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## **Gender Dimensions in Migration and a Public Works Programme**

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## Gender Dimensions in Migration and a Public Works Programme

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The failure of agriculture (due to multiple factors, inequality in land holdings, price and production risks, fragmentation of holdings, neoliberal policies, recurring droughts among others), towards generating stable income and lack of other employment options has aggravated rural poverty and distress. To address and alleviate poverty, the Government of India had enacted a landmark legislation, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA) which ensured rural households the 'right to demand work', and subsequently implemented the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) across the country. Considered to be the largest public works programme<sup>1</sup> ever implemented in the world, the MGNREGA guarantees all rural households 100 days of employment every year, provided its adult members are willing to do unskilled manual labour at prevailing notified wages. As the overarching aim of MGNREGA is to provide employment during lean periods of agricultural season, it has the potential to reduce distress migration from and within rural areas. Therefore there is an intrinsic linkage between MGNREGA wages, employment and migration, as vulnerable groups, particularly the landless and land poor households are found to resort to migration as a coping mechanism to agrarian crisis and lack of employment.

Despite many reports challenging the effectiveness of the scheme in addressing vulnerability of the rural poor, significant achievements include setting of a reservation wage (GoI, 2012), or fall-back option for rural workers, which in turn may have reduced distress migration. As MGNREGA Act stipulates guarantee of work within fifteen days upon demand<sup>2</sup>, technically it is a dependable fall back option for rural households under dire situation, provided it transposes on ground in letter and spirit. But if provision of work is delayed and further if households receive rationed<sup>3</sup> days of MGNREGA work, the fall-back may not be a dependable option. Ensuring timely payment of

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<sup>1</sup> Most public works programmes in Asia and Africa were a response to crisis arising out of drought and famine (Dejardin, 1996:2). In India, the Indian famine relief codes of the 19th century recommended public works which was implemented as relief (Ravallion 1990:2).

<sup>2</sup> It's a demand driven (meaning it should provide employment to anyone who seek work) and rights based programme

<sup>3</sup> Numerous studies have reported majority of MGNREGA households receive only few days of employment and not the entitled 100 days even if they wanted to work. In 2017-18, out of the total MGNREGA job card holding households, 40.5 per cent were provided employment, but just 2.3 per cent completed 100 days of work. This is due to rationing and not lack of demand.

wages is also critical as extremely poor households are incapable of adjusting to payment delays<sup>4</sup>, or waiting a fortnight to receive ‘on-time’ wage payments, as daily wages is needed for basic survival.

This paper examines how MGNREGA has impacted rural migration and specifically its effect on rural women belonging to migratory households. Majority of rural women may be left behind as male members migrate for family survival. For wives and mothers staying back in villages, has MGNREGA provided a safety net in the form of wages? Across states, in land poor and marginal farmer households where men have migrated to urban areas leaving their land holdings behind, has MGNREGA through its provision of works on individual lands<sup>5</sup> helped women belonging to these households to earn sustainable livelihoods? Examining published papers and available study reports the paper attempts to answer the above questions.

### ***Impact of MGNREGA on Labour Markets and Migration***

Initial studies conducted in different parts of the country indicated that MGNREGA employment did have an impact on distress migration. Based on a study in villages of Anantpur in Andhra Pradesh, Kareemulla *et al.*, (2009) observed that the scheme brought down migration levels from about 27 to 7 per cent due to availability of work. Similarly in a block in Bastar district, Kumar and Prasanna (2010), found that the number of people migrating had declined to 500 (previously 4500). Another survey in Sidhi district in Madhya Pradesh (MP) found reduction in migration by 60 per cent due to availability of work (CSE, 2008).

Studies have also acknowledged that MGNREGA did have a role in setting reservation wage for rural labour, though more significant was demand from sectors such as construction. Gulati, Jain and Satija (2013) based on an econometric model found an increase in farm wages in the 1990s and a steep ‘V’ curve during 2000–10, when farm wages dropped significantly just before the roll-out of MGNREGA. They also pointed out that the share of employment in construction sector jumped up four times from the 1990s to 2010, while the share of agriculture in total employment fell from 64 per cent during the 1990s to 53.2 per cent in 2009–10. The authors also cite the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) report on migration patterns in India (2007–08) and show that since 43 per cent of all short term migrants are engaged in the construction sector, these wages compete with farm wages for rural labour, and conclude that rising farm wages over the period were more due to macroeconomic factors like economic growth and growth in sectors such as construction and only to a lesser extent attributable to MGNREGA. Desai *et al.*, (2015) based on IHDS data comments that MGNREGS form only a very small part of rural labour markets, with

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<sup>4</sup> Payment is delayed if wages are not credited to the workers account within 15 days after completion of work. The MIS (accessed on June 25, 2018) indicate payments generated within 15 days as 26.85% in 2014-15, 36.92% in 2015-16, 43.43% in 2016-17 and 84.98% in 2017-18

<sup>5</sup> Vulnerable MGNREGA households are eligible for work on their private land. These could be land development work, infrastructure for livestock, sericulture/horticulture/plantation related works and so on. These fall under Category B works (MGNREGA has four broad categories of work, A, B, C & D)

just 13 per cent of rural men and 10 per cent of rural women in the age group 15-59 working in the programme, reporting that the average number of days worked in MGNREGA was less than 4 days at the population level. The study by Shah and Makwana (2011) indicated narrowing of gap between wage rates for male and female workers, and that the uptrend in wage rates for females encouraged women to participate in MGNREGA.

Das (2014) provides evidence to substantiate the claim that MGNREGS wages mitigate distress migration. Based on field survey of 556 households conducted from January to April 2012 in two blocks in Cooch Behar district<sup>6</sup> of West Bengal, she found that agricultural labour and those with BPL cards have a higher probability of getting MGNREGA work, but they also are more likely to migrate. The study results found that the probability of households sending at least one member for short term migration decrease as the number of days of participation in MGNREGS increase<sup>7</sup>, and as households got more work and income from the programme, the probability of migration decreased significantly.

In a study across 12 districts of Gujarat, MP, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, Mistry and Jaswal (2009) found that out of 938 beneficiaries, 55 per cent felt that migration had reduced in their families as a result of MGNREGA. Imbert and Papp (2012) using survey data from high out-migration areas in Gujarat, MP and Rajasthan found that the participation in MGNREGA significantly reduced short-term migration. The authors also document demand for more MGNREGA employment, including from those engaged in short-term migration, despite the fact that earnings outside the village were almost twice as high as earnings from the programme. They attribute this to the high cost of migration, which in some cases were as high as 75 per cent of daily earnings outside the village. Based on a study in Gujarat, Shah and Makwana (2011) reported that MGNREGA was found to have successfully shortened the period of migration, with 41.5 per cent stating that the programme also reduced distress migration. Members of participating households on an average worked as migrant workers for about 148 days whereas those in non-participant households worked for 164 days. Korra (2015) found the pattern of migrating out or working in MGNREGA depended on family size, gender and age composition of family members, and also on start (time) of the MGNREGA works, number of working days and wage rates. Many MGNREGA households combined migrant remittances and MGNREGA income for household survival. Out of the beneficiary households the migrant households were interested to migrate again during the next season, with some even temporarily selling<sup>8</sup> their job cards to non-beneficiaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Cooch Behar has among the highest number of migrants in the state with more than 22 per cent of the households migrating for casual labour

<sup>7</sup> At 95% level of significance

<sup>8</sup> Though universal entitlement, in the early years, such as in 2010 (the time of field survey of the above quoted study), job cards or the scheme was yet to be extended to all rural households wanting the job cards. The most vulnerable households, the SC, ST, BPL households were given them on priority. The author found certain beneficiary households especially from Pata Kodangal village giving off their job cards to others as they were leaving the village

The above cited studies, mostly conducted in the early years of MGNREGA implementation indicate the programme to have a positive impact on reducing migration. But others, Sudarshan (2011) in a study of three states found no evidence with respect to the programme reducing migration, except that in some of the villages in Himachal Pradesh, men put off the decision to migrate or went for shorter periods when works were open. But more recent studies, such as that by the Institute of Economic Growth or IEG (2018), in 30 districts covering 1200 beneficiary households reported migration to reduce only in six, while in the remaining, the percentage of migrating households did not change. The IEG (2018) study had also found that the average wage earned by MGNREGA workers were lower than the market rate and in some it was below the minimum wages. There is also evidence on workers not getting sufficient employment under MGNREGA. For instance, Mitra *et al* (2015: 24) found that in eight highly migration prone project villages in Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh (UP) only 12.4 per cent households got job cards under MGNREGA, and among these, not a single household was provided even a day of employment in the previous year.

Saxena (2015), based on field insights from 19 districts across twelve states, found weaknesses with respect to many critical aspects in the working of MGNREGS, and vast divergence from provisions spelt out in the Act. The greatest weakness across states was the ‘suppressed demand’<sup>9</sup>, workers demand for employment not being genuinely registered, workers not being aware<sup>10</sup> of getting employment on demand, and even in the event of being aware unable to assert their right, delay in payment of wages and timely provision of work. In his report on MGNREGS, Saxena remarks *the most disturbing aspect observed was that work was not being taken up when it was needed the most*.

MGNREGA has a critical function of providing employment during lean periods (when farm work is not available), which is immediately after harvest of *rabi* and after sowing of *kharif* crop. If MGNREGA work is not taken up during this crucial period of 3-4 weeks, then most labourers leave the village for survival. After this period, even if works are taken up, participation is low, and officials conveniently construe it as lack of demand, which is not really the case. Across survey sites, there was no pro-active steps in planning works to prevent such distress migration nor were there works taken up to synchronize with the distress period. Saxena (2015) emphasizes upon the fact that if work is not provided when it is urgently needed, then the subsequent provisions are useless, as the non-availability of work during the lean period, force workers to migrate to distant places. Consequently, a critical programme goal, breakage of debt bonded employment traps (work in lieu of advance received from contractors) fails. Saxena (2015) found workers who had been

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<sup>9</sup> There was huge unmet demand for employment which did not get reflected in official records. Officials at various levels claimed that there was no demand for work as people opted for other better paying employment opportunities while people stated that work was not available when they needed them

<sup>10</sup> the general understanding was the officials/representatives of the panchayat decided when to begin the work depending on sanction received from government

away for several months, returning home just before the rains in several study sites across states, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and others.

Examining administrative data, Aggarwal (2015), found that the scale of MGNREGA employment in the country in 2014-15 fell to half of the person days that was generated in 2009-10, with a 60 per cent fall observed in Bihar (from 2012-13 figures). During the same period, Jharkhand, one amongst the high poverty level states, saw a 20 per cent fall in MGNREGA employment. She also reports on the unavailability of adequate work and how the delay in wage payments caused immense hardships to workers, with many migrating out, some going to distant states such as Kerala. In absolute terms too many rural households in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and others, were provided just five days of employment during the entire year.

### ***Women in MGNREGA Wage Work***

Studies on migration has indicated the nature of male and female migration to be quite different. Mazumdar et al (2013, p.62) based on field data from 20 states concluded that female labour migration differed from male migration by the relatively greater weight of agriculture in the sector profile of female migrant workers, and a far greater weight of services and industry among male migrant workers, which indicated highly gendered employment crisis. The study had also brought out the significance of ‘jodi based migratory labouring units’ and piece rate wage payments in brick kilns across the country and sugar cane harvesting in western and southern India. As one of the core objectives of public works programmes is to stem distress migration, literature on gender inclusiveness with respect to MGNREGA wage work is discussed next.

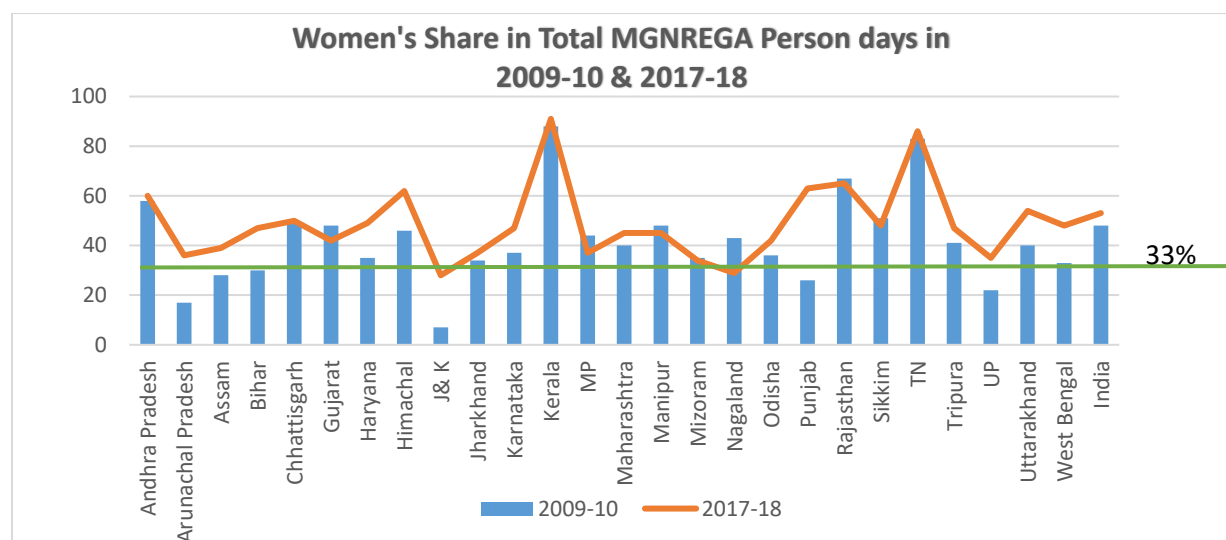
The design of MGNREGA has some gender specific clauses, which include, at least a third of all workers to be women, provision of equal wages <sup>11</sup> and the decision of who should work to be left to the household, which provide more scope for their participation (Khera and Nayak 2009; Sudarshan 2011). In addition, there are clauses such as provision of work within 5 km radius from home and crèche or childcare facilities at work-sites, and the flexibility of choosing when work is undertaken. Though these benefit all, it may be of greater significance to women (Pankaj and Tankha, 2010), and should potentially have a positive influence on their participation. There is variability in participation of divorced, separated or widowed women in MGNREGA, with studies in Tamil Nadu indicating them to be overrepresented among MGNREGA workers (Carswell and De Neve, 2013: 87), while Kelkar (2009:10) based on insights gathered from surveys in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh reported that they were “systematically excluded from seeking employment” and the reason for such exclusion was the way it was organised in these places, with women workers needing a male “partner”. Pellissery and Jalan (2011: 287) also observed this in

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<sup>11</sup> Schedule II (6) specify priority to be given to women for work and one-third of workers at the work-site to be women, while Schedule II (34) prohibits gender discrimination with respect to wages for the same work

Andhra Pradesh, where “physically arduous work was often performed by a man and woman working in tandem, disadvantaging single women”.

The participation of women in MGNREGA has gone up over the years, with 53 per cent of all employment generated in 2017-18<sup>12</sup> going to women. Women’s share of MGNREGA employment across the country rose from 41 per cent of total MGNREGA person days in 2006-07 (367.9 million person days) to 48 per cent in 2009-10 (1364.05 million person days), and then to 49 per cent in 2010-11 (1227.42 million person days). The MGNREGA Sameeksha (2012) mention that women were active in the scheme availing 47 percent share of total employment in 2011-12, though there was significant inter-state variation in participation of women across states, with highest participation at 93 per cent observed in Kerala, while Uttar Pradesh (18 per cent) and Jammu and Kashmir (17 per cent) showed low levels of women’s participation. Table 1 gives women’s share in total employment (MGNREGA person days) across years, beginning from 2006-07 (operational only in 200 districts), and in 2009-10, 2014-15 and 2017-18 (operational across the country), and it is clear that the share of female person days in total person days provided under MGNREGA increased from 48 per cent in 2009-10 to 55 per cent in 2014 -15 but since then fell to 53 per cent in 2017-18.



**Source:** Calculated from data available in the MGNREGA MIS <http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx>. Accessed on 24 May 2018

Across states, there was variation, with more than 85 per cent of MGNREGA work being done by women in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, while in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal, Punjab, Rajasthan and Telangana they availed 60 per cent or more of the total person days generated. Among the states, all except Jammu and Kashmir and Nagaland, recorded more than the mandated 33 per cent

<sup>12</sup> In 2017-18, about 1262.85 lakh rural households in the country were MGNREGA job card holders, while less than half or 511.78 lakhs were provided employment.

participation in 2017-18, while with respect to days of work, the average<sup>13</sup> days of employment to women increased to 32.3 days (from 29.2 days in 2014-15). With respect to days of employment generated, it was about 32 days on an average in 2017-18, but varied across states and within regions with North Eastern state of Mizoram providing the highest number of days, generating 63 days on an average while states nearby, such as Assam and Manipur provided the least, approximately 18 and 12 days of employment respectively.

With respect to overall participation of women in MGNREGA, studies have pointed out mismatch between figures in the administrative data and the national survey data. For instance, the Key Findings Report of CWDS (2012) comments that though the programme appeared to be providing employment to millions of women in rural India, all India employment surveys by the NSSO indicated dramatic falls in rural women's work participation rates, resulting in reduction in overall female workforce participation by over 21 million between 2004-05 and 2009-10. It further adds that the NSSO data indicated enhancement of female migration rates<sup>14</sup> (proportions of migrants in the female population), which accelerated in rural India between 1999 and 2007-08<sup>15</sup>. This implies that despite women's participation in MGNREGA, the migration rates had gone up, though it should be borne in mind that the two time periods are not exactly comparable, and that MGNREGA became operational across all rural districts only by 2008.

### ***MGNREGA Works on Individual Lands – Would they help Migrant Households?***

The primary objective of the Act is augmenting wage employment, and it is assumed that given the manual nature of work, it would be self-targeting, that is poorer rural households may be more likely to participate than others. On the other hand, the auxiliary objective is strengthening natural resource management through works that address causes of chronic poverty. The list of permissible work under MGNREGA is categorised in to A, B C and D of which category B are individual land works undertaken on private lands of vulnerable sections. The category B works include “provision of irrigation facility, *horticulture plantation and land development facilities* on land owned by households belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes or *to Below Poverty Line (BPL) families* or to beneficiaries of land reforms or to the beneficiaries under the IAY, *small and marginal farmers (SF/MF) as defined in the Agriculture Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme, 2008*”.

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<sup>13</sup> calculated from total number of women person days generated and total number of women provided employment in the year

<sup>14</sup> the rural female migration rate rose from 42.6 per cent to 47.7 per cent between 1999-2000 and 2007-08, in contrast to the fall in rural male migration rates from 6.9 per cent to 5.4 per cent

<sup>15</sup> Employment data is drawn from the major quinquennial surveys of the NSSO, unfortunately, migration data was not collected in either the 2004-05 survey or the 2009-10 survey. For migration, we thus have to refer to the surveys of 1999-2000 and 2007-08. The two time periods are not strictly comparable



Over the years, there has been a progressive increase<sup>16</sup> in share of category B works out of total works. This also indicate that with changing nature of MGNREGA, and increase in works on individual/private land, the less poor rural households may also be inclined to participate and the design of MGNREGA which was self-targeting may no longer be applicable. Desai *et al* (2015) based on data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2011-12 found that just about 24.4 per cent of rural households participated, with both the rural poor and non-poor households working in MGNREGA. Though the survey found the proportion of poor to be higher, 70 per cent of poor households reported not getting work, may be owing to weak programme implementation and work rationing as even the non-poor households were participating.

Majority of rural households are potential beneficiaries of individual land works, as the scheme include small and marginal farmers<sup>17</sup>, and therefore the provision of completing works to create assets such as dug wells, animal and poultry shelters, fruit tree plantations and others on private lands has the potential to transform MGNREGS, from a wage employment programme into one that can create sustainable livelihoods. The selection of beneficiaries of these works also follow procedure as in case of other MGNREGA works, with priority list of beneficiary households being drawn up by the gram panchayat (GP), based on recommendations of the gram sabha, which are then included in the shelf of works and annual action plan (AAP). As these works are recommended in the gram sabha meetings wherein participation of males and absence of females is the norm, the probability of exclusion may be higher in case of migrant households (with male alone or entire family).

Migrant households are also generally land poor and hence may not benefit from these works as they may not have sufficient land ownership in the first place, and also because many of these households may be de-facto women headed (as men have migrated and family survive partly on remittances). These women may be less inclined to participate in gram sabha meetings and even if they do may not be able to make their demands heard. But because the programme guidelines indicate single women<sup>18</sup> headed households as a beneficiary category that have priority for category B works, they may not be excluded altogether either. The inclusion of women headed households in individual land works was examined by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (2018) in a study across Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and West Bengal (WB), covering over 3000 beneficiary households. The study examined the proportion of women headed households that received completed individual land works in the preceding three years. Comparing

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<sup>16</sup> The percentage share of category B works have increased from 17.6% (out of the total 104.62 lakh works) in 2013-14 to 46.8% (out of the total 167.06 lakh works) in 2016-17. The progress in category B works in six states that account for more than three-fourth the share and include Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh (MP), West Bengal, Telengana, UP and Odisha.

<sup>17</sup> Small farmer households own less than 2 Hectare (Ha) of land, marginal farmer households own below 1 Ha

<sup>18</sup> According to Census 2011, 12.2 percent of India's female population is classified as single, and include women who are widowed, divorced, separated, and older unmarried women. They are head of their households and there is wide recognition of their vulnerability and poverty and being households with more dependents (Dreze and Srinivasan, 1997).

2011 Population Census data, across Karnataka, MP and WB, it was observed that while there were 15.8, 9.8 and 13.5 single women headed households, among the purposively selected sample beneficiary households, there were 14.9, 10.9 and 19.5 per cent of women headed households, indicating to some extent that single women headed households were receiving priority with respect receiving completed works. But while in quantity, they received a reasonable share of works, in terms works that had higher expenditures, they seemed to be shortchanged, particularly in case of dug wells in MP. Dug wells are very important for the overall wellbeing and particularly for reducing drudgery of women, but they were not getting their 'rightful' share of the work, with less than 7 per cent of dug wells going to women headed households. The study had also observed that there was an interplay of local political power and interests that determined who got what works, which marginalized women headed households (with or without migrant males) further. Beneficiaries in West Bengal had also reported rationing with respect to receiving wage work due to very large number of job card holders in their villages (CWDS, 2018).

With respect to private land works, it is important to ensure female headed households (single or married but without adult males as they may be migrants/deceased) get a similar share (as in wage work where they are assured of one-third share) of MGNREGA works undertaken on private/individual lands, both in total numbers and with respect to work types under expenditure bands<sup>19</sup>. CWDS (2018), had recommended maintenance of a beneficiary roster with respect to sanctioned private land works, and display of beneficiary names at the GP office to bring in greater transparency, and inclusion of the most vulnerable households. CWDS (2018) had also recommended focus on land poor and landless households, with expansion of permissible works for landless households (in addition to provision of livestock infrastructure works) to improve overall livelihoods.

### ***MGNREGA, Migrant Households and Women***

Can women's participation in MGNREGA possibly influence their migration decisions? Working in MGNREGA may ensure some wage income to rural households, and may be significant for women headed households without adult males and in women managed households where men may have migrated to urban regions for income and household survival. For those migrating alone for better work and income earning options, MGNREGA may not be of significance, but for women left behind in charge of households where males migrate out in search of employment and income, MGNREGA work may positively impact overall household welfare by supplementing income.

Women, particularly widowed and elderly, as well as those with children find it difficult to migrate, since leaving behind their young ones is not an option and migrating with them poses a lot of

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<sup>19</sup> Fruit tree plantation works ranged about 6 to 7,000 rupees in West Bengal while in MP it was above Rs.1,00,000. Works such as field bunding in MP were of lower expenditure ranging about 10- 25,000 depending on area while a dug well was on an average about 2,00,000 or above

problems and hence stay back (Chakraborty 2016: 179). Based on a survey of 700 households across five districts, Coffey (2013) argues that duration of mother's migration is a strong predictor of children's migration, reducing mothers' migration could help bridge the gap in the education of migrant and non-migrant children. Those staying back require cash for food security, and MGNREGA and the public distribution system could possibly provide income and food security to those who cannot easily migrate particularly women and the elderly. Korra (2015) in a field study undertaken in 2010 of 240 households in Mahabubnagar district of Telenga state, looked in to the distinction between migrant and non-migrant MGNREGA beneficiary households and found that the participation by women was higher in households where men had migrated.

Dodd et al (2018) based on results from household surveys in Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu, examined whether MGNREGA is a substitute for internal labour migration, and found households relying exclusively on MGNREGA differed in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics in comparison to households relying exclusively on remittances from internal labour migration. In the case of one-fifth of households, a gendered survival strategy operated at the household level, with MGNREGA and internal labour migration being complementary livelihood strategies, with women working in MGNREGA while men took up internal labour migration. Based on NSS data, Abraham (2009) found higher share of female workers<sup>20</sup> in the farm sector in distressed regions, which he attributed to migration of males to other regions, leading to feminization of agriculture. Rao (2012) in her field study in villages around Varanasi observed that in the era of globalization and falling returns from conventional agriculture, men belonging to small/marginal farmer households migrated to towns and cities for work, leaving the women behind, for whom farming became an extension of household work. For such households MGNREGA should be a supplementary source of income but are women left behind able to get work on demand, or do they demand work at all? In a field survey in Gorakhpur where men had mostly out-migrated, Mitra (2018) found that the women farmers had not received a single day of work during the previous year despite being job card holders.

In some of the early studies, such as that by Khera and Nayak (2009), 57 per cent of the sample respondents stated that MGNREGA had 'helped them to avoid migration', while Shah et al (2010), found vertical labour market segmentation, with women, old people and the infirm seeking employment with MGNREGA while the able-bodied men worked for higher wages in farm jobs. Similarly in Rajsamand and Dungarpur in Rajasthan, where men migrated for higher wages to urban centres, much of the MGNREGA workers were found to be women and older men who had discontinued migration (Verma, 2011). Studies also report that after Cyclone Aila, in four villages of the Lahiripur gram panchayat, in Gosaba block of 24 Parganas South more than 50 per cent of able bodied men in 18-45 age group, migrated out for employment leaving behind elderly parents,

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<sup>20</sup> In distressed regions, among farm sector workers, 44.5 per cent were female workers, while in non-distressed regions, only 36 per cent were female workers.

wives and children (Ghosh *et al.*, 2018). Thus the vulnerable are staying back, but to what extent is MGNREGA helping those staying back?

Studies have also pointed out gaps in the programme with respect to delay in work provision, delay in payments and other issues which is discussed next.

### ***Dependability of Wages & Work under MGNREGA***

In practice, every year the Central/Union Government make an annual budgetary allocation to fund<sup>21</sup> three-fourth of the material and entire wage payment of unskilled MGNREGA workers. As it is a demand driven rights based work entitlement, the government is mandated by law to provide funds over and above the initial allocation made in the annual Union Budget. In 2014–15 the Centre treated the initial allocation of Rs.34, 000 crore as a cap<sup>22</sup> on MGNREGA expenditure, and therefore, when funds dried up towards the end of that financial year, workers were denied work (Aggarwal, 2016). There has also been many instances of delay in transfer of funds from Centre to the States, delay in crediting payment to workers accounts<sup>23</sup> even after the generation of fund transfer orders (FTO), all of which lead to uncertainties. These delays has led to loss of confidence and faith in MGNREGA work as a dependable fall back mechanism.

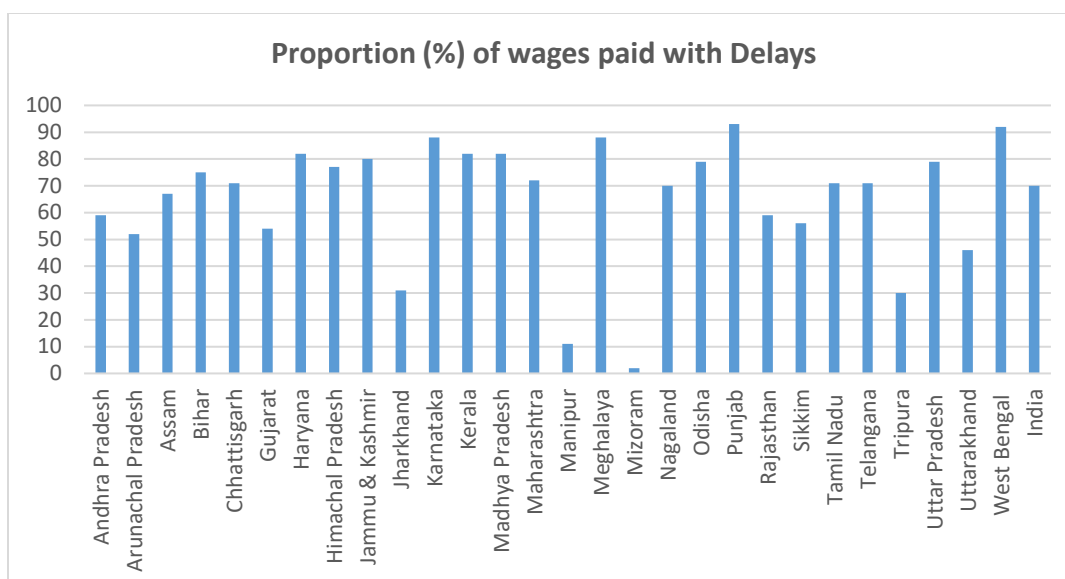
***Delay in Provision of Work and Payments*** The governance and implementation of MGNREGA at all levels is of great significance and determine whether the scheme may be a dependable fall back option for rural households. Studies report that workers are asked by panchayat officials and elected representatives to wait and ‘demand for work’ only when works are open, and therefore its purpose as a dependable fall-back option is lost. Verma and Shah (2012) found that while MGNREGA implementation had initially reduced migration in Mandla district (MP) the delay in payment of wages drove them back to migration for survival. Similarly the tribal farmers in Narmada district of Gujarat were not keen to participate because of delayed wage payments despite significant differences between the prevailing market rates (which was just about half of MGNREGA wage rates. The proportion of workers who were paid with delay (that is not within 15 days of last day of completion of work) in 2014-15, is indicated in the illustration below.

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<sup>21</sup> Centre completely funds the unskilled labour costs and 75 per cent of the material costs ( the rest of the material cost is borne by the state)

<sup>22</sup> The budget cap was removed in 2015-16

<sup>23</sup> Common in case of post office accounts and also in cases of technical glitches in the public financial management system (PFMS) or the banking system. The PFMS is an online application of the Central government for routing the FTOs



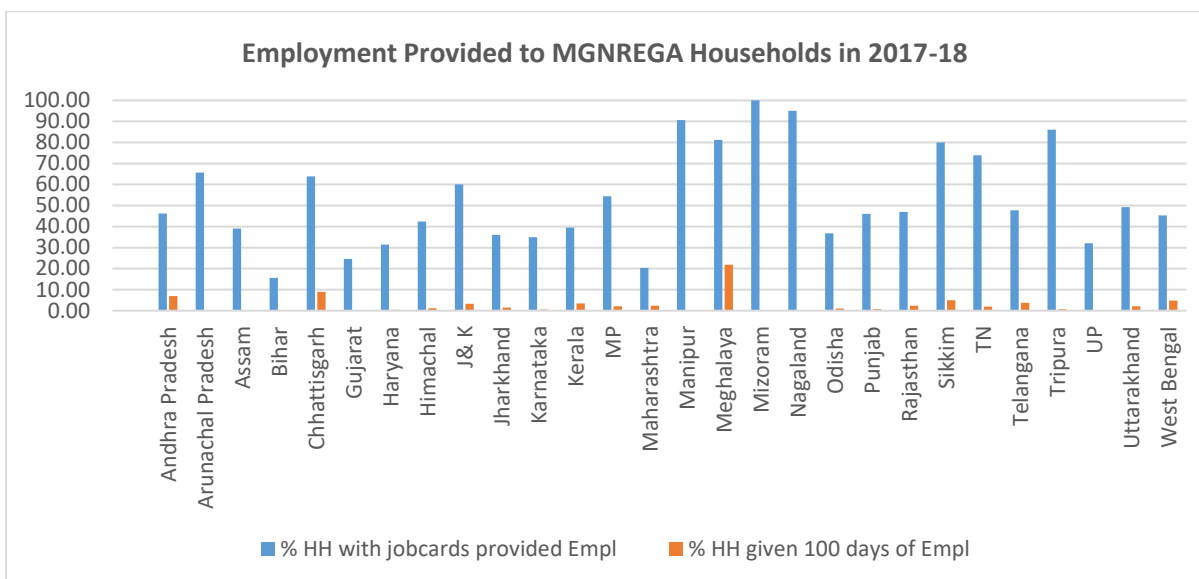
**Source:** Based on 2014-15 data given in Aggarwal (2016)

Poor households cannot withstand delay in payments as daily wages determine food security and survival. There has been reports of months of delay in wage payments (Saxena, 2015) which has become a recurring feature over the years. In the above illustration, that is in 2014-15 it was due to delays in transfer of funds from the Centre to the States (owing to various reasons, in case of Jharkhand and in many other states, it was because of delayed submission of audit reports). In 2018, delay of more than a month was reported in Bihar<sup>24</sup>, and the reason was the FTOs for wage payments sent to the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) remained unprocessed even in April due to ‘technical glitches’.

***Rationing of Work*** Despite the universality of the programme, households do not get 100 days of work due to rationing which occurs at different stages of the process, such as getting any work at all and getting the full entitlement. Desai et al (2015), based on data from the IHDS found that out of the quarter of rural households that participated, about 60 per cent had wanted to work more days but were unable to find work; and out of the households that did not participate, 19 per cent would have liked to participate but could not find work. At present the scheme has about 114 million active male and female workers, and has provided employment to about 50 million households every year, with about one-tenth completing 100 days of employment (Pankaj, 2018). The recent administrative data (presented in Table 2), indicate that only 2.59 million households were provided hundred days of employment during 2017-18. The bar chart below clearly indicates the extent to which job card holding households received 100 days of employment in 2017-18.

<sup>24</sup> The workers had not been paid since March 7 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/nrega-workers-without-pay-for-1-month/articleshowprint/63744901.cms>

While it is true that many job card holders do not seek employment (either because they do not require it, or as indicated in studies quoted, they had already migrated out as MGNREGA works began late), of those who are seeking employment, majority prefer more days than less, but they were not provided sufficient work.



**Source:** Calculated from data available in the MGNREGA MIS <http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx>.

This rationing of employment again is a breach of the promises made in the Act. In a field survey conducted by CWDS in 2017 as part of a NIRD commissioned study, it was observed that across gram panchayats in Pathar Pratima, Moyna and Nandigram blocks of West Bengal, many households with migrants and non-migrants reported wanting more days of employment under the scheme, but was limited by the work made available by the gram panchayat (which on an average was about 40-50 days in a year, instead of the guaranteed 100 days). As there were too many job card holding households, a rationing process was operational with the co-operation of households who received more days of employment in years when a work such as farm pond excavation or fruit tree plantation was taken up on their private land.

Certain other studies use the term rationing differently from what is stated above, with rationing rate defined as the *proportion of job seekers who were not allocated work*. Dutta *et al* (2012) based on a study using the NSS Employment Unemployment 2009-10 data found that though large number of women were drawn into the programme, they faced greater probability of not obtaining work than men, as the rationing process did not favour them.

Gender differences in rationing of employment was examined by Narayanan and Das (2014) by computing rationing rates<sup>25</sup> across men and women to assess whether women were more likely to

<sup>25</sup> The rationing was explicitly in favour of women in Southern states (except Karnataka) as well as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan while females faced higher administrative rationing than males in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jammu &

be excluded from MGNREGA employment. Using the NSS 68<sup>th</sup> round data (2011-12), they examined the extent to which the programme was inclusive of women, with a particular focus on subpopulations, female headed households, widows and mothers of young children who typically face serious constraints in the context of labor market participation. The study found that while MGNREGA was generally inclusive of women at national level, with women headed households facing lower rationing rates (0.19), it was higher for other categories, and there was substantial variations across states and exclusion of vulnerable groups of women was observed in some states. For instance the rationing rate for female headed households with no adult males was 0.56 and 0.93 in MP and Maharashtra, while for widows<sup>26</sup> it was 0.58 in Assam and Bihar, and 0.85 in Maharashtra, which indicate that though these women may desire to work under the programme, they may face significant social barriers in accessing work. These findings substantiate studies by Holmes et al (2011) and others who reported that widows and single women had to accompany men in order to get work.

## **Conclusion**

Studies discussed have brought out the positive impact of increasing days of MGNREGA employment on short-term migration, and how households combined migrant remittances and MGNREGA wages for survival. With agriculture unable to support the huge population dependent on it for livelihoods and limited non-farm employment options, MGNREGA and internal labour migration are being adopted by many landless and land poor rural households as complementary livelihood strategies, and evidence indicate a gendered preference to be operational at household level. These reasons may have led to increasing participation rates of women in the programme, particularly in areas where there may be higher wage earning work options available for men. But studies also found evidence with respect to barriers that compromised participation of widows and single women (from both migrant and non-migrant households) in the programme. In fact, in many areas, their probability of finding work depended on their ability to find a male partner, which was akin to brick kiln and sugar cutting work where men and women are normally recruited in pairs.

Numerous studies also gave evidence with respect to gaps in implementation, from what is stated in the Act and on ground, and therefore the programme has fallen behind achieving its many stated goals, particularly of mitigating distress migration. Timely work provision under MGNREGA during lean agricultural period, a period of distress for rural landless and land-poor households, is critical for achieving the goal of preventing distress migration, but studies showed that there was a general lack of planning with respect to ensuring work during these months. Evidence also indicate that works may not be taken up when it is needed the most, and even when they are taken up, delayed provision of work, rationing of work, as well as delay in wage payments has led to the

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Kashmir where as per the NSS figures, female work participation in MGNREGA was less than 6% (though administrative data available from the MGNREGA MIS indicate higher figures)

<sup>26</sup> The percentage of all widows seeking work was also small in UP (9.8%), Rajasthan (3.4%), Bihar (3.9%), Assam (6.8%) and even in Kerala (8%)

perception of the programme being unreliable, with workers resorting to migration during lean periods. The review also indicated that while there is 'right to hundred days of work for every rural household', across states it was being suppressed and many were not even aware of their right to get 'work on demand'.

The paper also discussed the increasing number of works taken up on individual/private lands, and the danger of exclusion of most vulnerable households in these works. In these cases priority list of beneficiary households were drawn up by the gram panchayat, based on recommendations of the gram sabha meetings wherein participation of males and absence of females is the norm. Hence, the probability of exclusion of female headed households (with or without male migrants) and migrant households were high, owing to non-representation in such meetings. Also the works on private lands attracted less vulnerable rural households including influential rural elite, leading to near complete exclusion of landless and the land poor migrant households who may be ignorant of such provisions, and processes for availing them. Therefore it is important to ensure migrant households are given priority in these works rather than the present situation wherein they are excluded altogether owing to absence in gram sabha meetings.

In conclusion, while the legislation guarantees right to work, to achieve its stated goals the programme have to address implementation issues on ground, particularly planning for synchronization and execution of works with periods of agricultural distress. Gender concerns, particularly barriers to obtaining work as faced by most vulnerable groups, single women, widows and elderly need to be addressed may be even through further affirmative action than the existing 33 per cent guaranteed by the Act.



**Table 1 Average Days of Work to Women and their Share in MGNREGA Employment**

States	Women's share in total Employment or MGNREGA Person days				Average Days of Employment to Women	
Years	2006-07	2009-10	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18
Andhra Pradesh	55	58	59	60	30.44	35.91
Arunachal Pradesh	31	17	30	36	12.77	28.44
Assam	32	28	28	39	15.25	17.57
Bihar	18	30	37	47	28.13	29.92
Chhattisgarh	40	49	50	50	17.29	28.09
Gujarat	51	48	43	42	19.21	24.27
Haryana	31	35	42	49	18.35	22.58
Himachal	13	46	61	62	34.87	34.45
J& K	5	7	25	28	27.80	33.54
Jharkhand	40	34	32	37	26.60	29.53
Karnataka	51	37	47	47	14.42	21.95
Kerala	66	88	92	91	41.20	44.67
MP	44	44	43	37	19.56	24.13
Maharashtra	38	40	43	45	27.63	27.29
Manipur	51	48	38	45	19.64	11.81
Meghalaya	NA	NA	43	47	32.90	45.43
Mizoram	34	35	40	34	14.23	63.33
Nagaland	30	43	31	29	16.65	45.83
Odisha	36	36	34	42	23.79	23.85
Punjab	38	26	57	63	18.97	28.76
Rajasthan	68	67	68	65	35.90	39.63
Sikkim	25	51	48	48	37.21	46.84
TN	82	83	85	86	41.49	36.75
Telangana	NA	NA	61	61	25.34	28.21
Tripura	76	41	49	47	48.37	24.78
UP	17	22	25	35	26.18	30.06
Uttarakhand	31	40	51	54	26.11	33.10
West Bengal	19	33	41	48	24.22	39.85
<b>India</b>	41	48	55	53	29.21	32.28

Source: MGNREGA MIS <http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx>

**Table 2 Households with Job cards and those provided Employment**

	<b>HH with Job cards (in lakhs) in 2017- 18</b>	<b>HH provided Employment (in lakhs) in 2017-18</b>	<b>HH with 100 days of Employment (in lakhs) in 2017-18</b>	<b>% HH with job cards provided Employment in 2017-18</b>	<b>% HH given 100 days of Employment in 2017-18</b>
<b>States</b>					
Andhra Pradesh	86.27	39.81	5.97	46.15	6.92
Arunachal Pradesh	2.16	1.42	0	65.74	0.00
Assam	43.19	16.87	0.11	39.06	0.25
Bihar	144.38	22.49	0.16	15.58	0.11
Chhattisgarh	36.48	23.27	3.24	63.79	8.88
Gujarat	35.05	8.61	0.11	24.56	0.31
Haryana	8.7	2.73	0.04	31.38	0.46
Himachal Pradesh	12.03	5.11	0.14	42.48	1.16
J& K	11.62	6.98	0.38	60.07	3.27
Jharkhand	40.08	14.45	0.58	36.05	1.45
Karnataka	54.58	19.05	0.3	34.90	0.55
Kerala	33.26	13.12	1.17	39.45	3.52
MP	63.91	34.81	1.35	54.47	2.11
Maharashtra	83.31	16.98	2.02	20.38	2.42
Manipur	5.42	4.91	0	90.59	0.00
Meghalaya	5.26	4.27	1.15	81.18	21.86
Mizoram	1.91	1.91	0	100	0
Nagaland	4.31	4.1	0	100	0
Odisha	62.85	23.07	0.68	36.71	1.08
Punjab	14.42	6.64	0.1	46.05	0.69
Rajasthan	96.11	45.14	2.28	46.97	2.37
Sikkim	0.8	0.64	0.04	80.00	5.00
TN	78.66	58.15	1.5	73.93	1.91
Telangana	52.95	25.28	2.02	47.74	3.81
Tripura	6.08	5.23	0.04	86.02	0.66
UP	151.72	48.72	0.43	32.11	0.28
Uttarakhand	10.37	5.1	0.22	49.18	2.12
West Bengal	115.54	52.41	5.58	45.36	4.83
<b>India</b>	<b>1262.85</b>	<b>511.78</b>	<b>29.59</b>	<b>40.53</b>	<b>2.34</b>

Source: MGNREGA MIS <http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx>

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