

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Rural Women Workers and Child care

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Research Article

Abstract: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which entitles rural households to 100 days of casual employment on public works at the statutory minimum wage, contains special provisions to ensure full participation of women. This paper, based on fieldwork in six states in 2008, examines the socio – economic consequences of the NREGA for women workers. In spite of the drawbacks in the implementation of the legislation, significant benefits have already started accruing to women through better access to local employment, at minimum wages, with relatively decent and safe work conditions. A social audit in Tamil Nadu finds that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has brought about major changes in the lives of women. However, the act overlooks the fact that childcare is a problem for many of the working women, especially for young mothers.

Key words: NREGA, Child care, Rural Women Workers.

Introduction

Recent social audit of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) indicates that the programme can have a positive impact on the social and economic well –being of rural labourers and their families. In particular, it holds the powerful prospect of bringing major changes in the lives of women. This is especially true in a state like Tamil Nadu, where women constitute an overwhelming proportion (more than so per cent) of NREGA workers. At the same time, however, some significant challenges frustrate this transformative promise of the NREGA. One of them is the issue of childcare, which is easily overlooked. To examine this aspect, a survey of creche facilities and childcare practices of working women was conducted in the Viluppuram district. (Tamil Nadu) in July 2007, on the sidelines of a social audit of the NREGA. This is particularly true for mothers of children below the age of three years. This article elaborates the difficult predicament of young mothers in the Ramanathapuram who work under the NREGA, even as it plays a positive role in their lives.

Table 1: Socio – economic Background of Women NREGA workers.

Average age	27 years
Average household size	45
Proportion who are illiterate	49%
Proportion who have completed middle school	5%
proportion who belong to landless households	60%
Proportion who belong to SC, BC or MBC communities	87%
Proportion who belong to agricultural labour households	39%

Source Survey Women With

In August 2005, Parliament passed the landmark legislation, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (hereafter NREGA). The NREGA is a national law funded large by the central government and implemented in all states, which creates a justiciable “right to work” for all households have a legal right to get “not less than” 100 days of unskilled manual labour on public works in each financial year. The enactment of the NREGA in 2005 came about partly as a result of a sustained campaign by academics and activists across India. Significant efforts were made by campaign groups to high light the crisis of food and work availability being faced by large numbers of the rural poor in India. The NREGA, as finally enacted, was a diluted version of the “citizen’s draft”. Nevertheless is signified a huge step forward as a social security mechanism for the rural poor. The paper attempts to understand the perceptions of this legislation as reported by women workers currently working under the Act. The NREGA’s potential in empowering women by providing them work opportunities has been commented on by providing them work opportunities has been commented on by others as well (See Dreze and Oldiges 2007, 2009;) Institute of Social studies Trust 2006; Jandu 2008) Looking at all India participation rates in the first two years of its implementation. Drez and Oldiges (2009) point to the marginal increase in the participation of women (from 40% in 2006-07 to 44% in 2007-08). Large interstate variations in the participation of women have been observed. Women constitute more than two – thirds of NREGA workers in Kerala (71%), Rajasthan

(69%) and Tamil Nadu (82%) and less than the stipulated one-third in Assam (31%), Bihar (27%), West Bengal (17%), Uttar Pradesh (15%), Himachal Pradesh (30%) and Jharkhand (27%). Other research on NREGA has highlighted the various benefits accruing to women from NREGA. This paper explores this further. Its purpose is twofold: one, to highlight the importance of the NREGA, as perceived by women workers, and two, to show that the full potential of this legislation is far from being realised.

NREGA: Main Provisions of the Act

Despite some weaknesses, the NREGA is a remarkable legislation under which local administrations are legally bound to provide work on demand to any worker or group of workers who apply for work, within 15 days of receipt of a work application on public works operated under the NREGA. Though the list of permissible works under the NREGA is quite restricted, there is ample scope for undertaking projects that provide economically useful assets. In the event that the local administration fails to provide work, an unemployment allowance is to be paid to the workers. The NREGA promises “not less than 100 days” of work to all households in rural India in each financial year where adults in the household are willing to undertake unskilled manual labour at the statutory minimum wage. There are several provisions of the Act which are of special interest to women workers. First, the Act mandates that at least one-third of the workers should be women. This, combined with the fact that the Act places no restriction on how each household's quota of 100 days is shared within the household, means that there is ample scope for women's participation in NREGA works. Second, the wage earned is equal for both men and women. Besides this, the NREGA also provides for childcare facilities at the worksite when more than five children under six years of age are present at the worksite. This is an important provision given that, in large parts of the country, there are no childcare arrangements (e.g. functional anganwadis) for working women.

NREGA Survey 2008

NREGA was extended to the entire country in April 2008. Districts included in the “NREGA Survey 2008” are all “Phase I” districts, where the Act came into force in February 2006. The Survey was aimed at understanding the impact NREGA has had in the lives of workers who are currently working under the programme. The survey was not focused on women specifically, but 32% sample workers were women. The interviews with women workers provided insights into the significance of NREGA work for these women and highlighted the “transformative” potential of this programme as substantial, implementation varies across states. In a mosaic of chequered implementation varies across states. In a mosaic of chequered implementation

however, many narratives from women workers tell a significant story about the benefits of the NREGA. We highlight this significance of NREGA work for women workers and make the case that attention must be paid by the government towards effective implementation to ensure that these important benefits are not scuttled.

Low workforce Participation Rates.

In the study areas, the NREGA, has provided income – earning opportunities to women where hardly any existed before. The reasons for the unavailability of wage labour for women are complex and vary across regions. Women are primary providers of care roles for the sick and the elderly. Outside of unpaid housework, women have some opportunities for paid agricultural work. The combination of a labour, imply that these opportunities tend to be seasonal in nature. There are even fewer opportunities for non-agricultural wage work in these areas where the rural economy is predominantly agricultural. The limited access to wage work for women in these areas is captured by the fact that in the three months preceding the survey, only 30% of the female respondents reported earning a cash income other than NREGA (see Table 2). In fact, even among men just over half (55%) said that they had earned cash from sources other than the NREGA. Half of the women in the sample said that had they not worked on the NREGA worksites, they would have worked at home or would have remained unemployed. This could be either because women do not have many other employment opportunities (locally and even otherwise in some cases) or women workers are, “as a rule”, paid less than their male counterparts in rural and urban casual wage work (see Table 2) “When women have other employment opportunities, they often face “invisible” social constraints: some women might have considered working only on the fields owned by farmers from their own community or at a place where other persons from their community are working. Similar constraints and limitations prevail when migrating for work to cities. On top of this. The harsh work conditions in the private labour market may also deter women from participating in it. To summarise, employment opportunities for women in the private labour market are limited, irregular, poorly paid and can be hazardous. It often involves migration which raises a whole range of issues of its own. In addition to “invisible” social barriers, working conditions in the private labour market are often very demanding and exploitive.

Attractiveness of NREGA Employment for Women.

NREGA workers (men and women alike) belong to the most disadvantaged groups. As Table 2 above shows, a large majority (over 70%) were from the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) and most NREGA labourers were illiterate (82% in the case of women). Many female respondents said the work provided under the NREGA opened up a new

opportunity for them. The wider acceptability of NREGA work derives from several factors. It is locally available, being government work there is and predictability of working hours, less chance of work conditions being exploitative and work is considered socially acceptable and “dignified” Last (but not the least), it is better paid than other work. These attractive features of NREGA for women are discussed below.

Table 2: Profile of Sample Workers

	Women	Man
Proportion of NREGA workers who are	32	68
Proportion of NREGA workers who are Scheduled castes (SC)/Scheduled tribes (ST)	75	71
Lliterate	82	52
Proportion of NREGA workers who Had other sources of cash income in the past Three months	30	55
Collect their own wages	78	92
Keep their own wages	69	51
Prefer payments through banks	53	44
Average wage (Rs/day)	88*	88*
Statutory minimum wage (Rs/day)		
Agricultural Work	47	53
Other casual labour	58	71
NREGA wage	85	85

Un-weighted average of state minimum wage in the six survey states

The Act stipulates that work be provided locally, within five km of the residence. This makes participation in NREGA work logistically feasible for women. Since they continue to best the main responsibility to household work, travelling any distance for paid work makes this task more difficult for them. Apart from the fact that NREGA work is provided in the village itself, the fact that women work in groups and that work is provided by the government helps to make NREGA work “Socially acceptable.” Other reason why NREGA work was regarded “acceptable” are pertinent. NREGA promises the statutory minimum wage. Even in cases where the minimum wage is not paid (as if often the case, especially in Rajasthan), NREGA wages imply a substantial jump in the earning potential for women. As per survey data, the average wage earned by women in the private labour market ranged between Rs.47 and 58 per day, for agricultural and other caesural labour, respectively. On NREGA, the average wage earned was Rs.85, clearly a huge increase over other wage opportunities. Some women stated they did not engage themselves in agricultural wage labour earlier because they would have been paid too little and it was not worth their

while to go out and work for a pittance. The prospect of earning a substantial wage within the village in some case might swing “acceptability” in favour of women. The fact that NREGA work is offered by the local government rather than by a private employer in some ways frees potential women workers from caste and community based strictures related to who they can and cannot work with. Further, being government work, the hours of work are clearly stated and are limited to eight hours in a day (in the case of daily wage work). Fixed working hours often cannot be expected in the case of other work. This is of special concern for women who combine any paid work with household work. NREGA employment is therefore considered relatively “safe” in the sense that it is thought that there are some checks and balances in place to of workers. Moreover, NREGA employment offers a new sense of independence for instance, Gita (Sirohi district, Rajasthan) said she would have stayed at home or worked on her own fields had NREGA work not been available. She considered working on the NREGA (government) worksite because she did not have to through a potentially embarrassing and humiliating conversation to ask anyone in the village for work.

Significance for Single Women

We have soon that NREGA offers the relatively high (compared to the private market) statutory minimum wage and women workers are paid the same as men. A work condition on NREGA work sites are better and there is perceived dignity in doing NREGA work. Social harriers in the case of NREGA employment are lower. In the case of single women, these benefits are magnified. In this short section we use testimonies gathered during the survey to highlight the benefits to some single women in the sample.

4.1 Barriers to Women’s Participation

He begins with a detailed discussion of the persistent barriers to women’s participation in NREGA works. The low participation rates in four out of six sample states bear witness to the existence of such barriers.

4.2 Bank Payments of NREGA Wages

Another area of concern relates to the en masse switch over to bank payments of NREGA wages since September 2008. This is a relatively recent “administrative innovation”, which is perceived by the government as a “magic pil” for ending corruption. Respondents were asked whether they preferred to be

paid in cash, or through banks or post offices. In the survey, roughly 53% of women in the sample wanted payments through banks and/ or post offices. the introduction of bank payment through banks payments include the perception that payment through banks will increase the possibility of saving and a reduction in the possibility of being cheated by those who distribute wages in the village (even in Rajasthan, where record keeping is on the whole better than in the other states visited). Other reasons why people want bank payment include the perception that this will lead to a reduction in delays (in payments), that a lump sum of money will be available in one installment (stated by respondents specially in up and Bihar). Interestingly, for women, it is also seen as an effective tool for increasing their control over the use of this money (eg, some women said when wages are paid in cash, it is easier for husband to take control over it).

5. NREGA and Gender Equality

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the NREGA has several provisions that are aimed at improving the participation of women. We have seen that these have met with varying degrees of success in different parts of the country. In the case of women it is important to note that even relatively small levels of NREGA complement have resulted perceived benefits from the programme. Serious problems remain in implementation across states (such as the lack of availability of crèches for mothers of young children and the continued illegal presence of contractors). Given the critical gains made by women workers in – in accessing work and an income, food and healthcare for them – selves and their families, and in leaving potentially hazardous work – it needs to be ensured that the problems in implementation do not derail the gains. To reiterate the benefits from the NREGA for women: work is available at the statutory minimum wage, allowing workers to get work in their village, as a result of which migration and hazardous work can now be avoided by many. These benefits should be adequately recognized and efforts should be made to strengthen

these gains. Ensuring the establishment of a schedule of rates more favourable to women will go a long way in removing the short-term barriers to women's participation in NREGA. For the longer term goals of gender equality to be realized, attention also needs to be paid to ensuring greater participation of women at all levels (e.g. as labourers, in NREGA worksite management and staff appointments) and in all spheres (eg, participatory planning through participation in gram sabhas, social audits). These measures can simultaneously impact gender relations and improve the implementation of NREGA.

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MGNREGS - Daily Report on Renewal of Job cards**Name of the District: Ramanathapuram****Date 14.03.2012**

S. No	No.of Blocks	No.of Panchayats	No. of Registered works	Details of Entry made in village Panchayat Register I (Out of column 4)		No of Active workers	No of saving Bank Accounts opened to workers (out of column 7)			
				No of entries made	Balance		Upto Yesterday	Today	Total issued upto date	Balance to be issued
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	RMD	25	26929	23219	3710	17900	2691	357	3048	14852
2	TPL	33	29791	29791	0	20250	0	0	0	20250
3	MNP	28	31003	31003	0	17785	0	0	0	17785
4	RSM	35	30263	30263	0	24210	620	0	620	23590
5	TVD	47	35170	35170	0	24750	1862	60	1922	22828
6	PMK	39	34630	34630	0	21811	3085	323	3408	18403
7	BOGL	26	17744	17744	1337	15716	4015	165	4180	11536
8	NLK	37	21601	21601	0	17849	4354	50	4404	13445
9	MUK	46	43705	43705	0	30751	5168	0	5168	25583
10	KMT	53	58719	58719	0	43453	2630	0	2630	40823
11	KDL	60	59462	59462	0	41803	14015	0	14015	27788
	Total	429	389017	383970	5047	276278	38440	955	39398	236883

**Project Director,
DRDA, Ramanathapuram.**