

# MGNREGA: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN GENDER RELATIONS

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*Women's empowerment essentially refers to empowering women to change gender relations in favour of the reduction in women's inequalities. Asset ownership such as land, housing, technology and economic participation (in labour market through employment, skill development, access to finance and market) are the two major components of economic empowerment, giving women confidence and capabilities to change power relations between them and men in their favour. An exhaustive search of relevant literature revealed only some anecdotal evidence on the gender relations impact of employment creation under MGNREGA programme. However, credible evidence is available on women's participation in MGNREGA generated employment.*

**Keyword:** Women, Employment

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, India has achieved a remarkable drop in poverty levels. The public investments in India in rural areas have significantly contributed to agricultural growth, improvement in real wages and non-farm employment (K. Sundaram 2007; Hirway, 2006; and Nathan, Reddy and Kelkar, 2008). It is further noted that with the globalized production, there has been an increase in the demand for skilled labour for development of infrastructure. But, along with a decline in poverty, there have also been persistent and growing inequalities (in both income and non-income dimensions) in key countries of Asia: China and India, accounting for 40 per cent of the world's poor, with a significant majority of women among them. Women and the poor have been prevented from participating fully in the growth that did occur since the early 1990s (Jenkins and Micklewright, 2007).

With the increasing feminization of agricultural work in China and India, contemporary rural-urban inequality in these countries is a matter of gender inequality. Women agricultural workers are frequently discriminated against in their livelihood security, education and autonomy (Montes and Linder, 2007; Kelkar, 2007). One of the liberating effects of globalization is that it at least partially frees individuals (such as women, Dalits and ethnic minorities) from their traditional holds – the family hierarchy, community governance, and caste rules. However, globalization is also a threat, especially to traditional ways of livelihoods. The ability of excluded groups of women and men to use the prospective opportunities that globalization offers “depends on their being included in newer ways of earning and living, such as new goods to produce, new skills and new techniques of production, and so on (Sen, 2003: 28). The concept of poverty has been defined in terms of social exclusion and lack of capabilities, and “encompasses more than conventional income-based measures of poverty and inequality” (Jenkins and Micklewright, 2007: 7).

Few dispute the close link between gender equality and economic growth, that failure to have women's equality will result in a developmental deficit to achieve the desired efficiency and well-being outcomes. The gendered distribution of assets and resulting vulnerability of women substantially limits national efforts at overcoming poverty, thus indicating the need for policy attention to address persistent gender discrimination and the weaker starting point of women in ownership and control of assets.

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Many of the feminist economist analyses have further demonstrated that households and individual well-being are not necessarily the same, that individuals living in the same household may have very different control over the household income and assets (Rao,2006, Deere and Das,2006). The lack of control over income and assets shows how economic inequality accumulated over the life course of individuals, impacts on women's lower wages and cripples their economic agency and decision making to manage and innovate with assets. Lack of ownership and control rights to productive assets is increasingly being linked to negative development outcomes, specifically in relation to gender inequality and inclusive economic growth. However, relatively little research has been done on the gendered distribution of productive assets and to determine how intra-household asset distribution affects women's economic security, limits their empowerment and impacts productivity.

This study is an attempt at drawing policy attention to the complex inter-relationship between gender relations and income and productive assets, through an analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (henceforth MGNREGA). MGNREGA is both income redistribution and asset creation. The major question is: What has been the policy component in MGNREGA for overcoming gender discrimination and inequality which is a fundamental feature of Asian systems of employment and production? Or, has the MGNREGA programme been indifferent to women workers' needs and interests and, in turn, reproduced the institutional norms and behaviour that treat women as a dependent category? To what extent rural workers and women workers in particular, have enhanced their agency and productivity through their employment-based income and creation of productive assets?

### **MGNREGA: A Public Wage Programme with Right to Employment**

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was passed on 25 August 2005, and renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009 with the objectives: provide work at remunerative wages for landless labourers and marginal farmers; and create assets for raising agricultural productivity. The act became effective at the state level in February 2006 in 200 districts, guaranteeing employment up to 100 days a year to poor rural households on demand. By March 2008, MGNREGA was expanded to cover all rural districts in the country. Over a period of three years, its implementation has provided 4.48 billion days of employment, and Rs. 34,600 crore has been spent on wages.

Significantly, MGNREGA is a rights-based programme, unlike earlier employment schemes. The rights of MGNREGA workers include employment on demand, minimum wages, gender parity of wages, and payment of wages within 15 days, as well as the provision of basic worksite facilities, among others. There is a legal guarantee of 100 days employment in a financial year to a registered household. That the government is legally bound to provide employment within 15 days of the application for work by a job seeker; in case of delay or failure to provide employment to the job seeker, there is provision of unemployment allowance. That a person seeking such employment is to be registered with the Gram Panchayat (village administration council); after due verification, the household is to be provided a job card.

#### **The other key features of MGNREGA include:**

- “Priority” is to be given to women in the allocation of work “in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women” (Schedule II, Para 6, MGNREGA). Further the act stipulates that wages will be equal for women and men.
- Shortening the chain of intermediaries and eliminating the role of contractors in implementation of schemes. To check corruption, the Central Ministry of Rural Development has signed agreements with the Department of Posts to open accounts of MGNREGA workers. Also, circulars have been

issued to all state governments for payment of wages to MGNREGA workers through accounts in Post Offices and Banks only.

- The Gram Panchayat is responsible for planning of works, registering households, issuing job cards, and monitoring implementation of NREG schemes at the local level. There is a provision for appointment of “employment guarantee assistant” in each Gram Panchayat to help carry out MGNREGA programme tasks.
- Social audits through Gram Sabha (village assembly) are expected conducted twice a year. In practice however these have not been conducted by Gram Sabhas. Civil society organizations often in partnership with local administration have conducted social audits.

**Social audit** is a process of reviewing official records and determining whether officially reported expenditures reflect the actual funds spent on the ground. Evidence is gathered through discussion with participants in NEREGA works, verification of works undertaken, and interactions with Panchayat members and local officials. It also looks at checking the timely payment of wages, leakages of funds and other violations. In cases of gross violations, particularly in areas with strong presence of grassroots organizations, social audits are followed by jan sunwai (public hearing) where details of public records are read out to the assembly of villagers.

- MGNREGA seeks the creation of durable and sustainable assets that are created by the community and also managed by it (Mehrotra, 2008: 33). For creation of such assets using the guaranteed employment, the act has codified the following nine types of works:
  - Water conservation and water harvesting
  - Drought proofing (including afforestation and planting of trees)
  - Irrigation canals (including micro and minor irrigation works)
  - Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by households of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (formerly lower castes and indigenous peoples) or to land of beneficiaries of land reforms and the Indira Awas Yojna ( the house-building programme of the Government of India).
  - Renovation of traditional water bodies (including de-silting of tanks)
  - Land development
  - Flood control and protection works (including drainage in water-logged areas)
  - Rural connectivity to provide all-weather access
  - Any other work which may be notified by the central government in consultation with the state government.

One of the most distinguishing features of MGNREGA programme is the creation of environmentally sound productive assets under the decentralized administration of panchayats (local councils). Studies have appreciated MGNREGA for enhancement of environmental services and reduction of vulnerability of agricultural production, with improvement in soil fertility and livelihoods (Tiwari et al 2011). Generally, the village and intermediary panchayats (Sub-district/Block level) manage the implementation activities, while coordination of activities is done at the district level. However, at every level, the concerned agencies and institutions are accountable to the local people (CSE, 2008: 11).

## POLICY CHANGE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The official data indicate an impressive number of women's participation in MGNREGA works. In July 2008, at the all- India level women's employment as a percentage of total employment in MGNREGA

works was 40 per cent ([www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in) on 17 July 2008, also see Jandu, 2008: 2). The leading states in women's participation are Tamil Nadu with 82 per cent, Kerala 71 per cent and Rajasthan 69 per cent. The effects of such participation in MGNREGA employment can be summed up in the following two statements:

Bhagwati of Gram Panchayat Khaira in Rajnandgaon District of Chhattisgarh, said, "Before MGNREGA we were forced to work as agricultural labourers or casual labourers in brick kilns for Rs. 25 to 30 per day. But under MGNREGA we are getting Rs. 62 to 64 per day, more than double, which is almost an unexpected amount for us," (Jandu, 2008: 4).

Importantly, the star performer Rajasthan has a recent history of civil society engagement with social audits and Rights to Information. Against the backdrop of people's awareness, when MGNREGA was launched in Rajasthan, a large number of women (who have studied class 5- 8) but trained as 'mates', (worksites supervisors). In many worksites, mates were reported to have formed groups; and "most mates knew about the task required to earn the minimum wage" (Khera, 2008: 4).

Another high performer state is Tamil Nadu. A study of Tamil Nadu in 2011 by Jeyaranjan for UN Women found that the flexibility of timing in implementation of MGNREGA and the rapid spread of micro credit with its weekly repayment schedule made the programme an employment opportunity for rural women. A social audit in Tamil Nadu found that 95 percent of women employees stated that it was their own decision to undertake work under MGNREGA; 73 percent of them "felt that MGNREGA work is very important for the economic wellbeing of their households"; and "70 percent of them kept all or part of the wages" (Narayanan, 2008: 11). Kudumbasree, a sub set of Panchayat, provides useful lessons in implementation of MGNREGA programme. Under Kudumbasree every household below poverty line is organized into a Neighborhood Group (NHG) at the local level consisting of 15 to 40 households, with each household being represented only by a woman. These NHGs help in better achievement MGNREGA schemes. For example, a systematic effort is made at promotion of transparency, explaining the nature of work, expected out turn, and the likely wages when the work is under taken (Vijayananda and Jithendra, 2008: Vijaykumar and Thomas, 2008, Abraham, 2008).

Studies report a drastic reduction in distress migration of women and men, as a result of available MGNREGA employment in their villages (Jha, Gaiha, Shankar, 2008; Ambasta, Shankar, Shah, 2008). In Jharkhand, one of the worst performing states in MGNREGA, it was observed that "the transition to a rights- based framework has led to a major decline in labor exploitation on rural public works. Wages are higher than they used to be, delays in wage payment are shorter, productivity norms are more reasonable, and complaints of worksite harassment are rare. MGNREGA is a valuable and valued opportunity for the rural poor, and particularly for women, to earn a living wage in a dignified manner", (Dreze, The Hindu, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2008).

Importantly, a majority of the women workers under MGNREGA programme say that such employment has brought a significant change in their communities and in their own lives; the MGNREGA wages are higher than the market wages and it has improved their spending capacity. Women are able to use their earnings for household food and consumption needs, healthcare and education of children. More important, earlier they "used to be dependent on their husbands for any expenses", but now with some cash in their hands, women have greater degree of economic independence and self- confidence, "feel empowered", as they are also earning members of the family (Jandu, 2008: 5). In many worksites, women have control rights to their wages in bank deposits. A 2008 MGNREGA Survey showed that 79% of women employees in MGNREGA works collect their own wages, and 68% keep their own wages ( FRONTLINE, 2009:13).

A significant policy change from the earlier employment generation schemes in India is that the Act stipulates that women's wages are not lower than that of men in MGNREGA employment. With the exception of few reported cases, such gender wage parity has been noted in large-scale surveys of MGNREGA worksites. In the given system of gender relations in India, this is no small achievement. As noted elsewhere, women's capital endowments do not determine gender wage differentials, which may be attributed more to discrimination favouring men (Kelkar and Wang, 2007). That the gender wage differentials largely found in non-farm employment in rural areas of India, is largely due to gender discrimination which encourages women's engagement in low levels of occupation, like unskilled and semi-skilled work, low-level management work and other related production work.

In an UN Women study conducted by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) in four states (Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh), it was noted that 68.48 percent of the total number of women workers have bank and post office accounts in their individual names and 13.70 percent have joint bank accounts with their spouses. And 82 percent of these women reported of accessing their bank and post office accounts on their own (UN Women – IHD, 2011).

In its attempt to address local gender norms which do not permit women's involvement in labour intensive infrastructure projects, the government of Bihar has relaxed the task norms for women in MGNREGA works. There are "separate measurements of work for men and men. Under normal soil conditions, progress for a man for one day of work was notified as 80 cft. For women, the measurement for it was notified as 15 per cent less to that of men, i.e. 68 cft." (PRIYA, 2008: 19). This is a significant measure in view of the women's work. In addition to huge amount of time in home maintenance and caring women spend up to 20-25 per cent of their productive time in the labour market on collection of basic goods for the livelihood security of the household, such as fuel wood, water, vegetables, fruits etc. as well as acquiring fodder for cattle (Hirway, 2008:12).

Another initiative to encourage women's participation in MGNREGA works has come from the government of Rajasthan: rewarding women workers who have completed 100 days of MGNREGA work in a year. This is done under 'Amrita devi Vishnoi Yojna' (PRIYA, 2008).

A major aim of these policy efforts has been to mobilize women's work participation in MGNREGA programmes. There is evidence of a general neglect with regard to bringing about a change in their gendered position (discussed more in the asset question). The provision of facilities, such as safe drinking water, child care, shade for periods of rest, and first aid are reported to be largely absent from MGNREGA worksites. A social audit exercise of Anantpur district in Andhra Pradesh with 60 per cent men and 40 per cent women in MGNREGA worksites, noted: "Drinking water supply has been given to women but in most places, they have not been paid .... No flexible time, wages go inside the family, no crèche anywhere in Anantpur district or in Andhra Pradesh. Earlier shade was provided but that is no longer there. Only water is provided in most places" Center for Environment Concerns [www.solutionexchange-un.net.in](http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in), WADA NA TODO ABHIYAN, 2007).

With the exception of awareness about guaranteed employment for 100 days a year to each rural household, there is limited knowledge of operational guidelines for MGNREGA schemes, such as household registration, the job card distribution process, application for work and entitlement of worksite facilities tend to make MGNREGA provisions ineffective for the villagers in general, and women in particular. This gets further complicated by the strict segregation of tasks on a worksite; "women generally do the work of lifting (not digging) and they have dependence on the number of men in the group" (Banerjee, 2008:9). Pointing out "the issue of injustice to women", the Centre for Environment Concerns, which conducted social audit of MGNREGA worksites in Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh, reports:



The payment for a work is based on measurement of the work, the work recorded is based on what is done by the men. Thus while the extent of digging and soil conditions form the basis of payment for the work, the task done by women in terms of carrying the load, the extent of this load or the underfoot conditions for undertaking their task does not figure in wage calculation.

So, we find two men digging and four women carrying the soil and when the wages are received the men want half the amount divided between the two while the women are left to share the balance between the four. The work of the women is thus “invisible” and seen as “attendant” and almost “dispensable” in nature and hence not meriting measurement. This leads to the wage differential especially as there is a sexual division in such works. We also pointed out that men work with tools, while women do not. For instance, in MGNREGA money is payable for purchase and sharpening of shovels used by men but no effort is made to address the drudgery of the tasks done by women.

The complaint of women is that the design, structure and materials used decide who is seen valuable as a worker. Women lose their self-image and have to beg for work and take what is paid because we do not value their work and measure it but also prefer models in our structure that was preferred by contractors as profit was their only motive. So unless all these are equally challenged we will be touching only the surface of gender issues facing MGNREGA. ([www.solutionexchange-un.net.in](http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in))

MGNREGA implementation needs to learn from the earlier gender analysis of the Employment Guarantee Scheme in the state of Maharashtra – that employment and income opportunities represent important economic gains for women, but they do not automatically lead to a change in the gendered position of women (Krishnaraj, Pandey and Kanchi, 2004). A Roundtable on National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme noted the need of understanding factors that determine women’s participation in labour based programmes, such as paying attention to flexibility in timing and location of work (ILO, 2005:48-50). In other words, MGNREGA implementation needs to take account of women’s household responsibilities, particularly childcare, appropriate time of work when children are at school, location of work near the home.

## **GENDER IS NOT A SUB SET OF DECENTRALIZATION**

Surprisingly, under MGNREGA the household is interpreted as a nuclear family and may include any person substantially dependent on the head of the family. The continuity of local patriarchal norms comes in their way; the concept of household head is interpreted to women’s disadvantage and exclusion from seeking work for livelihood.

Gender sensitivity and women’s voice are essential in creation of public productive assets, such as construction of water harvesting structures, infrastructure facilities and regeneration of tree covers, common lands etc. These can reduce the time and drudgery of women and poor spent on non market unpaid economic activities like collecting fuel wood, water and raw materials for household subsistence needs. Construction of rural connectivity and flood control structures can provide women not only a better access to labour markets but can also reduce their time spent on unpaid domestic services\_ maintenance of non durable assets, care of children, elderly and the sick.

Social relations within a community are not gender-neutral; neither are the effects of guaranteed employment. It has been argued that the use of household or community as a unit of analysis or development interventions, has often led to overlooking of social hierarchies and gender differences (Gurjeet and Shah, 1998; Moser and Moser, 2006). Here issues of security and empowerment tend to be simplified to raising issues with local people, without any fundamental change in relations of power and asset control both in the household and community.

Not surprisingly, women's role in planning of assets under MGNREGA or conducting social audits of the implementation is not visible. During a recent survey of states (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu) it was found that women workers did not take part in social audits. "An analysis of social audits reports conducted by NGOs in districts including Dungarpur (Rajasthan), Hardoi (Uttar Pradesh), Surguja (Chhattisgarh), Villupuram (Tamil Nadu), Chitrakoot (Uttar Pradesh) clearly indicate that the auditing processes have been mostly focused on issues such as registration of families, checking of muster rolls for preventing forgery, timely payment of wages and payment of unemployment allowance. It did not say anything about gram panchayat's involvement in the implementation process". (CSE, 2008: 53)

Interestingly, civil society organizations, such as National Consortium of Grassroots Civil Society Organizations for MGNREGA, PRIYA, Center for Environment, among others are making efforts to strengthen women's participation in planning and monitoring of MGNREGA programmes in some areas. In Haryana, for instance, after PRIYA's intervention, Scheduled Caste and women members have been included in Vigilance and Monitoring Committees (composed of members of local communities where work is undertaken) to monitor and supervise MGNREGA implementation. In Karauli district of Rajasthan, Shakuntala Meena, a woman sarpanch (leader) of Sapotara Panchayat Samiti, has been active in effective implementation of MGNREGA schemes in the local area (PRIYA, 2008: 25). However, barring a few instances, no efforts have been made under MGNREGA implementation to encourage women to actively voice their concerns in planning and monitoring MGNREGA schemes of the implementation.

More work is needed to provide data on income sharing within households under MGNREGA employment, and accounts of externalities and public policy impacts on productivity and agency of women and men workers. With the exception of gender parity of wage-rates, there is political silence on efforts to sensitize local institutions for gender related concerns in collective decisions that will actually help in creating, durable, sustainable assets and building gender-inclusive community ownership of MGNREGA process.

## CREATION OF PRODUCTIVE ASSETS: GENDER CONCERNS

In May 2008, official data showed the following productive assets under MGNREGA (<http://nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=38343>):

- **Water conservation and water harvesting:** 4,70,748 works were taken up which have created 1301.62 lakh cu metres of water storage capacity through digging new tanks and ponds, percolation tanks and small check dams.
- **Flood control and protection:** 49,324 works were taken up which created 7.50 lakh km of drainage in water logged areas through construction and repair of embankments.
- **Micro irrigation:** 89,354 works were taken up for construction and renovation of 0.46 lakh km of canals.
- **Land owned by SC/ST, land reforms and IAY beneficiaries:** 2,61,299 works for provision of irrigation facility were taken up, which provided irrigation for 0.65 hectares of land.
- **Renovation of traditional water bodies:** 1,32,479 works were taken up which created 1063.38 lakh cu metres of water storage capacity through de-silting of tanks/ponds and traditional open wells.
- **Land development:** 2,86,793 works were taken up creating 10.5 lakh hectares of land leveling and bunding.
- **Drought proofing:** 1,25,349 works were taken up which improved 6.14 lakh hectares of land for afforestation and tree plantation.

- **Rural connectivity:** 3.03564 works were taken up for 4.00 lakh km of road.
- **Other works:** 57,126 works of various nature were taken up.

It is not intended to get into discussion on low quality and durability of productive assets, as the focus of NEREGA process has been mainly on aspects of employment generation as compared to quality of assets created.

The multiplier effects of MGNREGA were seen to be significantly contributing to long-term development of agriculture and effectively reducing poverty. Though the number of people who depend on MGNREGA employment would steadily rise over time, the expenditure incurred on MGNREGA, “would be non-inflationary because it will spur agricultural growth upon whose foundation a whole range of sustainable livelihoods will be built” with private investments leading to secondary employment opportunities (Shah, 2007: 46).

The programme has also been successful in addressing “the problem caused by reverse migration as thousands of unskilled workers return home due to slowdown in infrastructure and other sectors” (Indo-Asian News Service, 2009, February 9). Our analysis of the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis showed that there was no support provided to those who lost their jobs and therefore returned to rural areas. Importantly women had to bear the burden of providing food to additional members in the home and for the household maintenance, in the absence of any rural employment programme.

Economic constraints, particularly in the context of current global financial crisis may not allow an open-ended guaranteed employment generation programme. The question is: Should the income from that guaranteed employment all be consumed? Or, a portion of such income should be invested in so as to build an additional stream of income? In the context of IFAD programme for the ultra poor in Bangladesh, a similar question emerged: Either the employment programme must be used to create productive assets that the poor could use after the programme ended. Or, income during the period of employment programme would have to be invested in a manner that provides an income after employment ends. In case of MGNREGA, a policy option seems that the programme must be used to create productive assets that a vast majority of assetless women could use at individual or household level with full control rights to the assets. Some related questions may come up: What proportion of guaranteed employment income is used in consumption? What proportion of guaranteed employment income is used in savings for investments over the current level of consumption in the poor households? A measure of compulsory savings may not be possible in MGNREGA implementation but establishing closer links with micro-finance programme, thus enabling the members of Self-Help Groups to handle repayments and savings may be required.

Evidently, the line of thinking in government and non-government agencies has been on reducing poverty and building the productive capacity of the rural economy. The dynamic of pervasive gender and social inequality has not been the major concern. The challenge, therefore, is: how can a programme for employment generation and creation of productive assets be directed at reducing both poverty and gender inequality?

It is encouraging to see that in India, as in much of Asia, there have been specific policy efforts at addressing some key aspects of gender inequality and also at establishing the possible link between the substantial reduction of gender-based violence and women’s increased involvement in the market economy. However, such policy measures are not sufficient for the provision of secure economic rights to women. In practice, these legal measures are not upheld by private and public enforcement or changed customs and traditions favouring inclusion of women in planning and management of production assets and resources.

The phenomenon of increasing feminization of agricultural work has drawn policy attention in recent years. However, the causes, the extent and its impact on women and productivity have not received sufficient



concern in policy and practice. Insufficient attention to some work sites where women are most active, such as cultivation of crops and vegetables, regeneration of degraded forests, wasteland development and watershed development, has meant that women's contributions and concerns remain invisible in planning and thus are ignored in agriculture knowledge and technology institutions (Sujaya, 2006; Kelkar, 2011). Further, the stress on self-employment and dependence on institutional credit in most land-based economic activities meant that women, who are mostly landless, would not be eligible for assistance beyond the rearing of livestock for income.

The question of women's land ownership remains current in India, as in most of South Asia (see, for example, civil society efforts, Consult on Women's Land Rights, and Indo-global Social Service Society). It is not just land ownership but also all that goes with it – access to institutional credit, training and extension facilities. They are relevant for matters like raising wages, since the reservation wage (i.e. the wage at which a person will enter the labour market) does go up with ownership of land. To an extent, some projects are enabling women to use their access to capital as a means of acquiring ownership and control over land, or related productive assets. In parts of Bangladesh, for example, women have taken land on lease through loans from micro-finance institution( MFIs). In other places, they have taken control over the management and income from fish ponds from their husbands, with capital from MFIs and training in aquaculture. In Andhra Pradesh, India, women in groups have leased land through Self-Help Groups.

A powerful civil society discourse is emerging in the country in favour of MGNREGA programme. This may create public opinion pressure for corruption-free, effective implementation of guaranteed employment to reduce poverty. Such civil society generated pressure, however, has not been attentive toward the prevailing norms of gender inequality in control rights to productive assets and to the token presence of women in local institutions and structures of monitoring of MGNREGA schemes, including social audits. The parity of wages between women and men under MGNREGA is generally interpreted as a sufficient measure for addressing the gender question in poverty reduction programme. The question related to gender equality in management and control rights to productive assets created under MGNREGA are seen a diversion in the strategy of poverty reduction through guaranteed employment. Attempts at reducing poverty and inequality continue to be seen in conflictual terms.

## **PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY OF RESOURCE USE**

Access to employment and thereby income and capital can enable women to get control over land and related productive assets. But what is done in these projects in small numbers can be generalized by a law to end the traditional systems that deny women's rights to land and other productive assets. Passing such laws are only the first step. The rights will need to be established in practice. 'Without reasonable income security, people lack real freedom to make rational choices and be socially responsible. Without collective and individual voice, the vulnerable will remain that way' (ILO, 2004:275). In response to the global orchestration on the feminization of poverty and to meet the demands from concerned civil society and women's organizations, women could be considered as individual subjects of poverty reduction through well-designed policy measures and its implementation for unmediated resource control and the development of related capabilities.

It may be noted that the emphasis on creation of public productive assets under MGNREGA, such as land development, water conservation and water harvesting structures, drought proofing, irrigation facilities etc has significant bearing on development of smallholder productive assets\_ land, livestock, tree covers, irrigation works all related to use in agriculture. Rural connectivity plays a pivotal role in enhancing access to basic services to health, education, communication and in improving economic well being of women and men located in remote rural areas. In other words, the convergence between community productive

assets and smallholder/household productive assets may add value to the overall strength of MGNREGA programme rather than undermine the effectiveness thereof (Shah, 2008).

On farm work related to irrigation of lands of dalits and adivasis under MGNREGA needs to be extended to all resource poor single women and women-headed households willing to adopt more sustainable technologies for enhancing productivity. As evidenced in numerous NEREGA reports, single women routinely encounter exclusion and discrimination at worksites, in addition to undertaking multiple, low productive tasks at the cost of investment in their agriculture and allied activities.

MGNREGA programme throughout the country has to be backed up with unmediated asset management by women; a process to enhance agricultural management skills and knowledge; a wide spread gender sensitization of rural institutions through information and communication technologies, which would help in developing the social understanding of women as workers, farmers and economic contributors. In other words, women's unmediated control rights to productive assets created under MGNREGA, new technologies and management skills are most likely to provide them and their households a livelihood with equality and dignity. At the same time, this is a stronger measure in overcoming poverty and social inequality.

The issues that need further attention are that of capacity building and skill development of the workers (both women and men) related to use of technology and spread of benefits among resource poor women and men to enhance their asset base in rural economy. Also there are issues of building ownership of assets created under MGNREGA, and promoting individual productive capabilities of the workers in the local agricultural economy.

## **EFFECTIVE POLICY FRAMEWORK**

In identifying an effective policy framework related to guaranteed employment and gendered distribution of productive assets, it is important to draw attention to some distinct issues that may otherwise be neglected in more conventional measures of poverty reduction and inclusive growth. The three particularly important issues for policy consideration include: first, an understanding of the changing nature of women's productive work in agriculture and the unorganized/informal sector; second, the economic implications of gender asset inequality in India; and, third, a priority of context specific policy change and control rights to land, trees, water bodies, and other productive assets. These should also include measures to monitor and assess success, including trends indicative of the scale of change in institutional barriers against rural women in implementation of policies.

Undoubtedly, employment under MGNREGA in creation of productive assets has improved self-worth and self-perception of workers (women or men) apart from monetary benefits. However, there is absence of any organized attempt by the state to improve mandated measures of women's economic empowerment and their voice in governance, as stated in the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year plan. With control rights to wage income and management of productive assets, women are likely to have greater prestige in the household and community. They are thus likely to determine the use of their income, which is what Amartya Sen's (1990) theory of household bargaining as cooperative conflict would predict. They are able to direct more of the household income towards improvement of their own economic agency as well as education and nutrition of children.

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 housework and caring, women have recourse only to work that is available.

To improve such gendered condition of women, SEWA has suggested a longer period of employment with a package of capacity development and training in new technology based income generation activities, such as 1) agro-processing, watershed development 2) printing, carpentry, plumbing and so on 3) creation of environmental assets such as tree plantation, recycling, water harvesting and operation and maintenance of water resources, including hand pumps and pipelines (Nanavaty and Pandya, 2008). A longer period of assured employment, and hence income, definitely increases the capability of women to lift their households by their own efforts (with some help from older children and men) and undertake risk-taking investments.

A review of five years of MGNREGA programme shows that the challenge is not to reinstitute policy for women's economic security, but to redeploy the machinery already in place to be used in a more gender responsive manner to overcome persistent gender inequalities, in both economic and socio-cultural spheres. The overarching vision that informs the design of MGNREGA for women's economic empowerment has hardly ever articulated the need for women's interests and inclusion of adequate numbers of women in management and social audits of creation and maintenance of productive assets. These errors of omissions and systematic de-emphasizing of gender equality in MGNREGA policies need to be made visible through district- and country-level workshops. An integrated approach that links equality-based rights to manage productive assets and gender inclusive, participatory rural institutions is the need of the hour for sustainable development and for addressing risks arising from MGNREGA fatigue.

In case of rural Tamil Nadu, the study of Jeyaranjan for UN Women noted "When NREGA required longer hours accompanied by intense work, women just ignored it irrespective of higher wages. However, when the work conditions changed and suited them, they took it up enthusiastically and used it to bargain better terms for them in the traditional labour market" (2011: 60). As widely recognized in development literature, for facilitating equality in social, economic relations and effective institutions are the two main factors in facilitating conditions for economic growth and human development. Self-Help Groups, Mahila Mandals (rural women's organizations), gender responsive Panchayats, community based organizations (such as SEWA, Working Women's Forum, Kudumbasree, and numerous rural NGOs working on MGNREGA implementation) can be efficient models of such institutional arrangement at the local level. These organizations can play an active role in widening the outreach of both technological information and spreading awareness on women's control rights to productive assets and incomes earned through the guaranteed employment and otherwise. Such an approach will enable rural poor women and men to have greater access to institutional credit, promote greater bargaining power against unjust social and economic practices and facilitate implementation of MGNREGA programmes.

The SHGs are one of the potential institutions at the grassroots level which can be used as an instrument of gender responsive implementation of guaranteed employment in creation of productive assets. Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh reports about 300 SHGs involving themselves with Gram Panchayats in implementation of MGNREGA programme and other schemes of rural development ([www.geagindia.org](http://www.geagindia.org)). Also, in the governing body of Kudumbasree in Kerala, SHGs and Panchayats of different tiers are represented; and they are actively engaged in MGNREGA advocacy and decision making. However, capacity building improvement of members of SHGs through skill training and mandatory measure of gender equality in management and control rights to productive assets are critical, only then it would be possible for SHGs to act as an effective agency for rural development under MGNREGA.

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 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 result in substantially reducing exclusion of women from social processes and promote development of diverse capabilities, thereby enhancing productivity and reducing inequality.

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