ready to marry, the window closes, as one girl said (focus group, 2009):

When girls get married they don't go anymore, the boys get married and they may still go. [...] More girls go than boys. Boys have other work to do, other options: in hotels-restaurants. Girls don't have options. Once we get married we can't leave.

Girls, boys and parents agreed, “marriage changes everything,” but while marital status defines which young women will migrate for seed pollination, this does not appear to have meant a change in the age of marriage in the area. In many societies, marriage is an important marker of adulthood (Ansell, 2005). Here, marriage is the moment in which the mobility of young women once again becomes constrained to the household (though now of her husband's family), and she will likely only engage in paid labor under rare circumstances.

For boys, growing older and becoming “big enough” is linked to the pressure to go in search for higher paid work. The “freedom to roam around” associated with both their time at home before marriage, and with work in hybrid cottonseed pollination, is greatly diminished – after marriage – by the added responsibilities of providing for an expanded household. This transition also means an end to less physically intensive work. Marriage presents less of a change in the mobility of boys. As one young man said (focus group, 2009):

Once we get married we still have to migrate for work but we look for work that is closer to home. Married men do construction work in Ahmedabad and they get 120 rupees a day. In the pollination fields in Gujarat we get 50 and that work is a child's job.

The pressure upon boys to search for work outside the community is great, and many boys said: “For work we will even climb a mountain.” In one focus group, three young men had lost their father to illness. One of these young men had studied until the fourth standard before their father died, and he then left his studies to find work. Another of the boys had never been to school. The oldest brother, still a young man, had become head of the household. These young men had all worked in hybrid cottonseed production in the past, and enjoyed it, but had transitioned to searching for more lucrative work. In cases where households are facing an imminent break down in their ability to survive, young people generally engage in

this work without discussion. For example, young people in one focus group said: “We don’t have a choice”, “We will take work where we can find it,” and “We will help our families to survive.”

In households with greater economic resources, young people played a central role in the decision making process. For some girls, this process provides an important, and relatively rare, space in which her agency and mobility is discussed with parents and siblings. Girls said that they expressed their feelings about this work, whether it was a desire to go or a desire to remain at home. They spoke of how their feelings about the work changed with time and differed among them. One young woman said (focus group, 2009):

We heard it was good work before we went. Otherwise we wouldn’t have gone. I like the work. She [her sister] doesn’t. She used to like the work when she was younger, but it is not as good once you are grown. It used to be fun to go in a group, but now she does not find it fun.

Social networks, friends, and previous experiences can all be mechanisms by which behavior and patterns of mobility are changed (Nieuwenhuys, 1995). Boys may choose to go and inform their parents after they have reached the fields, or they may stand up to parents by choosing to go, or not to go, based on previous experiences or the experiences of friends. One young man told us that he had gone for this work every year for many years, and that while he came home early last year because he was ill, his brother was able to get his wages for him. This was one of the few times that a young person told of being able to leave and still being paid in full for their work. Another said, “There were a lot of fights among the children and the housework was too much, so my mother sent me to Gujarat to work”. Others said, “We don’t know [if we will return next time], maybe, or we may take other offers” (focus group, 2008).

Because this work is the only generally acceptable wage labor open to girls, while boys have increased options as they grow older and stronger, girls participate in cottonseed production in larger numbers and for more seasons than boys. As in many societies, the roles of boys and girls differ in the household, with the mobility of girls more tightly constrained, and their expected contribution to household reproduction more extensive. Boys are generally permitted to “roam around,” while also lending a hand in daily household activities. Girls are expected to care for siblings and help to raise animals, work in fields and cooking family meals, collect and carry water and fuel and fodder from forests. As countless others have shown, the work of social reproduction done by women is often undervalued and invisible, and young women and girls face an extreme version of this undervaluation and invisibility (Abebe, 2007; Bass, 2004). Seasonal labor migration offers a window of opportunity for greater valuation of young people’s work, especially that of girls.

During the work of seed pollination, in fields in Gujarat, boys and girls experience differences in their mobility. This relates to the different constraints

upon them by each other, by farm managers and by mates. For example, three young men described their experiences in seed pollination work in a positive way, saying:

After work we can go outside of the plot. We sleep, visit other small villages, and hang around. We get more freedom when we are on our own. We like work where there is enough rest, good food. Cotton is good; there is more freedom to go around and [seed pollination is] easy work, compared to working in a hotel with long hours (focus group, 2009).

While boys are given relative freedom during any time off while in the fields, girls are often more closely supervised. As one girl said in a focus group (2008):

We get to know some others but not as friends. If the boss finds out then we would get yelled at. Girls go with the mates and are not accompanied by the boys. Even sisters are not really allowed to go near the boys in the fields. If we did the boss would say: “just keep working instead of talking.”

There are some differences in the tasks given to boys and girls, sometimes mirroring those back home. In a typical workday, girls may be responsible for cooking the food for all of the laborers to eat, in addition to the work that all are expected to do: harvesting male flowers, drying and preparing them, and hand pollinating the female flowers of each cotton plant. Additionally, all are responsible for the tedious task of marking plants to show they have been pollinated.

The ability to “roam around” differs depending on the personality of the mate and farm owner or boss. One boy said: “We even have the time to go out and relax when we are in the fields. Once work is over, we can go to the nearby villages and come back in time, but girls stay back” (focus group, 2009). Whereas a young girl said: “We never get a full day without work when we go to the fields. Time to eat, or other free time on a day with less work is what we get” (focus group, 2009). Still, they find ways to meet friends, and many girls expressed a general pleasure in just being away. One girl said “being away is good, and gives a little freedom from the community” (focus group, 2008).

Young people exert their agency and mobility where they can, and many of these young people work to see cottonseed production in Gujarat as an opportunity, a chance to “get away,” even as many experience physical exploitation, sexual exploitation, illness, homesickness, and other difficulties. Girls and boys discuss the threat of verbal and physical abuse (with sexual abuse and harassment as an undertone in discussions with girls), from being hit to being yelled at.<sup>11</sup> Boys talked

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<sup>11</sup> Local organizations and members of the community have found it very difficult to document cases of sexual abuse and harassment, due to fear of retribution and the difficulties presented by limited resources of adivasi communities and the challenges of holding distant producers accountable. Instances of verbal and sexual abuse

of being challenged when the work was done incorrectly or when they tried to protect each other.

Experiences and understandings of this migratory work are by no means homogeneous among and between girls and boys, while many young people talk of the fun and excitement of “getting away”, others tell stories of abuse, illness and of having “no choice but to go, since our families need to eat.” Indeed, the experiences and perspectives of these young people tell a complex and contradictory story of new freedoms and new limitations. This work offers opportunities for young people to spend time outside of their communities, to engage in wage labor, to meet and make friends with young people from other villages, to travel and to see other places, to travel in groups and away from parents, to do another kind of work, and to simply have a different routine.

In discussions with parents and young people alike there are indications that the participation of girls in this migration is working to shift adult ideas about girls’ agency and mobility. For example, older women perceive a greater sense of independence among young women, and an increased capacity to live, however temporarily, outside of their community. This may have long-term effects for the identity of young women, despite the fact that they will move to another village when they marry. For example, young women may begin to search for other waged opportunities outside the home, leaving relatives or older siblings as heads of households.

Some of the key reasons for the divergent experiences between and among boys and girls relate to the conditions into which they are placed, whether the mate is present and can act to protect and intervene on behalf of young workers, and how individual employers treat laborers. Experiences of this labor are also based in shifting gendered societal expectations of boys and girls, as they grow older. Finally, their experiences of this work are shaped by the differing meanings given to it by boys and girls, as they consider what the future holds.

## **Concluding Discussion**

Hybrid cottonseed production has come, through a complex set of processes, to be seen as “children’s work” among adivasi communities in southern Rajasthan. This has happened, in part, as a response to household economic needs, and through the search for a cheap temporary source of labor across the border in Gujarat. However, it also relates to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the school system, and a broader feeling of alienation from the idea that education is linked to economic opportunity. In addition, a long history of dependence on out-migration for the reproduction of these households, and the continued struggle to make ends meet through subsistence agriculture and small scale cash crop

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and harassment are also noted in several other studies of hybrid cottonseed production (see for example, Khandelwal, 2008; Ramamurthy, 2010; Venkateswarlu, 2007).

production on marginalized lands, have played important roles in engagement in this work. The interests, attitudes and behaviors of some young people towards this work have influenced broader community perceptions of it. Finally, local adivasi labor contractors (mates) have fostered the migration and hiring of young people in the community through building relationships with Gujarati producers, on the one hand, and with parents in their communities, on the other. The framing of hybrid cottonseed production as “children’s work,” then, is the result of wide ranging historical, social, and economic factors.

Findings from this research also suggest that this migration does not necessarily come in the way of school attendance, but rather that many of the young people from these households are unlikely to attend school for more than a year or two, if at all. Parents’ perspectives on this issue represent a severe critique of the Indian government’s ability to provide adequate schooling for adivasi communities. In addition, parents are articulating a sense of frustration with ongoing class and caste inequalities, through which their community is further marginalized.

The contradictory nature of young people’s engagements in this work is illustrated in a number of ways in this study. As young people are connected to the global economy through their participation in this work, they are also being marginalized in new ways: through low wages, the temporary and unfree nature of the work, and otherwise exploitative conditions (Abebe, 2007). Thus, even as many find a sense of freedom, grounds and space for respect and independence through this work, there are clear limitations. These limits relate to how many seasons they will participate (dictated in part by social norms), and to their agency in the face of the conditions they encounter in the fields. The measure of respect and pride achieved through wages earned demonstrates the ways in which young peoples’ work in the home, and care work especially, is often invisible, or unrecognized as such (Robson, 2004). Marriage, too, acts as a limiting factor and as a framing mechanism for young people’s work, structuring who will go, and for how long. Participation in this work, with marriage as its end, offers a rare opportunity in which girls’ mobility can be discussed and negotiated.

The largely positive assessments of young people towards this work warrant additional analysis. These might be read as a testament to the otherwise extreme constraints and limitations on young people’s lives, but they might also be seen as a sign of the great capacity of young people to seek and find respect, and to give meaning to their work (Aitken, 2001; Dyson, 2008). Agency in the decision making processes surrounding mobility have great significance for young people in light of the community’s constant struggle to achieve greater stability, and the extremely limited opportunities available. In addition, the ways that older women discuss the migratory labor of young people in the community offer insight into a shifting view of girls, in which they appear as less timid and more independent, more capable of going off and returning safely, than previous generations. This may have a lasting impact on expectations upon young women in these households

and in the broader community, perhaps leading to a shift in patterns of mobility of women in these households.

This work speaks to the need to contextualize and situate the diverse engagements of young people in paid labor away from home, in time and space. This case illustrates the significance paid work and labor migration can have for young people in marginalized communities. It also demonstrates that participation in wage labor can be a means for a community to respond to on-going social and economic inequalities, and lack of access and alienation from employment and education. Understanding the work that young people do, the meanings and limitations associated with it, from their perspectives, we can work to build informed, and justice-oriented understandings of young people's lives. In this work, then, I join other scholars of geographies of working children and young people by contributing empirical material attesting to the idea that young people are social actors, not only exercising agency, but also actively negotiating their own patterns of mobility, and understandings of the role and meaning of their work (Abebe, 2007; Aitken, 2001; Ansell and Van Blerk, 2004; Dyson, 2008; Katz, 2004; Punch, 2007; among others). This emphasis - on how young people (and their households) make sense of, negotiate, give meaning to, and experience paid labor migration - offers important insight for informing and building justice-oriented approaches to development.

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