

Gender Perspectives on Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India: Study across SAT Villages

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Abstract

This policy brief presents the key findings and policy suggestions on gender aspects of implementation of MGNREGS in dryland region of India. This is based on the recent study across 10 villages in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Nearly 30% of the total 490 women respondents surveyed indicated that they used the wage income from MGNREGS towards meeting daily consumption needs, while 20% reported using the wage income for meeting the expenses towards education of children and meeting health needs of the household. By and large, about 70% of the respondents also observed that their status in the household and the community had increased after working in MGNREGS and securing equal wage payments.

However, women are deprived of having the real control over decision making process in respect of MGNREGS work allocation or wages paid to them, through more representation of women in Gram Sabhas, and issuing job cards in the name of women participants. In fact, the program can be more women friendly by increasing duration of work for women participants over 100 days per year, regular and assured work per annum basis, payment of wages on daily basis

rather than measurement of work, broadening the scheme to accommodate non-farm works, as well. Similarly, more involvement of women led Self-Help Groups in implementing the activities under MGNREGS in a village would also encourage more women to participate in the programme.

Likewise, the scheme can be made more women friendly and effective by associating it with health insurance or other long-term welfare measures. Our findings suggest that the program has attracted women more than men- who are also more likely to outmigrate for high paying jobs than women. Thus, to some extent, the MGNREGS effectively caters the Social safety nets function of the program in terms of involvement of women in the program.

1. Introduction: Women in the workforce

In India, women are yet to get their rightful share in the economic and social spheres. Demographically, women constitute nearly half of the Indian population as per 2011 census, but their share in the labour force is only 31%. This does not mean that women in India do not work, but most of them are concentrated in non-formal sector and unpaid domestic or household activities. Women in India in most of the

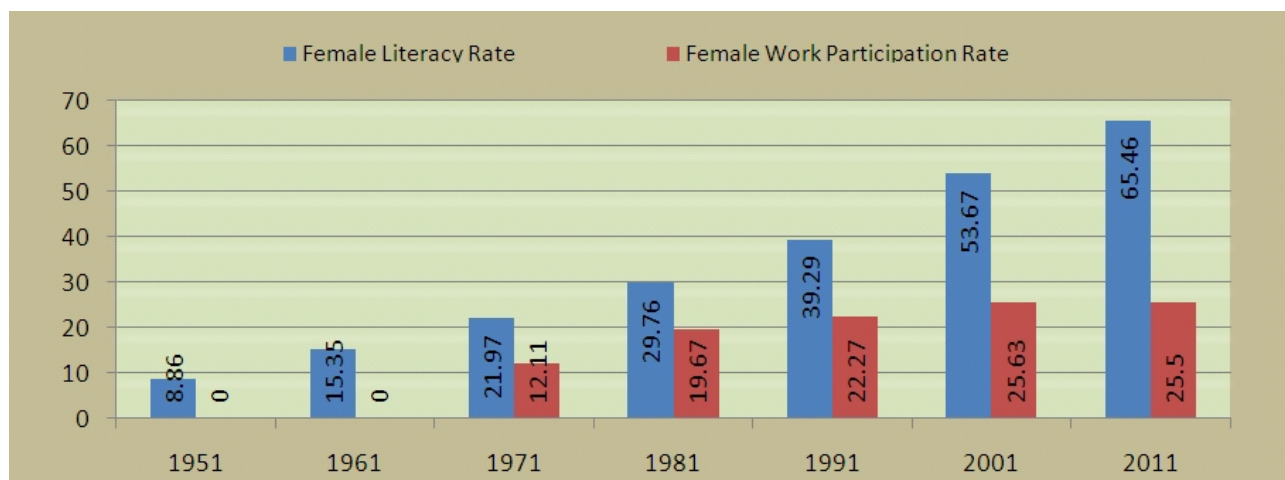
households shoulder the responsibility of household chores as well as play active role in family run agriculture, manufacturing and service activities. Most of these women remain in unpaid or low paid work. Those who work outside their home are either underpaid for their labour or support the men of the household for which no extra payment is made (NCEUS, 2009, Antonopou Antonopoulos and Hirway, 2010). India's aggregate level labour force participation rate has declined from 37 per cent in 2004-05 to 29 per cent in 2009-10 (NSSO, 2011, Mitra and Verick, 2013), which is highly reflective of the lower work participation among women. Part of this decline (44% to be precise) in labour force could be attributed to enrollment of females above age 15 years for education (Rangarajan et al, 2011). As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2013), India ranks 11th from bottom among 131 countries in women's labour force participation.

Women in India face much discrimination

from their birth to adulthood in matters of health, education, asset ownership and participation in economic activities (NIPCCD, 2010). The patriarchal society despite several interventions from the state still holds its sway over vast regions in the country especially in rural areas, where women are destined to take care of their families, fulfill the reproductive duties and help the men in the household enterprises/activities. Though female literacy rate has increased over the years and the gap between male and female literacy rates have declined, this has not benefited women in asserting themselves in matters of reproductive choices, ownership over economic assets and participation in labour force.

Figure1 shows that from 1951 onwards, the literacy rate has gone up while women participation in workforce has declined in India. It strengthens the argument that women being more literate hardly make any difference by facilitating their entry in the labour market.

Figure 1: Literacy and Female Work Participation at All India Level (%)



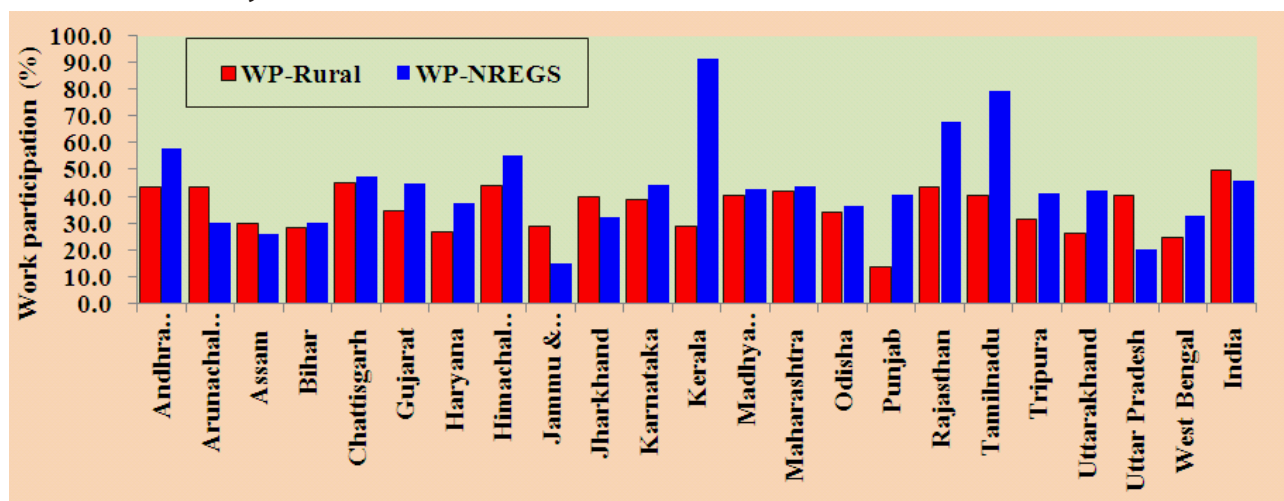
Source: Census India for various years

As per Census 2011, the workforce participation rate for females at the national level stands at 25.5% compared with 53.3% for males. In the rural sector, female workforce participation rate is 30% against 53% for males. In the urban sector, it is 15.4% for females and 54% for males. It indicates that the participation of rural females is more than urban females, as rural women are compelled to support the family members for earning their livelihoods. It is also possible that some of the women from rural areas also move to urban areas for employment which pushes the urban figures upward. There are various barriers for women to enter labour market, some of which are highlighted here.

Given this background, the scheme like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has helped the rural women to participate in the labour force. As the national level figures show, women constitute 54% of the total persondays

created under MGNREGS till December in 2013-14. The share of women have increased from 40% in 2006-07 to 54% in 2013-14 while the number of total persondays have gone up from 90.5 crores to 134.8 crores during the same period. Though the total number of persondays have declined from 2009-10 to 2013-14, from 283.59 crore persondays to nearly half in 2013-14, the share of women albeit continues to grow (MoRD 2014, pp. 9). The existing literature highlights that the flexible working hour, availability of work within the village and gender neutral wage rates, etc have attracted rural women to the MGNREGS (IRDR; 2013, pp. 260-262). The worksites are mandated to provide toilet facility, place for rest, drinking water and crèche for children, all of which help women to participate in the MGNREGS work. It is not surprising that the women work participation rate in MGNREGS is much higher than figures from decadal census for many of the major states (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Gender work participation in MGNREGS and Rural Labour Market across major states



Note: Calculated by Viswanathan and Mandal (2012). The figures are averages for the period 2009-10 to 2013-2014. Female Work Participation Rate has been interpolated from the Primary Census Abstract data of 2001 and 2011. Post 2011 gender work participation data has been extrapolated using CAGR method.

Source: <http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx> (for MGNREGS data).

2. About the study

In 2013-14, Gujarat Institute of Development Research (GIDR), Ahmedabad and International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Hyderabad undertook a study to assess the impact of MGNREGS in 10 semi-arid villages spread across Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat at community, household and individual level (for women). For the study 4 from Maharashtra and Gujarat 4 villages each were selected while the remaining two villages are drawn from Madhya Pradesh. The study surveyed 486 women from 326 households, who have their names in the job

card of their family. All of the sample women belonged to small farmer or landless labour households. A separate semi-structured module on gender was prepared for collection of data. Few focus groups discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to gather information. However, as there was no MGNREGS work in all these years in 3 of the Maharashtra villages and 2 Gujarat villages, only reported work once in all these years, the total figures effectively reflect the findings from 6 villages from these 3 states for which the survey was undertaken. Major objectives of the study were as shown in Box 1.

Box 1: Major Objectives

- i) To ascertain the functioning of MGNREGS from women's point of view and its impact on women, their households and the community they live in;
- ii) To examine the gaps in implementation as perceived by the women and their suggestions to bridge the gap, if any;
- iii) To discuss the limitations of the extant institutions in the implementation of the scheme and women's suggestion to improve the functioning of those institutions associated with the MGNREGS;
- iv) To understand the change in women's status in their respective households and communities because of their participation in the scheme; and
- v) To ascertain whether the MGNREGS has empowered women

3. Profile of Women Beneficiaries

Most of the surveyed households belonged to scheduled tribes or scheduled castes. Overwhelming majority of women were in the age group of age 25-40 years and were married. Most of them are illiterate and nearly 70% of the women from farming households used to work in their family farms. Among the women from landless labour households, 60% of them also worked as casual labourers.

4. Major Findings

Out of 486 women, 62% had at least worked once in MGNREGS in their respective villages. Contrary to the all India figure, the average number of days the women worked in MGNREGS had gone up from 26 days in 2006-07 to 31 days in 2012-13. However, the number of women who had participated in MGNREGS has come down drastically from 83 in 2007 to 47 in 2013 (Table 1). The average daily wage has gone up from Rs. 88

to Rs. 121 during the same period. It is important to remember that except in Maharashtra villages, in other 2 states the payment is based on measurement of work.

So the average wage rate reported above may not really reflect the wage suggested under MGNREGS in these respective states.

Table 1: Mean Number of Days Reported by the Sample Women that they got work in MGNREGS in a given Year from 2006-13

Mean number of days, women got work in MGNREGS (number of women)	Year	Gujarat-Tribal region	Gujarat-Non-Tribal region	Madhya Pradesh-Eastern belt	Maharashtra-South-West	Maharashtra-Vidarbha	Total
	2006	25.0 (21)	0.0 (2)	0.0 (0)	0.0	0.0	26.0 (23)
	2007	29.0 (83)	0.0	0.0 (0)	0.0	0.0	29.0 (83)
	2008	41.0 (11)	0.0	17.0 (6)	0.0	0.0	33.0 (17)
	2009	32.0 (24)	15.0 (30)	31.0 (21)	0.0	0.0	25.0 (75)
	2010	32.0 (13)	38.0 (14)	31.0 (14)	0.0	25.0 (2)	34.0 (43)
	2011	31.0 (9)	42.0 (32)	26.0 (13)	0.0	34.0 (5)	36.0 (59)
	2012	0.0 (0)	30.0 (25)	36.0 (15)	0.0	37.0 (11)	34.0 (51)
	2013	0.0 (0)	25.0 (23)	33.0 (18)	0.0	46.0 (6)	31 (47)
Total no. of women HHs surveyed		153	70	29	59	21	326

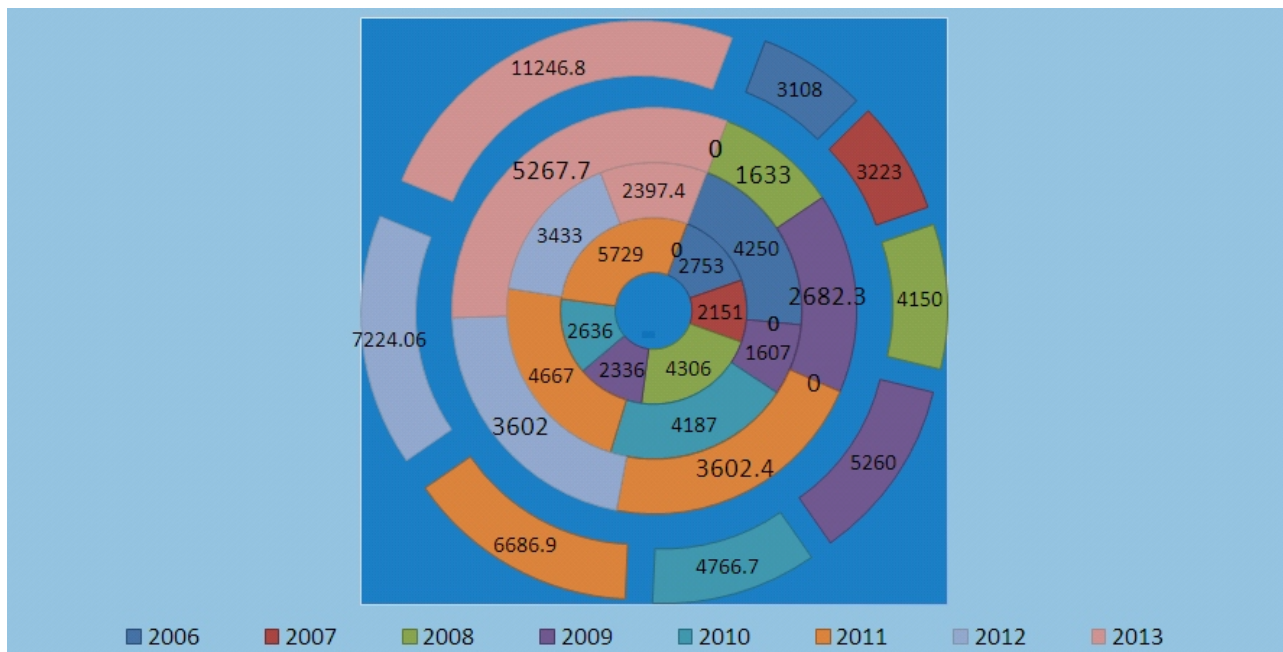
Note: Here it is important to remember that though we have surveyed 486 women from 326 households where women have their names in the job card or hold card separately, only 62% of them little more than 300 women have worked ever in the MGNREGS. Above the result represents the women respondent from the household alone to whom the question is asked. So the total 'N' is 326 rather than 486. Again all of these very few of these 300+ women had worked in MGNREGS more than once.

Source: Calculation by authors from filed data collected during 2013-14.

The average wage income for the household has increased from Rs 2906.0 in 2007 to Rs. 6129.0 in 2013 for all sample households in which women reportedly worked under MGNREGS. Figure 3 represents the average income of the women households from MGNREGS during 2006 to 2013. The outer ring in the figure represents the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, while the most inner ring represents the tribal region of Gujarat. The second ring from the most outer ring represents the Eastern Madhya Pradesh and the third ring from the most outer ring represents the Non-Tribal regions of Gujarat (Saurashtra).

The increase in mean wage income is highest in Maharashtra followed by Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Nearly 30% of total responses on use of MGNREGS wage went towards meeting daily consumption needs, while 20% each goes towards education of children and meeting health needs of the household. Another 17% goes towards purchase of agricultural inputs like fertilizers and seeds. About 67% sample women who worked in MGNREGS at least once during 2007-13, said they were consulted by their in-laws/spouse to use the money. About 76% of women also found the MGNREGS work is easier compared to other works available to them.

Figure 3: Average Annual Income from the MGNREGS for the Women across various Regions of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat



Note: The outer ring in the figure represents the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, whereas the innermost ring represents the tribal region of Gujarat. The second ring from the most outer ring represents the Eastern Madhya Pradesh, and the third ring from the outer most ring represents the Non-Tribal regions of Gujarat (Saurashtra). However, the larger rings and smaller rings does not say about which of the region is performing better but represents only the order in which the data is entered to construct the chart. The inner most ring in this case was the first column representing the tribal region of Gujarat while the outermost ring is last column representing the data in the last column.

Source: Calculation by authors from field data collected during 2013-14.

However, nearly all the women reported that there was any facility provided for women or their children at the worksite. It also came into light that 55% of women out of those who had at least worked once in MGNREGS held the view that the overall work burden has increased for them, despite getting help from other family members. About 39% of women denied that they received any support from the household in household chores, most of these women belonged to households with older in-laws and younger children. Nearly 70% of the women acknowledge that the participation in MGNREGS has increased their status in household as well as in the

community. Majority also acknowledges that the MGNREGS wage is great relief for them to meet the household expenses, helping them to facilitate the study of their children. However, for a major chunk, the overall socio-economic status of the household has not changed significantly. One of the reasons could be that these women do not get adequate work and the wage rate received is comparatively lower than the prevailing wages in the village. On environmental impact of the MGNREGS, the women informed that it helps in recharging ground water, containing soil erosion and increasing green cover in the villages.

However the study also highlight that the number of MGNREGS works undertaken in the villages were coming down each year significantly. Further, not all the demanding households were getting work; no facilities provided to women or to their younger children near worksites. The wage rate offered being extremely low, some of them who come for the work preferred it only when they have no other work on that day or have leisure time. The payment was made very late; often they had to borrow money to run the household, later they repaid after receiving the payment. This is not surprising that most of the MGNREGS works were undertaken during summer, which is non-agricultural season and households face difficulty to meet the needs. Majority of women were also not aware of Gram Sabhas or with the provisions under the act like unemployment allowance, social audit, muster roll etc.

5. Women empowerment and MGNREGS

MGNREGS was designed to facilitate the needs of women to integrate them in to mainstream labour force. It envisages an enabling environment for women to come forward and participate in meaningful economic activities. The wage is credited in the bank account or postal account, so that women will have access to formal financial institutions. Some of the studies also show that money in women's hand improves the food security, better health and education access in general and for girl children in particular. However from our study no strong evidence comes out on this front, partly due to the reason that the study was designed to capture perceptions of the women towards the scheme and partly because of poor implementation of the scheme in the studied villages.

To achieve the gendered objective of MGNREGS in general, women empowerment in particular may not be possible in a relatively shorter period of time. In long run it may help women to achieve parity and equality in the society. No improvement is possible if the women are not allowed to have real control over the decision making process in MGNREGS or wages paid to them. It is observed that in almost all cases the job card is issued in the name of the eldest member of the household who happens to be the husband or father-in-law of the sample women. In such scenario the account is opened in the name of the eldest member. Invariably, the women have no adequate control over the money. Most of the time, she had to adhere to the line taken by male members in the household regarding the use of money. Similarly we found that hardly any women recalls her ever being part of decision making process in the Gram Sabhas meeting to undertake works under MGNREGS. Some of them who attended the meeting recall that it is the Sarpanch of the village who is mostly male or husband of the female Sarpanch, along with few influential people and block development officer decide the works to be undertaken in MGNREGS. Hardly any women know about the provisions of the act or grievance redressal mechanisms available under the act. The ICT approach alone may not be suitable to make rural women aware of the scheme or its provisions.

6. Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

The study highlights major gaps in the implementation of the scheme. Though the scheme has generated enthusiasm among rural women it is far from meeting their expectations. There are some positive

outcomes from the scheme as highlighted above, but still much needs to be done. Following steps needed to be considered at the earliest to make the scheme truly

beneficial to women. Policy suggestions as summarized in Box 2 were drawn from the FGDs held with the women beneficiaries across the 6 villages in the 3 states.

Box 2: Policy Suggestions

- a) The women in the household should have a separate bank account in their name.
- b) The Gram Sabhas which decide about the works to be undertaken could have a committee in which women should constitute at least half of the members.
- c) The duration of work should be increased to at least 100 days as mandated in the act.
- d) The wage should be paid on daily basis rather than measurement of work, which substantially brings down the wage earned by the beneficiaries.
- e) The scheme should be widened to accommodate non-farm works and works in agricultural fields as well, as women are underpaid when they worked in private farms.
- f) Promotion of women led self-help groups could be useful, as seen in case of 'Kudumbashree' experiment in Kerala.
- g) Some part of the wages could be deposited in pension schemes, health insurance or other long term saving tools. This will help women to have some sort of social security in their old age. It may also help women not to withdraw entire amount to meet the household consumption needs either voluntarily or under compulsion from family members.
- h) The community based awareness campaigns like street plays, community radios and other mechanisms are essential to make the women aware about the scheme and its provisions.
- i) Aanganwadis could play a major role as a crèche for young children. Now most of them worked only half a day. If these worked full day it will be helpful to facilitate young mothers to work in MGNREGS.
- j) Promoting women associations through non-government organizations or other appropriate means will give collective bargaining power to women which will facilitate the realization of demand for work by the women. It could also be handy to facilitate the interaction between implementing authorities, institutions providing legal remedies and the women.

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