

Gender and Social Empowerment through MGNREGS

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Introduction

As a rural wage employment programme, MGNREGA recognized the relevance of incorporating gender equity and empowerment in its design. Various provisions under the Act and its Guidelines, aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies.

From Financial Year (FY) 2006-07 up to FY 2011-12, around Rs. 53,000 crore have been spent on wages for women and around 47 per cent of the total person-days¹ generated have been by women. This paper synthesizes the findings from studies on the impact of such a transfer on the economic and social empowerment of women. It also reviews the literature on the reasons for high participation of women in the Scheme. Overall, MGNREGA has been a positive and important Scheme for women.

Women Participation in MGNREGA

With a national participation rate of 47 per cent, evidence suggest that women are participating in the Scheme more actively than in other works. Research also indicates that MGNREGA is an important work opportunity for women who would have otherwise remained unemployed or underemployed. However, the significant inter-state variation in participation of women requires further research and analysis. In FY 2011-12, Kerala had the highest women participation at 93 per cent, while Uttar Pradesh and Jammu participation at 18 per cent and 17 per cent respectively.

Significantly, female share on works under MGNREGA is greater than their share of work in the casual wage labour²market across all States.³ Women are participating in the Scheme much more actively than they participated in all forms of recorded work.⁴ This may support the hypothesis that MGNREGA creates decent and favourable work conditions for women. For instance, MGNREGA's stipulation of work within 5 kilometres (kms) of the village where the job applicant resides makes participation in the scheme logistically feasible for women who may have limited employment opportunities available to them, given their role and responsibilities in their households. A study conducted across ten sample districts of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh seems to confirm these findings; only 30 per cent of the women in the sample recalled earning a cash income from a source other than MGNREGA, in the three months preceding the survey. Of the total women in the sample, 50 per cent said that in the absence of MGNREGA they would have worked at home or would have remained unemployed.⁵

Some of the possible factors responsible for a high rate of participation in the southern states could be:

- Cultural acceptance of female participation in the labour force,⁶
- Influence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs),⁷
- Effective institutions at the State and local government level that are committed to promoting female participation in MGNREGA,
- Wage differentials between private sector and MGNREGA,⁸

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- Higher rationing⁹ in poorer states such that there are still a higher percentage of women in casual wage.¹⁰

Reduced Differential Wages and Wage Party

MGNREGA has reduced traditional gender wage discrimination, particularly in the public works¹¹ sector. The NSSO 66th Round¹² indicates that MGNREGA has reduced the traditional wage discrimination in public works. As per the data, average wage for labour in MGNREGA was ₹ 90.9 per day for men, and for women it was ₹ 87 per day. The difference was larger for labour in other public works; ₹ 98 per day for men and ₹ 86.1 per day for women.¹³ Other studies also suggest an upward movement of unskilled wages for women post-MGNREGA.

Economic Independence and Empowerment of Women

Preliminary findings suggest that the increased access to paid work due to MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's socio-economic status and general well-being. For instance, in a survey conducted across six states, 82 per cent of the widows in the sample regarded MGNREGA as a very important source of income, and of the total sample, 69 per cent of the women stated that MGNREGA had helped them avoid hunger. Findings from different studies also observe that post MGNREGA, women have greater control over their wages and have been spending them on repaying small debts. Paying for their children's schooling and bearing medical expenses etc.

Improved access to economic resources and paid work has had a positive impact on the socio-economic status of the women. In a survey of 600 women workers across five districts of Chhattisgarh, it was observed that women respondents with a household income below ₹ 8,000 decreased from 94 per cent due to MGNREGA, indicating the importance of MGNREGA for the poorest of the poor.¹⁴ This was also apparent in the findings of another study which concluded that in Rajsamand and Dungarpur (Rajasthan), where migration to urban areas offers relatively higher incomes for men, much of the MGNREGA workers were found to be women and older men who had discontinued migration.¹⁵

Studies also indicate that women exercise independence in collection and spending of MGNREGA wages, indicating greater decision-making power within the households. In Andhra Pradesh, when 600 women workers were interviewed across five districts, it was found that almost 47 per cent of the respondents received wages themselves, 50 per cent received wages along with their husbands and wages of around 4 per cent respondents were paid to their husbands. In Rajasthan, almost 91 per cent of the 600 women respondents received wages themselves and another 4 per cent received wages along with their husbands. Other States, including Bihar and Chhattisgarh reflected similar trends.¹⁶

In a large number of cases, women indicated that they had a substantial say in the way this money was spent. They were able to utilize the money for avoiding hunger, repaying small debts, paying for their child's schooling and bearing medical expenses. In a survey conducted in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, and Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh, 81 per cent and 96 per cent of the women said they had spent their earning from the Scheme on food and consumer goods. MGNREGA is also a relevant and steady source of employment for women-headed households. In a survey six States, 82 per cent of the widows in the sample regarded MGNREGA as a very important source of income. Further, of the total sample, 67 per cent of the women stated that MGNREGA had helped them avoid hunger and 46 per cent said it had helped them avoid illness.^{17, 18, 19.}

Women have also reported better access to credit and financial institutions. The mandatory transfer of wage payment through bank accounts has ensured that a greater number of women are brought into institutional finance from which they had been largely excluded.^{20, 21}

Research suggests that qualitative and quantitative improvements in gender equations across various spheres (social, political and economic) coupled with positive changes in self-perception gradually result in

the empowerment of women and engender lasting social change.²² Findings of a study conducted in Meghalaya suggested that the necessity of interacting with the bank/post office/government officials have empowered the rural tribal women by enhancing their confidence level and by ensuring some degree of independence, both in matters of finance and decision-making. For example, the role of women was limited in the traditional Khasi²³ society. Due to the policy of reservation for women in MGNREGA women have been able to seek representation in decision-making bodies, including the Village Employment Councils (VECs)²⁴.

Other concerns related to implementation have also been highlighted by studies on the subject. As per a study, only 33 per cent of the sample workers in the six States surveyed (both men and women) stated they had attended a Gram Sabha (GS)²⁵ during the 12 months preceding the study. Women, in particular, were not aware of their right to participate in a GS. For long-term gender equality to be realized, women need to participate at all levels (not only as workers but also in worksite management and in staff appointments), and in all spheres (e.g. planning through participation in GSc, social audits, etc.)^{26,27}

To address some of these concerns, the Scheme may incorporate particular provisions related to gender-specific lifecycle needs, such as allowing women time off for breastfeeding and flexibility in terms of women's working hours, so that they can balance their domestic care and work responsibilities. Increasing the share of women in MGNREGA staff appointments would also go a long way. Specific policy considerations for female-headed households, may further increase women participation and make the Scheme more gender sensitive.²⁸

MGNREGA, Gender and Ecology

Women rely heavily on natural common property resources like water, fuel, etc., and since MGNREGA plays an important role in natural resource regeneration, the Scheme seems to be strengthening livelihood security for women.

While considering the Scheme's impact on gender, one needs to keep in mind the link between environment and livelihood security. In a context where the large majority of women are dependent on agriculture and where household access to water and fuel relies heavily on common property, local resources are clearly a major source of well-being, or risk.²⁹ Women are more severely affected by climate change and natural disasters because of their social roles (providing daily essentials like food, fuel, fodder, water, etc.). Migration again leads to extra hardships for women since in cases of extreme circumstances men tend to migrate leaving the women-folk behind to look after their property and household. In dry land areas, female-headed households are often ones which are the poorest, and to manage the house women put in significantly extra efforts.³⁰ MGNREGA, through the creation of sustainable rural assets, water conservation and forestry works, has the potential to contribute to ecological restoration and generate environmental benefits through increased livelihood security, especially for rural women, to climate change and other shocks.

Experts on gender studies point out that part of the problem women face in household provisioning in areas of high dependence on natural resources is due to a lack of defined rights over community assets. At present a large number of women workers have minimal rights to the productive assets they work on even under the Scheme and this contributes to persistence of social exclusion. Organizational arrangements at the local level are needed to reduce the problem of implementation of gender-specific policy measures. These may include rights to maintenance, sharing, etc.³¹ Further, a more detailed gendered analysis of MGNREGA may be necessary to make rural asset generation an inclusive process and address the crises underlying increasing feminization of poverty in India.³²

References

1. Person-day in the context of MGNREGA is defined as one day of work. In other words, one person-day of work entitles a worker to the MGNREGA notified wage as per the Schedule of Rates (SoRs).

2. Casual labour refers to work on non-public work. For details, see P. Dutta, R. Murgai, M. Ravallion, and W.V. Dominique, 'Does India's Employment Guarantee Scheme Guarantee Employment?', Policy Research Paper, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012.
3. Dutta, Murgai, Ravallion and Dominique, 'Does India's Employment Guarantee Scheme Guarantee Employment?', Policy Research Paper, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012.
4. J. Ghosh, 'Equity and Inclusion through Public Expenditure: The Potential of the NREGS', New Delhi: Paper for International Conference on NREGA, 21-22 January 2009.
5. Dreze and R. Khera, *The Battle for Employment Guarantee*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 43-81.
6. K. Bonner, et al., 'MGNREGA Implementation': A Cross-State Comparison, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 2012.
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. Rationing of demand: Households that are willing to work and seeking employment under the NREGA but not being given work.
10. Dutta Murgai, Ravallion and Dominique', *op.cit.*
11. Public works are development projects/works that are undertaken for public use and owned by the government.
12. NSSO, 66th Round National Survey, July 2009- June 2010, Employment and Unemployment, 2009-10.
13. *ibid.*
14. C. Dheeraja and H. Rao, 'Changing Gender Relations: A Study of MGNREGS across Different States,' Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), 2010.
15. T. Shah, S. Verma, R. Indu and P. Hemant, *Asset Creation through Employment Guarantee? Synthesis of Student Case Studies in 9 States of India*, International Water Management Institute (IWMI), 2010.
16. Dheeraja and Rao, *op.cit.*
17. Khera and Nayak, 'Women Workers and Perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, no. 43, 29 October 2009.
18. National Federation for Indian Women (NFIW), *Social-Economic Empowerment of Women under NREGA*, Report Submitted to the Ministry of Rural Development/UNDP, NFIW, 2008.
19. Dreze and Khera, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-81.
20. Ghosh,*op.cit.*
21. Dheeraja and Rao, *op.cit.*
22. *ibid*
23. Khasi is the name of a tribe in the state of Meghalaya.
24. Indian Institute of Management-Shilong (IIM-S), 'Appraisal of MGNREGA in Sikkim and Meghalaya,' Shillong: IIM, Report submitted to the Ministry of Rural Development/UNDP, 2009. The Village Employment Councils for the implementation of NREGA are the equivalents of the Gram Sabha and thus are vested with the powers and functions of the Gram Sabha as envisaged in the Act.
25. Gram Sabha are convened by the Gram Panchayat to disseminate information to the people as well as to ensure that development of the village is done through participation or consent of all households.

26. A social audit refers to an audit of all processes and procedures under the Scheme, including Wage Payments, Muster Rolls, etc. It normally involves a scrutiny of all documents and records of work done.
27. Khera and Nayak, *op.cit*
28. R. Homes, S. Rath and N. Sadana, 'An Opportunity for Change? Gender Analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act,' Overseas Development Institute and Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, February 2011.
29. Sudarshan, 'India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Women's Participation and Impacts in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan', Institute of Development Studies (IDS), 2011.
30. P. Ghosh, S. Narain, J. Parikh, N. Sazena and P. Soni, 'Climate Change: Perspectives form India', New Delhi: UNDP, 2009.
31. G. Kelkar, 'Gender and Productive Assets: Implications for the National Rural Employment Guarantee for Women's Agency and Productivity', UNIFEM, 2009.
32. Sudarshan, *op.cit*.