

Women's Empowerment through MGNREGA

Shivani Verma

Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, D.N. (PG) College, Meerut

Abstract

The Purpose of this paper is to highlight the impact of women empowerment through MGNREGA. Overall preliminary finding confirm that the MGNREGA has the potential to stimulate local development, if the management and delivery are good, and that women's weak position in the labor market has been greatly helped. The national Rural Employment guarantee act (MGNREGA) was part of the commitments made by the united Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in its Common Minimum Programme and came in to force in February 2006-initially in 200 selected districts, at one each one state .it has been hailed as a landmark and has attracted national and international attention .it has diverse objectives. On the other hand, through providing guarantee employment in rural areas, it also seeks to improve labor market outcomes. This paper reviews India's approach to social protection since independence and places the NREGA within the broader social protection discourse. It looks at how gender concerns have been addressed within public works, and specifically in the MGNREGA guidelines.

Keywords : *women empowerment, gender development, gender discrimination, social protection.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Rural Employment guarantee act (NREGA) was part of the commitments made by the united Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in its Common Minimum Programme and came in to force in February 2006-initially in 200 selected districts, at one each one state .it has been hailed as a landmark and has attracted national and international attention .it has diverse objectives. On the one hand it is a social protection measure and builds on the experience of previous public programmes, especially the employment guarantee scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra. On the other hand, through providing guarantee employment in rural areas, it also seeks to improve labor market outcomes.

This paper reviews India's approach to social protection since independence and places the MGNREGA within the broader social protection discourse. It looks at how gender concerns have been addressed within public works, and specifically in the MGNREGA guidelines. The last section of the paper presents national overview of women empowerment. It suggests that the level of women's participation has been strongly influenced on the demand side by male-female wage differences in the markets, and between markets wages and minimum wages .On supply side ,It has been influenced by the commitment of various states government and efficient management efforts done at Gram Panchayat Level. The net impact has extended beyond the transfer of income to enhanced savings. An upward movement of the female market

wages and an increase in men's contribution to household management. Challenges remain, and these are noted.

2. SOCIAL PROTECTION

The term social protection and the debates and discussions around it -the what, for whom, how -have momentum since the mid-1990s. Internationally, social protection gained greater attention after the Asian financial crisis, which resulted in huge job losses, and as more evidence came in to suggest that globalization and its economic and financial repercussions have adverse consequences for certain groups and sectors. The national context has been set, on the one hand, by changes in the macro policy framework and internal pressures for labor market reform, and on the other by continuing high levels of poverty and vulnerability.

This paper briefly reviews the experience with social protection policies and programmes in India in recent years, as for study of the MGNREGA.

The early 1990s marked a watershed in both the economic policy framework and the social protection discourse in India. Regarding the economic policy framework, the period after 1990s is associated with economic liberalization, reflected in changes in key macro indicator. Since 1991, the share of trade in the GDP, a summary indicator of an economy's openness, has shown a steady increase.

Prior to 1990, the policy approach and programmes included under the rubric of 'social protection' were narrowly defined and their outreach very limited. Post 1990, there has been efforts to expand both concept and outreach, although actual achievements may fall short of intentions. The changes in thinking owes much to concerns that a higher economic growth rate will be difficult to sustain without also simultaneously improving workers productivity, their working conditions, and fallback positions /safety nets. The often divergent concerns of those primarily focused on growth, and those seeking to ensure workers rights have found common ground in contestation over social security.

The design and implementation of social protection programmes is social protection is also

strongly associated with 1993 decentralization of government through the creation of panchyati raj (village government) institutions.

3. SOCIAL PROTECTION IN INDIA

The Idea that governments have a responsibility to initiate public action to ameliorate the poverty and vulnerability of individual citizens is an old one. Yet it is only in the last decade that social protection has emerged as an important component of development planning in Asian countries. In the past, the more commonly used terms have been social security and social assistance, or social welfare and social insurance. These terms include the concept of protection, but in different ways. Perhaps the most specific and clearly defined of these terms is social security.

In India, social security is mandated by articles 32 of the constitutions, and supports the idea of universal coverage for specified situations.

The State shall, within the limit of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education, and public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness, disablement and other undeserved want.

A two-pronged approach was taken in implementation this mandate, through the provision of 'social security' on the one hand and 'social welfare' on the other. Social security was designed for workers employed on a regular basis in the organized sector. It included an employees' insurance, and a provident fund scheme. The coverage of this scheme has been gradually expanded over the years. Social welfare was seen as a women, children, youth, family, scheduled caste (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), other 'backward' classes, the physically disabled and others .while originally designed as a welfare approach ,this gradually gave way to a development -oriented and then an empowerment approach.

4. PUBLIC WORKS AS A SOCIAL PROTECTION MECHANISM

Within the social protection umbrella, public works have probably had the largest outreach. Public works schemes have been an important measure of

poverty alleviation worldwide. In India, large scale public works were instituted as drought/famine relief under the aegis of the British. The Famine Commission Report of 1180 established 'famine codes'. These 'scarcity manuals' explicitly stated that it was the responsibility of the state in the event of natural calamities to provide employment to all at a reasonable distance from home, and gratuitous relief for those unable to work. Post-independence, rural wage employment programmes have been popular as a way of providing relief at times of crisis, and preventing costly adjustments such as the sale of land and livestock, and/or distress migration. Where durable assets are created, there is a Contribution to rural infrastructure. These programmes can put an upward pressure on market wage rates by attracting people to public works programmes. While public works programmes to provide employment in times of distress have a long history, there was only a major thrust to wage employment programmes after self-sufficiency in food grains was attained in the 1970s.

A major criticism of wage employment programmes has been that they generate relief type employment rather than employment through the creation of productive assets, without which they cannot contribute to the generation of sustainable and productive employment.

Within the many public works schemes that have been experimented with in India, the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra has a special place.

5. EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME IN MAHARASHTRA

The Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra is the longest surviving programme of its kind. It is unique because its design and execution exhibit unusually clear goals a consistent approach. The scheme grew out of the pilot experiment - known as the Page scheme after V.S. Page - in Sangli, Maharashtra in 1965. In 1970, it was extended to cover 11 districts and in 1972 to the entire state. Employment was guaranteed to all able-bodied adults who came forward for it. It was implemented by the existing administrative system in the state at very little

additional cost. It was largest state-sponsored public works programme focused on the poverty alleviation, and guaranteed gainful employment to all adults above 18 years of age in rural areas and 'C' class municipal councils. Selection for employment was based on willingness to undertake unskilled manual work on a piece-rate basis and self-targeting. The important short-term objective was to add to household income based on employment and, in the long term, to contribute to the development of rural infrastructure and create sustained employment opportunities. There were provisions like an unemployment allowance, shelter and first aid, and there was to be no discrimination on the basis of gender or caste. The benefits of EGS were many employment and income earning opportunities, food security for the poor, income stabilization and parity of wages between men and women.

Some of the shortcomings identified are:

- ❖ The gap between commencing work and getting paid
- ❖ Non-availability of continuous employment
- ❖ Leakage due to under - utilization of the fund
- ❖ No unemployment allowance or compensation for anyone involved in the scheme
- ❖ Low awareness of entitlements
- ❖ An absence of linkages between works and large plans for the district.

6. THE IMPACT OF EGS ON WOMEN

In a seminal study of the Maharashtra EGS and women's participation, it is reported that a higher percentage of women than men were seen on the sites, that more women came to work than were registered, that the majority were between 30-50 years of age, and that they were principally landless or small or marginal farmers lacking any other work. The women reported an improvement in family food/nutrition as a result of the EGS work.

Female employment under the scheme as a percentage of total employment in person days was reported as 38 per cent in 1995-6. It increased to 73 per cent in 1998-9, but declined to 57 per cent in

1999-2000. Studies have also shown that in terms of family coping strategies, men are that first to use migration or alternative employment to improve the family's economic status, while women are responsible for basic survival strategies.

7. MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT (MGNREGA) 2006

All previous programmes of wage employment through public works are now merged into the MGNREGA. The NREGA builds upon earlier public works programmes, including the National Rural Employment Programme 1980-89; Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme 1983-89; Jawahar Rozgar Yojna 1989-99; Employment Assurance Scheme 1993-99; Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojna 1999-2002; Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna since September 2001, National Food For Work Programme 2004 (a precursor of the NREGA), and the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The NREGA has a multiplicity of objectives, and is seen as an intervention to stimulate local development as much as a means of social protection. Expected outcomes include :

- ❖ An increase in employment and purchasing power
- ❖ Women's participation in the workforce
- ❖ The strengthening of rural infrastructure through the creation of durable assets
- ❖ Regeneration of natural resources that provide the livelihood resource base of the local rural economy.
- ❖ An increase in productivity
- ❖ A reduction in distress migration.

The Act was initially implemented in 200 of the country's poorest and least developed districts, and has now been extended to the entire country. The Employment Guarantee Act 2005 guarantees 100 days' paid work each year for every rural household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work. In this way, it envisages improving the livelihood security or rural households.

The NREGA places a major part of the responsibility for its implementation on the panchayats (village councils). For example, whereas the district collector and his/her team are expected to monitor and supervise other public works, in the case of the NREGA, these are the responsibility of the panchayat. The Act works through the decentralized system of governance that has been in place since the early 1990s and the local community can create project to meet local needs through the gram sabha (a permanent body of people on the local electoral roll that monitors panchayat plans). Each panchayat is expected to prepare a list of projects (technically approved and economically viable) so that the NREGA works reflect village priorities. All adults living in rural areas are free to apply for a job card. After verification, the panchayat issues one card to each household. Anyone with a job card can apply to the panchayat for work when needed, and work has to be provided within 15 days, within a 5 km radius. Over the course of a year, 100 days of work is guaranteed to each household.

The Act aims to provide wages equivalent to the rural minimum wage in each area or Rs. 60 per day, whichever is greater. However, in contrast to earlier public works, payment is based on how much work is completed by the group of workers on a site. The total amount due is calculated, and distributed equally between all.

Obviously, the output will be influenced by whether or not there is any 'free rider', the age composition of the group and the climate, quality of soil, etc. Despite any observed shortcoming in implementation, the importance of NREGA lies in its implications for development process, giving emphasis to domestic markets and to full participation of poor people in economic processes.

8. GENDER CONCERNS

Gender issues in social protection In India, the majority of the approximately 462.1 million people living below the poverty line are women (Social watch India Report 2014). Globalization has ensured that women's labor is further actualized - women have lesser means, education and skills, and fewer productive

assets than men. Given their additional responsibilities within the household, their range of employment options are severely limited. This feminization of poverty is associated with a concentration of women in the informal sector and in agriculture, putting them beyond the reach of traditional social security measures. Women thus find themselves vulnerable, caught between unorganized work and household responsibilities, and lacking access to support in the event of seasonal or life cycle contingencies.

Women as workers are concentrated in agriculture (85% of all women workers) informal work and, in particular, home-based work over 50% of non-agricultural workers). As agricultural workers, women have a strong connection with the land and are heavily influenced by fluctuation in agricultural output. As informal/ home-based workers,

Women are often invisible, dependent on informal arrangements and contracts and, as some research suggests, most dependent on local and domestic markets. Their lower mobility into new areas is dependent on several factors, including household and care responsibilities, traditional social norms, and a lack of information and skills.

Understand gendered roles are a key factor. 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 - nor risk. Given the dismal lack of gender sensitivity in public policy in general, it is not surprising that public works in particular have not been explicitly concerned with women. Rural employment schemes have, on occasion, even displaced women - for example afforestation on agricultural lands under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana. Reducing the distance between work site and home, providing crèche facilities, paying a ratio of food and cash (given that women should have greater control over the use of grain) and equal wages are core programme features that have a marked impact on women's participation in public works.

Public work schemes have traditionally concentrated on road, forestry, housing irrigation and soil conservation. They may also be used to produce

services and assets specific to women, such as food kitchens, domestic violence shelters and health clinics - a development that will only come about with women's increased participation in decision-making. Gender biases in public employment are manifested in the lower wages paid to women. While it is ostensibly because women are excluded from physically more difficult tasks, it also carries deeper resonances of inequality.

Combating gender inequality is not the same as combating poverty. In attempting to 'mainstream' their issues, poverty programmes and gender programmes have often neglected the intersection between them, i.e., poor women. Since the 1970s, the Indian Government has made poverty reduction a priority in its development planning. Policies have ranged from ensuring food security and promoting self-employment through greater access to assets to increasing wage employment and improving access to basic social services. Policies' effects on poor women could differ from those on poor men - thus requiring greater attention to designing poverty programmes with poor women in mind.

9. GENDER AND THE MGNREGA

The MGNREGA, with its guarantee of 100 days of unskilled work for every household, has been envisaged as a gender sensitive scheme. It allows for crèche facilities on work sites, insists that one-third of all participants are women, and do not discriminate between the sexes. However, a gendered analysis of the programme is necessary to make rural assets generation an inclusive process and address the crises underlying an increasing feminization of poverty in India.

The main way in which social protection seeks to be 'gender sensitive' - and this is true also of the NREGA - is to suggest that a certain percentage of beneficiaries must be women. While providing employment, priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under the scheme. (MGNREGA, Schedule II, Section 6:19)

Given that agriculture is increasingly dependent

on women cultivators as more men move out of agriculture, the availability of NREGA work is expected to be especially beneficial to women. Today 53 per cent of all male workers but 75 per cent of all female workers, and 85 per cent of all rural female workers, are in agriculture. Women constitute 40 per cent of the agricultural workforce and this percentage is rising. Also an estimated 20 per cent of rural households are de facto female-headed, due to widowhood, desertion, or male out-migration. These women are often managing agriculture and providing family subsistence with little male assistance.

The NREGA provides some explicit entitlement for women to facilitate their full participation. These include:

- ❖ Equal wages for men and women. The guidelines spell out clear instruction for equal payment of wages for men and women. 'Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers and the provision of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with.'
- ❖ Participation in management and monitoring of the programme. As per the guidelines, a local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee is to be appointed with members from the immediate locality or village where the work is undertaken, to monitor the progress and quality of work. 'The gram sabha will elect the members of this Committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.'
- ❖ Participation in social audit. The guidelines mention a social audit forum, convened by the gram sabha every six months as part of the continuous auditing process. There is stress on the quorum of these meetings maintaining female participants alongside those from other disadvantaged groups. 'The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient in particular for REGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalized communities.'
- ❖ Providing support for child care, and convenience to households. The guideline

mention the need for a crèche at the work site, and for the works to be convenient for families: 'if some applicants have to be directed to report for work beyond 5 km of their residence, women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work on the work sites nearer to their residence. 'Also, 'If several members of a household who share the same job card are employed simultaneously under the Scheme, they should be allowed to work on the same work site.'

- ❖ Ensuring that single women are eligible. Finally, through recognizing a single person as a 'household', the Act makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work.

10. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION & EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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 FY 2006-07 up to FY 2013-14, around Rs 72,000 crore have been spent on wages for women and around 53 per cent of the total person-days generated have been by women.

It also reviews the literature on the reasons for high participation of women in the Scheme and inter-state variations in participation. Overall, MGNREGA has been a positive and important Scheme for women.

11. NATIONAL OVERVIEW

With a national participation rate of 53 per cent, evidence suggests 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 2013-14 Kerala had the highest women participation at 93 per cent, while Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir showed low levels of women participation at 18 per cent and 17 per cent respectively.

The participation of women in the Scheme has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent. The percentage of women participation from FY 2006-07 up to FY 2014-15 is provided in Table below significantly, female share on works under MGNREGA is greater than their share of work in the casual wage labor market across all States.

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 FY 2006-07 up to FY 2013-14 (up to Dec, 2014), around Rs 72,000 crores have been spent on wages for women. Women participation rate has ranged between 40-48 per cent of the total person-days generated much above the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent. Infact, the participation rate of women under the Scheme has been higher than in all forms of recorded work. Research studies also indicate that MGNREGA is an important work opportunity for women who would have otherwise remained unemployed or underemployed. With an increased rate of participation and large amounts being spent on wages for women, studies and field evidence suggest a positive impact of the Scheme on the economic well-being of women.

The Scheme has also led to gender parity in wages. The NSSO 66th Round indicated that MGNREGA has reduced traditional wage discrimination in public works. Access to economic resources has also had a favorable impact on the social status of women, for example women have a greater say in the way the money is spent in households. A large percentage of these women spend their money to avoid hunger, repay small debts, paying their child's schooling etc.

12. ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Preliminary findings suggest that the increased access to paid work due to NREGA has had a positive

impact on women's socio-economic status and general well-being. For instance, among all the 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 had a positive impact on the socio economic status of the women. Indicating the importance of MGNREGA for the poorest of the poor. 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. 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. 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 utilise 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.

Table 1 : Women's participation in the MGNREGA

State	Total Person Days (Lakhs) Expenditure Per Household (Rupees)	Total Female Work Days (Lakhs)	Female Share Of Total Person Days (Percentage)	Expenditure Per Household (Rupees)
TAMILNADU	387.27	317.56	82	4118.422
TRIPURA	69.13	52.53	76	8295.6
RAJASTHAN	1098.87	747.23	68	7897.532
KERELA	50.32	33.21	66	3187.867
ANDHARA PRADESH	876.77	482.22	55	4512.056
GUJRAT	138.84	70.81	51	4132.170
KARNATKA	321.01	163.72	51	5124.357
MANIPUR	28.32	14.44	51	12908.54
MADHYA PRADESH	2671.77	1175.58	44	7489.364
CHATTISGARH	801.27	320.51	40	6129.890
JHARKHAND	614.74	245.89	40	4632.15
MAHARASHTRA	213.28	81.05	38	5520.18
PUNJAB	29.27	11.13	38	8927.057
ODISA	999.34	359.76	36	6260.956
MIZORAM	17.85	6.05	34	5001.119
ASSAM	752.29	240.73	32	8747.188
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	37.12	11.51	31	8018.001
UTTRAKHAND	49.60	15.38	31	8752.121
NAGALAND	25.08	7.52	30	6124.224
SIKKIM	5.60	1.4	25	7673.476
WEST BENGAL	549.18	104.34	19	2279.396
BIHAR	649.87	116.98	18	5817.274
UTTAR PRADESH	922.91	156.89	17	4029.928
HIMACHAL PRADESH	37.89	4.93	13	7203.546
JAMMU & KASHMIR	41.20	2.06	5	3117.191

Source: <http://nrega.nic.in/states/nregampr.asp> accessed on dec 2014

13. CONCLUSION

A review of social protection approaches in India shows that until the 1990s, most schemes were contributory and applicable to workers in the organized sector. The dominant majority of workers in the informal economy were excluded from social security

provision. Anti-poverty programmes provided some measure of relief, and welfare fund covered a few groups of unorganized workers in parts of the country.

Since the early 1990s, the better growth performance, as well as stronger political commitment, has led to many more social protection programmes

being started. Among these, the NREGA stands out for the fact that it is demand driven had greater permanence than other schemes, covers the whole country, and has the potential both to provide a minimum income and stimulated local development.

Public policy and public works in India have generally tried to include women as a percentage of beneficiaries, but have not paid enough attention to gender sensitive design. The NREGA in its design in its design has attempted some gender sensitivity.

findings suggest that, there has been some shift out agriculture into the NREGS, mainly with respect to female workers. Since the minimum wage paid under the NREGS is far greater than the market agricultural wage for female workers, women who were not

working previously have started to do so on NREGS sites. There seems to have been some 'smoothing' of income or consumption. The fact that NREGS wages are paid through banks encourages saving and, reportedly, some percentage is left in the account as savings.

The actual performance of the NREGS in India owes much too state government commitment and the managerial role of the Block and area development supervisors in particular. Overall, findings confirm that the NREGS has the potential to stimulate local development, if the management and delivery are good; and that women's weak position in the labor market has been greatly helped.

○

REFERENCES

1. IIMS journal of management science titled "What Next For MGNREGA" published in year 2013, vol.4, by Gaparaju Srikant & Shome Sanik.
2. 14th July 2012 "Dainik Jagran" a hindi newspaper "Successful journey of MGNREGA (Analysis of achievements and problems of MGNREGA in its first phase) done by Mr. Jai Ram Ramesh)" written by central Minister of Rural development Mr., Jai Ram Ramesh.
3. J.S.Mehta "MGNREGA -The right to work" vol one 2012 first edition.
4. Research Paper on "Understanding NREGA: - A simple theory and some facts (Jan 2011)" prepared by the Uday Bhanu Sinha (Delhi school of economics) prepared for Centre for Development Economics.
5. Business magazine "Business Standard Nov 2009" Aruna Roy responds to changes being made in NREGA.
6. Jian, Devaki (1979) Impact on Women workers: Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, Delhi: Institute of Social studies Trust.

Websites

1. <http://planningcommisison.nic.in>
2. <http://rural.nic.in>
3. <http://nrega.nic.in>
4. <http://nceus.gov.in>
5. <http://indiabudget.nic.in>
6. www.wikipedia.org
7. <http://wcd.nic.in>