

Harika's story

A profile from Young Lives in Andhra Pradesh



Harika is 13 years old. She is the only girl in her family and has an older and a younger brother. She has to work hard to help her mother at home. She enjoys school and worries about missing it when she works in the fields during the peak agricultural season. Working with the cotton has also affected her health. She is proud of the fact that she has won a national scholarship.

Harika's older brother has been informally adopted by an aunt who has no children and lives nearby. He comes home regularly and helps with the family farm but in effect Harika is now the oldest child in the household. As such, and also being a girl, she has many responsibilities at home. Being the only daughter she has to share the housework with her mother. Harika says her brother does not have to do any of the household chores so he can sleep in but he does go with her to the cotton fields. She says that when she was his age she was already doing work in the house but that he doesn't have to because he is a boy. Harika's work has increased over the past few months as her father is immobile since he injured his leg in a road accident and her mother shoulders responsibility for all the work that her father used to do.

Her parents say that Harika is a well-behaved and quiet girl who works hard and does a thorough job whatever she is doing. She says her mother scolds her a lot and they do not talk very much. She is closer to her grandmother. Her mother says:

“She likes her grandmother a lot. She looks like her grandmother. So her grandmother also likes her a lot. She goes to her grandmother during her free time.”

Harika remembered the Young Lives researchers coming to visit when she was younger and was keen to be interviewed again. She says she is keen on her studies and works hard at school. She likes her school and her teachers.

She believes that education is important: “If we are not educated, we don't know anything. So, if we go to school, we can learn about all the things.”





Harika's day

Time	When attending school	When working in the cotton fields
4.00am		Sometimes gets up to study
6.00am	Gets up	Gets up and takes a bath
	Brushes teeth and drinks tea. Takes a bath	Brushes teeth and drinks tea
7.00am	Fetches water from the hand bore, cleans the utensils and sweeps the floor.	Goes to the cotton fields to pollinate the buds
9.30am	After breakfast she goes to school	Her mother brings breakfast to the fields
4.00pm	Finishes school and plays games with her friends	Separating the cotton buds
4.30pm	Comes home and has tea	
	Sweeps the floor and fetches more water	Spins the cotton
5.30pm	Cooks food for dinner and takes care of her father and younger brother	Comes home from the fields and studies
	Sometimes watches TV at a neighbour's house	Separates the seeds from the cotton while watching TV
9.00pm	Eats dinner	Eats dinner
10.00pm	Goes to bed	Goes to bed

“If we are not educated, we don't know anything.”



Harika worries about missing school during the months she works in the fields and her mother says that she often gets up at 4.00am during this time to study before going to work. Harika thinks her friend Salma is lucky because she doesn't have to work in the fields or at home and she wears nice dresses.

Most of the children in the village work in the fields during the peak season and miss school. In fact, Harika's parents say there are not enough children to do this work and so they have to bring some from a neighbouring village to help. The cotton has to be pollinated and the families and the whole community need the money it brings. They acknowledge that the work is hard, hot and sometimes dangerous. It is the adults who spray pesticides but sometimes they affect the child workers and they get sick and vomit. It also affects girls' adolescent development. Harika's mother says: "She is tiny for her age and has not yet attained puberty although all her friends have." There is also a danger from snakes and Harika was once bitten on her foot.

Despite having to work in the fields, Harika was the only student in her class selected for a national scholarship based on a competitive examination. She is grateful to her teacher who coached her after school hours. She is proud of her achievement. Harika would like to be a teacher like her uncle but she can only study up to tenth

grade in the village school and her parents are not keen for her to continue beyond as it would mean going to school in another village and people generally do not send girls because they fear for their safety.

Work in the cotton fields and health

In some areas of rural Andhra Pradesh, it is common for children over 10 to work in the cotton fields for two or three months of the year. In the Young Lives survey 20% of the older cohort reported working for pay. Ninety per cent of these workers are girls under 14. Once they attain puberty, girls tend to stop the pollination work and do other jobs in the fields.

Young Lives interviewed a health worker about the risks faced by these girls. She said: "They spray pesticides in the cotton fields... we ourselves cannot bear the smell. It is intolerable and very pungent. Even adults cannot bear this smell, let alone the children. Some people vomit and have a burning sensation in their eyes..."

The health worker said the cottonseed work affects children's health very directly:

"If they do such work, the children become weak and turn anaemic. They have small cracks on the gums and teeth... Even if we give them some tablets, they will not accept or take. ... In those girls who are in the age group 12 to 14, their breast growth is slow, particularly among those who work in the cotton fields ... so many times we observed that quite a few of them have flat chests in this community."

It is ironic that pesticide use apparently delays girls' periods, while at the same time, local beliefs favour pre-pubescent girls for pollination work. The health worker said:

"They are more anaemic than the adults, particularly the adolescent girls. They have less blood, they will not grow much. Because of the smell, they also do not feel hungry. So they don't eat much, and therefore do not grow... We get the children of the same age group and compare them, so we can find the difference in these children. Even though they have good complexions, if they go to the cotton fields, their skin turns dark and gets tanned. Even their nails are also spoilt as they pluck the cotton flowers. Their feet get cracks and bleed. Some wear shoes, some will not. They get their periods late."

This confirms the comments made by Harika's mother about her delayed physical development.

Source: Virginia Morrow and Uma Vennam (2008) 'Children Combining Work and Education in Cottonseed Production in Andhra Pradesh: Implications for Discourses of Children's Rights in India', paper presented at Childhoods and Children's Rights Conference, New Delhi, 10-11 November.



Country context: India and Andhra Pradesh

India has a population of over a billion people. It is a country of huge inequalities, with the second largest number of billionaires in the world but is also home to 25 per cent of the world's poor. The poverty debate in India has been rarely extended to child poverty, which makes Young Lives of particular interest.

- One in every three illiterate people in the world lives in India.
- At least 35 million children aged 6 to 14 do not attend school.
- The country accounts for more than 20 per cent of global maternal and child deaths.
- India ranks 128 out of 177 countries in 2007/8 United Nations Human Development Report.

Andhra Pradesh, in southern India, is its fifth-largest state. It has been the role model for several new government initiatives during the 1990s to eliminate poverty and has achieved considerable progress on child development indicators since the mid-1990s. But despite this growth, significant disparities remain, based on class, caste, gender and geography. Poverty estimates for rural Andhra Pradesh are low (11.2% compared to the national average of 28%), although per capita expenditure in rural areas is only about 5% more than the national average. Only 27% of the population lives in urban areas, although the state capital, Hyderabad, is one of the leading centres of the IT revolution. Consequently, the state is witnessing a shift away from agriculture (which remains important at 30% of state domestic produce) towards the service sector, which is expanding rapidly.

Sources: Young Lives Round 2 Survey Report; Andhra Pradesh; The Times of India (9 Nov 2004); Smile Foundation 'Children in India'; 2007/2008 UN Human Development Report

Young Lives is a unique long-term research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. By following a group of children over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty, and provide evidence to support the development of effective policies. We are working with 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. The story here is one of a set of twenty taken from the interviews our researchers did with the children individually and in groups. Each child's story has a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that the children are having to contend with, but also gives a wider picture in relation to children's lives. This ranges from child work and education, to migration, health, domestic violence, inequality, gender, and individual circumstances such as being an orphan or being disabled.

The children and their families who are participating in Young Lives willing share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality. For this reason, the children's names have been changed. The accompanying photos are of children living in similar communities in similar circumstances to the Young Lives children. Photo credit: © Young Lives / Farhatullah Beig.

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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty