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Economic Activities of Children in Two Iranian Villages

Akbar Aghajanian

Introduction

Social demographers have long pointed to the significance of the economic utility of children and its linkage to high fertility in the agricultural societies.¹ Thus it has been proposed that the shift from rural agricultural societies to an urban industrial one implies reduction in the economic value of children to parents and hence, the desire for large families. Parallel to this argument, attitudinal studies have shown a link between attitudes toward the economic utility of children and individual fertility.² Studies of actual economic contributions of children in contemporary agricultural societies are few.³ In a previous paper in this journal we have conceptualized the significance of economic utility of children in rural Iran.⁴ Rural chil-

1. F. W. Notestein, "The Long View," in *Food for the Future*, edited by T. W. Schultz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); F. W. Notestein, "Economic Problems of Population Change," in *Papers of 8th International Conference of Agricultural Economists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

2. J. Caldwell, "Fertility Attitudes in Three Economically Contrasting Rural Regions in Ghana," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 15:2 (1967), p. 217-38; Eva Mueller, "Economic Motives for Family Limitation," *Population Studies* 23:3 (1972), p. 62-68; and F. Arnold *et al.*, *The Value of Children: Introduction and Comparable Analysis* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1975).

3. M. Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Eva Mueller, "The Value of Children in Peasant Agriculture," in *Population and Development*, edited by R. G. Ridken (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1976); B. White, "The Economic Importance of Children in a Javanese Village," in *Population and Social Organization*, edited by M. Nag (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); M. T. Cain, "The Economic Activity of Children in a Village in Bangladesh," *Population and Development Review* 3:3 (1977), p. 201-27; M. Vlassoff, "Labor Demand and Economic Utility of Children: A Case Study in Rural India," *Population Studies* 33:3 (1979), 415-28.

4. A. Aghajanian, "Family Economy and Economic Contributions of Children in Rural Iran," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 3:1 (Fall 1979), 20-31.

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dren are wanted not only for the psychic satisfaction but also because they are valuable as active participants in productive and serving activities of their households. Utilizing micro-level data from households, this article explores the actual economic activities of children in two Iranian villages.

The Setting

The two villages studied are located within fifty kilometers from the city of Shiraz in the southern province of Fars. The city of Shiraz, with a 1976 population of 425,873, is the political, economic and educational center for the southern region of Iran.

Village A (Dehno) is located ten kilometers from the main road connecting Shiraz to other cities in the south. Physically, it is a new village built about thirty years ago when the tribes were forced to settle. A group of families from Kashkooli Tayefeh of the Ghashai tribe settled in this place, which was their summer pasture. After they were settled, only the few rich families who could hire people to move their cattle to summer and winter pastures were able to keep their cattle. Most families must cultivate on the dryland of their pasture. Agriculture is new among the people in this village.

The major crop in village A is wheat. A few rich families have started orchards to produce apples for the city market; the extension of these orchards could be a major source of employment in the village. There are some summer crops such as tomatoes.

Village A has a population of 360, with seventy-one households. About 30 percent of the families in this village do not have land and most young heads of households do seasonal work in the city. The village has a primary school and a health room staffed by a female health worker.

Village B (Cheramakan) is a very old village located fifteen kilometers from the main road. A large stream irrigates the land around the village and owned by the villagers. Almost all farms are irrigated and all villagers are farming families. Their main crops are wheat, barley, and peas. They have also summer crops such as tomatoes. There are some orchards which produce apples for cities in the southern region. There are only a few landless families in this village. With its extension down the hill on which it is located, it has a population of 310 with sixty-two households. The village has its own primary school.

Cultural, ecological, and economic differences exist between the

two villages. Village A has a tribal population of Turkish background and culture (the Ghashai tribe) which is only recently settled. Village B, with a long-settled population of Tajik (Persian) background, was built a long time ago. The land around village A is natural pastureland and has no source of water except for the winter rain. The land around village B is irrigated by a stream passing around the village. In village A tribal, peasant and urban economy are mixed: There are some dry-land farming, some animal husbandry and some seasonal urban employment. In village B all households depend on irrigated farming. Some families also keep small herds of goats and sheep. In general it is evident that labor is more necessary to the economy of village B than in village A.

Data and Method

As part of a household survey, data were collected on economic activities of children during the last two weeks of August 1980. This was toward the end of peak-season labor demand, during the period between May and September, when most crops were harvested and tomatoes and apples were being picked.

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire, from children aged eight to fourteen ($N = 109$). An attempt was made to include all children eight to fourteen in the survey. Based on the data from the household survey, we could cover 90 percent of the girls and 85 percent of the boys in this age group. For each child socioeconomic data were recorded from the household survey form. Then the child was asked to list all the labor activities that she/he had done during the previous two weeks within house or out and for her or his own family or for other families.

For the purpose of this study the labor activities of the children were divided into two groups. The first group includes activities such as fetching water, which do not directly contribute to economic production, but which do release time for adults who could make direct productive contributions. The second group are those activities which are directly productive, such as help in farming.⁵ Within each group some activities are listed separately because they are time consuming or important in the economic production of family in particular way, such as fetching water and irrigation. Other activities are grouped together, for example, sweeping or

5. This classification is borrowed from White (1976).

washing dishes, are grouped as "other household chores," and weeding is grouped in "farming activities."

Results

1. Economic activities of children. The time releasing activities reported by children include fetching water and firewood, other household chores such as sweeping, and tending younger brothers and sisters. Labor activities directly related to family production or family income include herding, irrigating and cutting grass for animals. Other farming activities include weeding or picking fruit. Some wage-earning jobs are also reported. Table 1 presents the rate of participation of children in the two groups of activities by sex in the two villages.

Table 1. *Participation of Children (Ages 8-14) in Direct and Indirect Activities*

Indirectly Productive Activities	Females	Males
Fetching Water	54.6%	57.0%
Other Household Chores	82.0	35.0
Tending Brothers & Sisters	75.0	00.0
Fetching Firewood	32.0	53.9
Directly Productive Activities		
Herding	18.3	38.6
Irrigation	2.3	29.3
Cutting Grass	13.7	26.2
Farming Activities	20.5	53.9
Wage-earning	9.1	18.5
N	(65)	(44)

It is evident that children's economic activities are sex-specific. The labor activities of female children are mostly those inside home. Almost 82 percent of female children report doing all kinds of chores around the house in comparison to 35.4 percent of male children. When it comes to tending brothers and sisters, the rate of participation for male children is zero but for females it is 75 percent. On the other hand, collecting fuel (wood) is mostly done by male children: 54 percent of male children in comparison to 32 percent of females. Fetching water is almost equally done by girls and boys.

Children start herding jobs as early as six or seven years in the

Iranian villages. This young age of activity as a shepherd is possible because herding does not need much skill or strength. About 20 percent of the female children reported various farming activities and 18.3 percent reported herding. Cutting grass for animals, usually one or two cows owned by the family, is reported by about 14 percent of female children. Females do not do much work for other families and hence only 9.1 percent reported wage-earning jobs. Irrigation not only requires skill but, like other economic resources of the village, is totally controlled by men. So it is natural that only 2.3 percent of female children reported irrigating activities.

For male children the rate of participation in directly productive activities is overwhelming in general and in comparison to female children in particular. In fact, for most productive activities the rate of participation for male children is more than two times the rate for female children. Among these activities the minimum rate of participation of male children is for cutting grass, which is reported by 26.2 percent of children. The labor activities that male children mostly do are those related to farming. They include weeding and picking fruits and tomatoes. Picking fruits and tomatoes are a major source of the economic contribution of the children to the family. It costs about 800 Rials per day to hire an adult male for picking tomatoes, while it costs about 350 Rials to have a child doing the job and it costs nothing if it is the child of the family owning the field. Note that 800 Rials is a lot of money for a family with three hectares of land which make about 150,000 Rials per year.

Irrigation needs skill and strength, especially if the family's turn for water is at night. So it is usually the older children and adults who do the irrigation work. Among male children in the two villages 30 percent reported participation in irrigating work. Herding is almost all done by youngsters. Rarely an adult man spends his time as a full-time shepherd unless he is administering several boys with a big herd of cattle. About 38 percent of male children reported participation in herding. Wage-labor activities are reported by 18.5 percent of male children.

2. Age pattern of economic activity

In addition to sex differences, variations exist in the economic activities of children by age. Table 2 presents the age differentials in economic activities of children. Fetching water decreases with age among both sexes. As girls become older, their rate of participation

in this kind of activity decreases and by age twelve it is half that of age below ten. A similar pattern is seen among boys. Other household chores are done more by older girls and to a less extent by older boys. For example, sweeping the house or washing dishes is all done by girls ten years or older and running errands is done by older boys. It is mostly younger girls who tend brothers and sisters. Collecting fire-wood required going out of house and hence less allowed for older girls. It is then natural that as female children age, their rate of participation in this kind of activity decreases. No systematic relation is found between age and participation in collecting wood.

Table 2. *Participation of Children (Ages 8-14) in Economic Activities by Age and Sex*

	Females			Males		
	10-	10-11	12-14	10-	10-11	13-14
Indirectly Productive Activities						
Fetching Water	77.8%	58.0%	43.0%	100.0%	55.6%	42.9%
Other Household Chores	77.8	89.5	85.8	00.0	33.4	48.6
Tending Brothers & Sisters	91.0	63.2	78.6	00.0	00.0	00.0
Fetching Wood	89.0	31.6	7.2	66.7	83.4	37.2
Directly Productive Activities						
Herding	27.3	21.1	07.2	37.2	39.0	41.8
Irrigation	9.1	00.0	00.0	20.0	38.9	41.7
Cutting Grass	27.3	15.8	00.0	11.5	28.8	66.7
Farming Activities	36.4	21.1	7.2	42.9	61.2	75.0
Wage-earning	36.4	00.0	00.0	14.3	22.3	25.0
N	(11)	(19)	(14)	(12)	(18)	(35)

Systematic relationships between age and directly productive activities of children are found. Yet, the direction of the relation is different for males and females. Among females, it is mostly the younger girls who participate in various productive activities. For instance, while 27 percent of those below age ten report taking part

in herding activity, the figures for those ten–eleven and those twelve and above are 21.1 and 7.2 respectively. Hence, as girls become older they participate less in all kind of directly productive activities which have to be done out of the house and require exposure to males. Note that wage-earning jobs are all done by girls below age ten.

The relationship between age and productive activities is positive among male children. While 41.8 percent of those twelve and older participate in irrigating, the rates for those ten–eleven and below ten are 38.9 and 20.0. Similar positive relationships exist for herding, cutting grass and farming activities. It is mostly the older boys who report having wage-earning jobs.

3. Family resources and economic activity of children

The labor of children is significant and could be utilized to the extent that other resources, particularly land, are available to the household. Table 3 presents the activity rate of children by the availability of land to the household. Except for household chores, other indirectly productive activities are significantly higher for other children in landed households. A similar pattern exists among male children. Those from landed households report a significantly higher rate of participation in fetching water and firewood. In general it is evident that children from landed households release time for adult members to get involved in the directly productive activities contributing to the family economy. On the other hand, adults from landless households could not use much of the time released by children as they do not have their own family land and other assets to combine with labor.

The second panel of Table 3 clearly shows that availability of land to the family increases the productivity of children. Note that except for cutting grass, the rate of participation of children of landless households in all directly productive activities is zero. Yet, for landed households, participation of female children in all productive activities is significantly high. For instance, 41.3 percent of them reported farming activities and 34.4 percent reported participation in herding.

Association between landholding and productive activities of children is more evident among boys. The boys from landed house-

Table 3 *Participation of Children (Ages 8-14) in Various Economic Activities by Landholding Status*

	Females		Males	
	Landed	Landless	Landed	Landless
Indirectly Productive Activity				
Fetching Water	62.0%	36.3%	68.0%	50.0%
Other Household Chores	75.8	100.0	19.1	86.3
Tending Brothers & Sisters	79.3	54.5	00.0	00.0
Fetching Firewood	51.7	9.0	55.3	36.3
Directly Productive Activities				
Herding	34.4	00.0	34.0	22.6
Irrigation	4.5	00.0	40.4	00.0
Cutting Grass	20.6	9.0	29.4	9.0
Farming Activity	41.3	00.0	78.7	00.0
Wage-earning	10.3	00.0	23.4	13.4
N	(29)	(15)	(43)	(22)

holds report a much higher rate of participation in productive activities than those from landless households. Among those from landed households 34 percent indicated that they have done herding in comparison to 22.6 percent of those from landless households. This difference is more salient with respect to such activities as irrigation. For irrigation, the rate of participation for boys from landless families is zero; for boys from landed families it is 40 percent. It is interesting that even the wage-earning jobs are done by boys from the landed families. This might be due to the fact that landed families only trust children from other landed families to do the activities needed in farming production.

4. Village differences in economic activity of children

Ecological and economic differences between the two villages should reflect in economic activities of children. Note that village A is a newly established village with people of tribal background while

are new in agriculture and the land they cultivate is their dry-land natural pasture. Village B is an old village with a tradition of agriculture and a large amount of irrigated land. Contrary to the situation in village A, almost all families in village B have their own land to farm. In village A some family heads do non-agricultural activity and commute to the city to work. Hence, with irrigated land, complete dependency on farming, and a long tradition of agriculture it is expected that children in village B will be more productive and have a higher rate of participation in the family economy. Data presented in Table 4 indicate that this is the case. For both girls and boys the rate of participation in all productive activities is at much higher level for village B than in village A. This is particularly notable with respect to farming and irrigation. For boys, only 5 percent in village A participate in irrigation in comparison to the rate of 77.8 percent for those in village B. For farming activities the rates are 25 and 100 percent respectively. There are, however, no systematic differences for indirectly productive activities between the two villages.

Table 4 *Village Differences in Economic Activity of Children (Ages 8-14)*

	Females		Males	
	Village A	B	Village A	B
Indirect Activities				
Fetching Water	89.0%	50.0%	100.0%	83.4%
Other Household Chores	100.0	50.0	25.0	5.6
Tending Brothers & Sisters	58.9	90.0	00.0	00.0
Fetching Firewood	23.6	61.2	95.0	72.9
Directly Productive Activities				
Herding	17.3	33.5	30.0	34.6
Irrigation	00.0	16.7	5.0	77.8
Cutting Grass	00.0	39.0	5.0	66.7
Farming Activity	00.0	72.3	25.0	100.0
Wage-earning	00.0	11.3	10.0	33.4
N	(20)	(24)	(34)	(31)

Discussion

Our findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Children in the two villages studied have significant level of participation in time-releasing and productive activities which contribute to the family economy. Wage-earning activities are reported much less than unpaid family work.

2. Children's labor activities are sex-specific. The activities of female children are those mostly done inside the home where they are separated from male strangers. This situation is more intensified as the girls get older and become teenagers. On the other hand, male children participate in a large range of activities outside the house. These activities are usually much more productive in comparison to activities of female children which are mostly time-releasing.

3. Directly productive activities of male children rise with age. For girls productive activities decrease with age as most of these activities are located out of the house where the girls cannot be secluded from male strangers.

4. The availability of land is highly associated with productive activities of children. For both male and female children, participation in productive activities is significantly more for children from landed households.

5. There are village differences in the level of participation in productive activities. Children in village B, where the economic structure is of the familial type and there is a long tradition of agriculture on irrigated land, the activity rate of children is at a much higher level than in village A.

These findings indicate the significance of the labor contribution of children in the Iranian villages. To the extent that the economic structure of these communities is of the household unit type where the family is the exclusive unit of production, children's labor is utilized for directly and indirectly productive activities. Hence, children are not unproductive to the family, though their labor might not be demanded at the village level. Also, at the family level, it is not the poor landless families who can utilize children's labor; rather, families with more land and other assets receive the most labor contribution from children. A consequence of this differential utility of children is the lower fertility of landless agricultural

laborers in comparison to peasants.⁶ The sex difference in the utility of children might be used to justify the irrationality of large families among peasants. This is again a situation which is different at the village and family levels. While it is true that at the village level cultural and particularly religious factors limit the opportunities of female children for labor contribution, at the family level this unfavorable situation is resolved by marrying off the girl when she is around fourteen, when she can no longer participate in productive activities as a single female. (Note that in her husband's house she contributes to the family economy by both production and reproduction.)

6. A. Aghajanian, "Family Economy and Fertility in the Iranian Rural Communities," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 9:3 (1978), p. 119-27.