

# Empowerment of Women Through MGNREGS : Issues and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

*There is inequality and vulnerability of women in all sphere of life. They need to be empowered in all walks of life. Without the active participation of women, establishment of a new social order may not be a successful one, because women constitute half of the population. Women should realize that they have constitutional rights to quality health care, economic security, and access to education and political power. Mahatma Gandhi firmly states that the status of women would not change merely by bringing legislations; it must be supported by change in the women's social circumstances and situations and also man's sexist attitude to women. 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. The paper discusses status of women participation in Odisha in comparison to other States and issues and challenges for women's participation in MGNREGS.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. A large segment of Indian womanhood still suffers deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is necessary to mobilize the vast women power, if the country has to progress in all sphere of development. Empowerment of women is a long and difficult process which is to be promoted with full public support and this could be successful only when those women living at the lower strata who have been suppressed by the male dominated society taking undue advantage of their lack of education and poverty can rise up to claim their

rightful place in their own society. 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.

Gender is the inevitable push factor for growth and development of a nation like India. In India women constitute a major share of chronically poor population. The Government has framed different programmes/schemes to uplift the women from poverty and vulnerability of life. One such women friendly programme is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which was enacted in 2005. MGNREGA has provided a unique opportunity

to people from rural India to earn their own income without any discrimination of caste or gender. Most remarkable feature of NREGA is that it pays women the same as men, something that was virtually unimaginable in rural India. However, some States have registered high percentage of women workers getting enrolled in the scheme whereas others have registered a very low percentage of women availing benefit under MGNREGA.

## 2. Women Through MGNREGA

MGNREGA plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. It has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of the rural women and contributed substantially for the increased living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers. The role of MGNREGA on women's participation can be examined through the following parameters:

- i. **Income-Consumption Effects:** By income-consumption effects we mean an increase in income of women workers and as a result, their ability to choose their consumption baskets. MGNREGA empowers women by giving them a scope of independent earning and spend some amount for their own needs.
- ii. **Intra-Household Effects:** Women play a major role in raising the economic resources for their family but their contribution remains uncounted because of they perform a significant amount of unpaid work. In rural areas, the dominance of males in intra-household decisions has been seen. MGNREGA has significant impact in converting some unpaid work into paid work and widen the scope of decision making role of women in household matters.

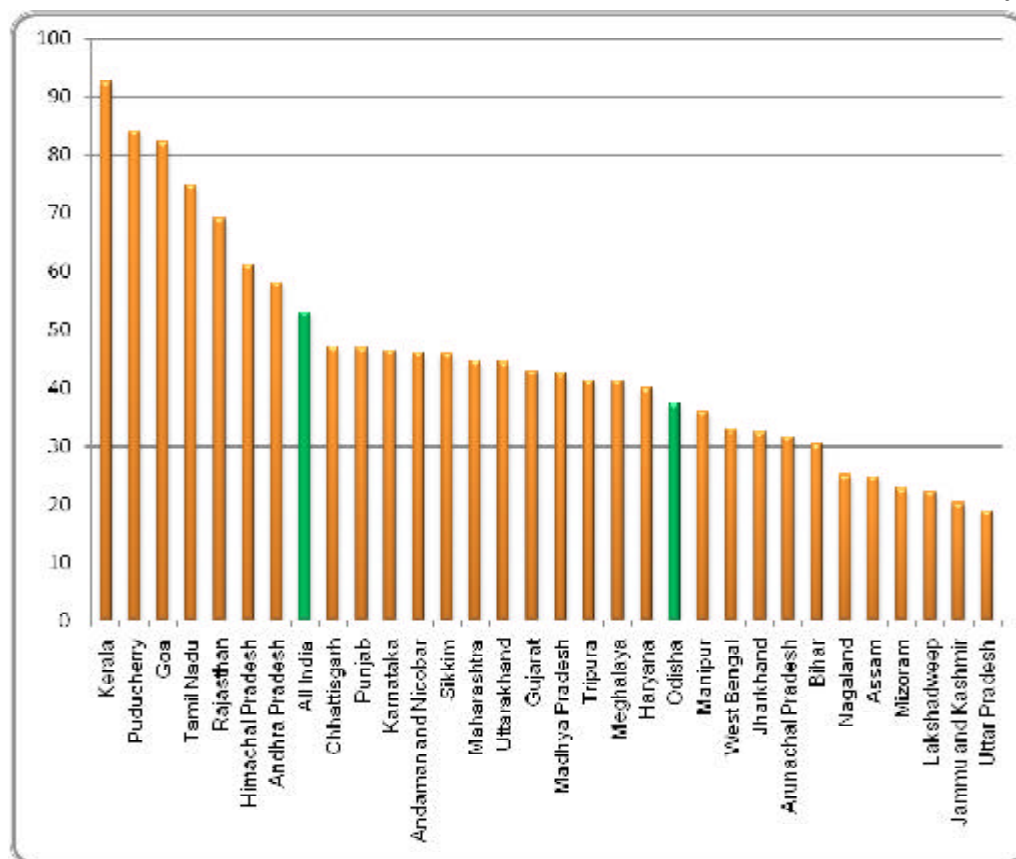
- iii. **Community-Level Effects:** Women's participation at the local and district level of governance process is low in spite of 73rd Amendments of the Constitution. But women participation has increased after the implementation of MGNREGA in many areas. A large number of women workers attended the Gram Sabha meeting held in connection with MGNREGA. Community level empowerment of women is one of the great achievements of this Act.

## 3. Women's Participation under MGNREGS in Odisha

There are various factors which encourage the women worker's participation under this scheme include nature of work, which do not need skilled worker, the limited hours of work, availability of work locally, reduction of migration of male member, substantial jump in the wage rate etc. Participation of women varies widely across States. Women participation under MGNREGS is measured in person days.

At the national level women participation has increased significantly to 53.01% in 2012-13 (till January, 2013). Highest participation is seen in states like Kerala(92.66%) followed by Poducherry (83.96%). In comparison to these States Odisha ranked 20 with women participation rate of 37.39%. Although, women workforce participation under the Scheme has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent, the Act stipulates that priority shall be given to women. In terms of implementation it mandates that a minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries are women who have registered and have requested for work. However, ideally, there should be gender equality in participation in MGNREGS. That means, women proportion should be around 50% both in terms participation and person-days of work. There are some issues which hinder women participation in MGNREGS in the State.

**GRAPH-1: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN PERSON DAYS GENERATED IN COMPARISON TO MEN IN ALL STATES OF INDIA- 2012-2013 (Till January 2013)**



#### 4. Issues Related to Women Participation in MGNREGS

- i. **Non-availability of Child Care Facilities:** One of the major shortcomings of the Act is non-availability of proper crèche facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. Different studies show that women remained worried about their children while they are working at MGNREGA worksite even some women do not accept the job facilities of MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facilities.
- ii. **Low level of Awareness:** In many states women participation is low because of low

level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the programme.

- iii. **Nature of Work:** Most of the studies reveal that nature of work is also not helpful for women workers. In most of the projects selected being related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies involving earth work requiring application of physical force, male workers were preferred to women workers (Hazarika, 2009).
- iv. **Poor Worksite Facilities:** MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place and first aid. But most of the studies reported that

except drinking water facility all other facilities are generally absent.

- v. **Delay in Payments:** Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they are the main earners in the family. Because the Banks are far from the village, it becomes difficult for the women to open Bank Account and draw cash which discourage women participation.

## 5. Policy Issues

The effectiveness of MGNREGA crucially depends on what type of schemes it gives priority to lack of focus of social, gender inequality in creation of productive assets has been a major reason for limited success of wage employment programme. Compared to men, the proportion of unskilled, subsidiary workers among women is much larger under MGNREGA. Given poor health and literacy as well as the predominant responsibility of house work and caring, women have recourse only to work that is available.

Generally, women lack any productive assets other than their own labour. Often they do not even possess a homestead within which they could raise livestock or set up a shop to meet daily food requirement. There is thus the need to maintain to inform and assist public policy to institute implementation of programmes for a gender responsive political economy, with adequate measures for building women's ownership and control rights to productive assets. Needless to say such measures are compatible with development needs of the country. That equal rights to productive assets of women with those of men, can lead to greater economic activity, change in the perception of dependence on men, and thus results in substantially reducing exclusion of women from social processes and promote development of diverse capabilities, thereby enhancing productivity and reducing inequality.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

MGNREGA has positive impact on employment pattern of women. Women have benefited both as individual and community. Women are benefited individually because they are able to earn independently, spend some money for their own needs, contribute in family expenditure etc. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the Gram Sabha, increasing number of women in speaking out in the meetings, increasing capacity of interaction etc. But the poor implementation across the nation (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility and illegal presence of contractors) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act mainly in north-eastern state. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation.

### Recommendations for policy and programme design

Suggestions for policy and programme design emerging from the study include the following.

#### a. Strengthening active citizenship

Women's participation in Gram Sabhas is likely to be increased as they become more aware of their citizenship rights and duties. Investing in informal groups is one way of doing this – policy has prioritised investment in training of elected leaders, which needs to continue, but democratic processes require active citizenship by all and this fact needs to find a place in resource allocations too.

#### b. Broadening the understanding of poverty to include needs of women

The programme could have a greater impact on poverty reduction and on development if

there were a broader understanding of the nature of poverty, and especially the constraints faced by women. The programme needs to find ways of improving its relevance to the daily lives of people (especially women) and addressing ecological poverty, not just income poverty, through suitable modifications to programme design. This will not happen through ad hoc creation of small and isolated tanks or wells. It requires an explicit framing of the development discourse within which MGNREGA is located.

#### c. Systems of wage payment

Women are employed as unskilled labour on MGNREGS worksites. Over a longer period, enhancement of skills and productivity will be one way of increasing earnings. To overcome the difficulties faced by the women in drawing cash from bank, provision can be made to provide door step delivery of the wages.

#### d. Complementing the NREGS for different needs of women

The programme design is perceived to be inclusive, as it is open to all irrespective of age or any other consideration. As a social protection system, NREGS reaches out to the able-bodied; to reach out to meet the needs of women who are at different stages in their lifecycle, a cash transfer or other kind of intervention may be better and more efficient.

#### e. Improving quality of childcare

The programme design includes a recommendation that mobile crèches need to be available at workplaces. From a policy stand point, the issue of quality needs to be brought to the forefront and not treated as something to be addressed at a later stage after issues of access or infrastructure have been dealt with.

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