

Project Briefing

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Key points

- Rural poverty in India has strong gender dimensions, including discrimination in the labour market, access to productive resources and decision-making
- MGNREGA design and implementation should be strengthened to avoid exacerbating gender inequalities
- Supporting women's participation in decision-making and investing in gender-sensitive implementation will empower women and enhance gender equality

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An opportunity for change? Gender analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

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The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) guarantees 100 days minimum wage employment to rural households in India. Enacted in 2005, MGNREGA is a flagship programme now reaching over 50 million households across the country. It aims to promote improvements in grassroots democracy and facilitate transparency through community accountability mechanisms, e.g. the social audit forum where villages participate in the assessment of programme implementation.

MGNREGA is part of the Government of India's broader commitment to inclusive growth, which aims to address both the economic and social underpinnings of poverty. As the Planning Commission states: *'A major weakness in the economy is that the growth is not perceived as being sufficiently inclusive for many groups, especially Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and minorities. Gender inequality also remains a pervasive problem and some of the structural changes taking place have an adverse effect on women ... For the first time in the history of Indian planning there is an attempt to move beyond empowerment and recognise women as agents of sustained socio-economic growth and change'* (Planning Commission of India, 2008: 1, 4).

This Project Briefing presents evidence from qualitative and quantitative research carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in the state of Madhya Pradesh.¹ It assesses the extent to which MGNREGA integrates a gender-sensitive approach to public works programmes to support the inclusion of women – especially from marginalised communities – in India's poverty reduction and growth processes.

Poverty and vulnerability through a gender lens

Poverty is highly concentrated in rural areas in India. Many of the poor are landless and rely on daily wage labour. The decline in the agricultural sector over recent years is of particular concern given the sheer number of people – more than half the population – that depend on it. The challenges to poverty reduction in India are not just economic. Poverty is also strongly influenced by social inequalities governed by caste, ethnicity, gender, age and religion. In 2000, the poverty rates in rural areas were highest among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) at 45% and 37%, respectively, compared with 21% for others.

Nationally, women face specific risks and vulnerabilities. They receive wages that are up to 20% lower than those for men in casual labour for the same tasks (World Bank, 2009). Women constitute two-thirds of the agricultural workforce but own less than one-tenth of agricultural lands (NAWO, 2008). They face significant time burdens and spend a disproportionate amount of time compared with men on domestic activities (457 minutes per day compared with 391 for men) (ibid). In addition, only a small proportion (21%) of women in rural areas decide how their own income is used, with most having only a limited say in decisions other than small household expenditures (IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

Madhya Pradesh is one of the poorest states in India, with a high concentration of SC and ST households. Most households rely on agricultural labour, receiving low wages, and are highly dependent on migration as a livelihood strategy. Poor rural households are very vulnerable to covariate and idiosyncratic risks, mainly production-related, and health and social

shocks and stresses (Narayan et al., 2009).

Gender and social inequalities influence rural poverty in Madhya Pradesh. Women's literacy and schooling rates are particularly low: 44% of women aged 15-49 are literate compared with 74% of men in the same age bracket; secondary school attendance for girls, at 24%, is half that of boys. Although infant mortality rates have declined in Madhya Pradesh in recent years, they are still the third highest among all India's states, with an estimated 70 deaths before the age of one per 1,000 live births (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). The under-five mortality rate, at 94 deaths per 1,000 live births, is the second highest in the country and higher for girls (113/1,000) than boys (104/1,000).

Women and girls also experience high rates of early marriage, physical violence (higher in Madhya Pradesh than the national average), and constraints on mobility in public areas. Women are less likely to be paid in cash for their work and those working as agricultural labourers can receive approximately 20-30 Rupees less per day than men. Almost one-third of women have little decision-making power in the household (e.g. about expenses, mobility), only 9% have a bank or savings account that they themselves use, and only 1% have ever used a micro-credit programme (IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

How gender-sensitive is MGNREGA?

MGNREGA was designed to address the high rates of poverty and vulnerability in the rural sector by

providing employment for rural households while transforming rural livelihoods through the creation of productivity-enhancing infrastructure in agriculture.

MGNREGA includes design features to tackle some of the challenges women face in the rural economy. It promotes their participation in the workforce through a one-third quota in each state, provides for crèche facilities, and gives preference to women (especially single women) to work close to home (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008). It states that equal wages are to be paid to men and women under the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act 1976 – an important measure given prevailing gender wage disparities. Guidelines also suggest that when the banks or *Panchayats* (local government) open bank accounts, they should consider individual and joint accounts to avoid crediting earnings solely to the male head of household.

The Act states that women should be represented in local-level committees, and the social audit process (the monitoring mechanism to promote accountability of MGNREGA implementation), as well as state- and central-level councils. The social audit forum, it suggests, should be conveniently timed for MGNREGA workers, so that women and marginalised communities can attend.

These are important steps towards a gender-sensitive approach. However, the current design of MGNREGA is not comprehensive in addressing the different ways in which women experience poverty and vulnerability (see, for example, Box 1). As a result, its impact has been mixed, with gaps in gender-sensitive design exacerbated by poor implementation.

Box 1: International experience of enhancing gender equality in public works programmes

Early public works initiatives suffered low levels of female participation, but, over time, a range of approaches has been adopted to address this gender imbalance. These include:

- institutionalisation of explicit quotas for female programme participants
- provisions for gender-specific life cycle needs, such as allowing women time off for pregnancy and breastfeeding; provision of work close to participants' homes; crèche facilities and flexibility in terms of women's working hours, so they can balance their domestic and care work responsibilities
- consideration of the particular circumstances of female-headed households, including household-level contracts, so that work can be shared more flexibly, and quotas for female-headed households
- guarantee of equal wages for men and women
- provision for women to take on programme supervisory roles
- support so that women are better able to save through establishment of 'savings groups', and have access to credit, so as to graduate from public works programmes
- linkages to complementary services that empower women more generally, including provision of adult literacy classes
- mechanisms which ensure that the type of work undertaken benefits women, either because of the nature of the community asset created (e.g. improvements in transport and roads which ease women's time burden in collecting water or fuel-wood); or through provision for women's involvement in decision-making about what types of community assets should be built, using public works labour.

Source: Holmes and Jones (2009).

Impacts of MGNREGA

Our research found important intended and unintended impacts on men and women at the individual, household and community level (also highlighted by participants in Box 2).

Individual and household level

Women have relatively good access to MGNREGA employment in Madhya Pradesh, exceeding the one-third quota for participation, at 44.2%. Women also earn significantly higher wages from MGNREGA, as a result of its equal wage policy. In private agricultural employment, women received approximately 30 Rupees and men up to 45 Rupees a day. Under MGNREGA, both receive approximately 90 Rupees a day. Women's increased contribution to household income also supports their 'practical needs', as they are largely responsible for immediate household needs.

However, while the Act stipulates that households are entitled to 100 days of employment and equal wages, a closer look at the number of days of work provided and the actual provision of wages suggests a more unequal picture. Entrenched social norms about the gender division of labour affect the type of work seen as 'acceptable' for women. Women receive fewer days' work because they are

not allocated all the types of work available and are often assigned 'soft' work, such as moving soil dug out of wells, which requires less time. Single women face particular discrimination when, for example, earthworks depend on family-based couples working together or there is high demand for work from men.

Lifecycle vulnerabilities also influence access to employment. While there is provision for different types of work for the physically challenged, there is no such provision for pregnant or nursing women, or for older women or men.

Intra-household

Our findings suggest that women's employment in MGNREGA has improved the economic status of some women and enhanced their decision-making power slightly in some households. This relates mostly to decisions on the food purchased for household consumption. In other cases, MGNREGA employment has had no impact on household relationships.

This may be, in part, because women do not have automatic access to MGNREGA payment through individual or joint bank accounts, as the opening of bank accounts is implemented at the discretion of the local government. In some cases, women's employment in MGNREGA has exacerbated household tensions, with work putting pressure on the amount of women's time for household duties. Indeed, despite the provision of crèche facilities as part of the programme design, the actual implementation of childcare is very limited, constraining women's participation in the programme or compelling them to leave younger children (aged one year or older) with in-laws or older daughters. While women work more hours than men, by combining domestic and productive work, MGNREGA has no provision for flexible working hours to ease their time pressures or support their dual responsibilities.

Community level

The most common types of works created through MGNREGA in Madhya Pradesh have been road construction, the digging of wells (and other water-related activities) and tree planting. These community assets have had varying impact, including the facilitation of greater crop production and better marketing of products as a result of improved infrastructure. However, some respondents noted that not all poor households in the community benefit from the infrastructure (especially the landless) and that not all infrastructure is appropriate to local needs. This reflects a larger challenge for MGNREGA: that the assets being created are not benefiting the rural poor as much as they could do, and are not, therefore, harnessing the potential for rural change and poverty reduction as originally planned.

There is a general concern that MGNREGA has been focusing on employment at the expense of development (Mahaptra et al., 2008). Proponents of women's empowerment and gender equality have

Box 2: Participants' perceptions of implementation and impacts

'Men are always preferred than women. Single women are excluded as some works demanded the participation of both men and women as a pair' (Female Focus Group Discussant (FGD), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

'[Women] were side-lined and men given preference – there were more women than men preferring to work in MGNREGA. As women fought among themselves, it was decided that women had to accompany men' (Widow (General Caste), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

'Women do not attend "Gram Sabha" meetings and it is generally men who go to the meetings' (Female FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).

'Though people know about the MGNREGA provisions, they do not have major say in deciding about the type of work to be done in the village, nor about the provision of crèche facilities' (Male FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009).

also called for a refocus on the types of works that are offered under MGNREGA and suggest that health care, literacy and skills programmes, nutrition and sanitation are alternative public works that would make a sustainable contribution to economic productivity and address pressing gender concerns.

Moving beyond the creation of assets, MGNREGA also has a vision to support improvements in local governance and democracy through, for example, the social audit process to ensure public accountability. Community meetings are designed to agree on assets created by MGNREGA in response to local needs and priorities. Our study, however, found that prevailing socio-cultural norms prevent women from contributing to community meetings and decision-making. They are less likely to participate in social audits and have little say in deciding what types of work are carried out in the village, despite a high level of awareness of their rights.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Although there is commitment to gender equality, as stated in national development plans, MGNREGA has a narrow approach to gender equality and women's empowerment. The quota for women's participation is important and equal wages – where provided – are significant, but many barriers to their economic participation in the labour force and equal participation in household and community decision-making remain. These need to be recognised and addressed if women are to be agents of economic growth and change. The following recommendations include mechanisms to improve the design and implementation of MGNREGA, to promote gender equality and improve programme effectiveness.

Programme design

- Pay greater attention to lifecycle vulnerabilities, for example by providing alternative options to heavy manual labour such as direct support or less physically demanding work during pregnancy and nursing.
- Recognise the unequal division of labour in the household and in intra-household bargaining



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power, through flexible working hours and the provision of bank accounts in a woman's name.

- Pay attention to the different impacts of the structure and demography of the household, as this influences access to MGNREGA and the benefits gained from employment. An approach is needed that supports appropriate work for single women and ensures they have equal access to MGNREGA days.
- Create community assets to reduce gender-specific vulnerabilities and broaden the narrow scope of types of work appropriate to rural productivity. This could include public works activities to reduce women's time poverty, such as: improving fuel-wood and water collection sources, or, more broadly, addressing discriminatory access to common property resources and sources of drinking water for SC/ST women; healthcare, nutrition and literacy/skills programmes; improving market access and infrastructure for women; and supporting investments and training in other agricultural activities.
- Promote the participation of women in community planning and the monitoring of MGNREGA works through community meetings and social audit processes. This can be better achieved through quotas for women's representation, flexible meeting times, awareness-raising about the importance of women's participation, and mechanisms to strengthen women's confidence to voice their opinions in community decision-making processes.

Programme implementation

- Invest in technical capacity-building for staff at all levels of government, including the Department of Women and Child Development, to articulate the importance of gender equality for rural development and poverty reduction and build the capacity of implementing bodies to apply

the gender-sensitive features of the programme. More work is needed, for example, to improve awareness on gender equity at the *Panchayat* level, to break down cultural norms on the gender division of labour that result in the allocation of 'soft' work for women, fewer days of employment, lower wages based on male productivity norms and/or the preference of employment for men.

- Strengthen the existing monitoring and evaluation of data collection and analysis on gender-related dimensions of the programme. Improvements in data collection could include a focus on the gender-related benefits of the types of assets created, participation in decision-making structures, and increased budget allocations for capacity-building for gender-related programme dimensions.
- Institutionalise inter-sectoral coordination between gender and rural development ministries to promote the understanding of, and a greater focus on, gender in the rural sector. Strengthening linkages between MGNREGA, skills training programmes and access to agricultural inputs and credit would help maximise livelihood opportunities for rural men and women.
- Finally, it would be beneficial to share best practice on the promotion of gender equality in MGNREGA between and within states. For instance, in some parts of Madhya Pradesh, the decision to appoint worksite supervisors across the state is an important way to support women's opportunities for alternative skills development and to enable them to take on more of a supervisory role.

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Endnotes, references and project information

Endnotes:

1. Madhya Pradesh was chosen for this research study in part due to its relatively good implementation record of MGNREGA in comparison to other states. Primary research was conducted in four villages in two districts, using a household questionnaire (100 households), focus group discussions (8), life histories (16) and key informant interviews.

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Project Information:

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