

Women participating in care calendar activity to understand their paid and unpaid workload during different seasons over the year, Dungarpur, December 2015



# Making Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) More Care-Responsive

Programmatic notes for Women's Economic Empowerment Policy and Programming



Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST)

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PROGRAMMATIC NOTES

Started as a pilot in 200 of the poorest districts of India in February 2006, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a demand-based public works programme which entitles every rural household in India to 100 days of waged employment. MGNREGA envisages women's inclusion and empowerment through a 33 per cent reservation for women in MGNREGA employment, equal wages at par with men, proximity of residences to worksites, and the provision of facilities such as crèches at worksites. Through its operational guidelines, it also expects categories of 'vulnerable' women, such as 'widowed', 'deserted' and 'destitute' women, to be specifically included in employment provision. Similarly, pregnant and lactating women are to be provided with 'special works' that require 'less effort and [which] are close to their house' (Ministry of Rural Development 2013: 79–80). Further, MGNREGA requires that women participate in the monitoring and management of the programme, and through its operational guidelines it recommends that states consider reserving 50 per cent of 'mates' (site supervisors) posts for women (Sudarshan 2011; Murthy 2015).

This note examines MGNREGA to understand how women's economic empowerment (WEE) policy and programming can generate a 'double boon' – paid work that empowers women and provides more support for their unpaid care work responsibilities. The research was carried out using a mixed-methods approach in the districts of Dungarpur and Udaipur in Rajasthan, India with both MGNREGA participants and non-participants, with the additional criterion of them having at least one child under six years old.

## Experiences of women workers: unpaid care work and paid work

We found that household work, and water and fuel collection are to a high degree female activities, while childcare is a task which is shared more between female and male members of the family. Children, especially girls, were engaged in all three types of tasks. Men participated in childcare, particularly when the women had to be away from home. Of the three types of care work, water and fuel collection was considered the most tedious, time-consuming, and depleting. Women who were mainly

responsible for this task spent about 15 hours (accounting for simultaneity of tasks) of their day on household chores which included a high number of hours on water and fuel collection.

Men and women in our research settings were engaged in hard, back-breaking and low-paying agricultural work, both as daily wage agricultural labourers and in their own small landholdings. Families complained that in the absence of irrigation facilities, they were unable to grow enough even for their own consumption. Women took up MGNREGA employment when it was available during the lean agricultural period, and if better educated, they took up other employment where it was available, for instance in *anganwadis* (childcare centres under the Integrated Child Development Services – ICDS) and schools. The most important type of paid work for women in Dungarpur was MGNREGA, followed by daily wage work, while in Udaipur hardly 2 per cent of women considered MGNREGA as their most important work; instead, they preferred income-generating activities which largely included farming. Women demanded more than 100 days of MGNREGA work in Dungarpur due to poor availability of other kinds of paid work.



## Conditions of work under MGNREGA

- One of the key features of MGNREGA as a demand-driven programme is that it encourages community engagement and democratic participation. However, we found that women respondents did not show any clarity on what, how and when MGNREGA work was sanctioned, pointing to poor participation of women in the decision-making process of the *Gram Sabha*<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, lack of women's participation in community meetings led to them being unaware of their entitlements under MGNREGA.
- In response to enquiries on the availability of crèche facilities, the majority of women said there were no crèches at the worksites or other protection from the elements, with some children being kept in 'pits'. For women without childcare support at home, the children shadowed their mothers at work, and in some instances women would bring along an older child to watch over his/her younger sibling(s). Some women who did not have this help chose not to work at all. The block office<sup>2</sup> believed that provision of crèches was pointless as they felt that women workers did not use crèches due to a superstitious fear that their children would be cursed by the women appointed to watch over the kids. Some women did share superstitions with us about entrusting their children to unknown caretakers appointed at the crèches on the worksite. While these point to social norms they also point to the childcare options at worksites not engendering workers' trust, as well as the dismal quality of the crèches.
- The biggest concern for the women workers in Udaipur, and to some extent in Dungarpur, has been the issue of delay in or non-payment of wages under MGNREGA. Workers complained of not receiving their dues for close to a year. 'There are 1,200 people, of them only one to five get payment per day, if the government gives us NREGA but doesn't fix the payment then how will it work!', said a community leader in Dungarpur. There have also been technical issues with incorrect linking of bank accounts to job card numbers. Indumati, who stopped working under MGNREGA asserted, 'I urge that as soon as we complete our tasks, we should be paid our wages within ten days' (Udaipur, January 2016). Moreover, payments are processed only through banks, resulting in problems with accessing these banks in terms of distance and inability to use ATMs due to financial illiteracy. Consequently, workers in Udaipur are losing interest in MGNREGA and are not enrolling in the programme.
- The women workers on the ground were often unable to match up to the requirements of the task assigned to them under MGNREGA due to the additional pressure of care tasks on them; even more so in the case of women with young children, or pregnant or lactating mothers. Women sometimes went late to the worksite or left early to attend to care tasks, disincanting others in the group who could give more time to the task. Even the MGNREGA staff recognised this challenge:  
  
**women have to work at home and it is natural that a person cannot do work beyond human capacity... they do as much as they can but still coming late, there is weakness here due to lack in food and water, so they are not able to [complete the task in time]**

Hence, the wages received were far less than the daily market wage rate, as the workers were unable to finish the assigned task in the specified time. In Kotra, Udaipur workers received wages between Rs 80 and Rs 100 for a day which was far less than the minimum wage rate of Rs 173 (IP3, Udaipur, December 2015). Data from MGNREGA show that workers in Rajasthan were paid far less than the notified wage rate: in 2013–14 the average wage earned in Rajasthan was Rs 106.6 against the notified wage rate of Rs 149; similarly in 2012–13 workers earned Rs 98.5 on average while the notified wage rate was Rs 133 (NREGA 2017). Rajasthan had the second lowest average wage earned under MGNREGA in 2012–14. Women respondents who were either pregnant or who had young children who had to be breastfed were not given any light work, and instead felt discouraged and discriminated by their co-workers as they slowed down the productivity of the group resulting in lower wages for the entire group.

- The only paid work offered under MGNREGA is unskilled hard labour. Women complained of tiredness and body aches:

**‘When we need to carry the soil to throw at a far-off place... this is bit difficult’, said Devibai, and ‘I feel tired when I go out to work’, emphasised Teesta**  
Udaipur, January 2016

Despite the difficulties listed above, the income generated from work carried out under MGNREGA was considered either very important or important by the women, especially when this was their primary type of work (which was the case for 60 per cent of women in Dungarpur). The importance of the paid work performed by women under MGNREGA is also evident from the attendant expressions of the necessity of their work. Sangeeta Sohan Damra, a participant of MGNREGA from Dungarpur says, ‘things won’t carry on if I don’t go for paid work’ (January 2016). Similarly, another MGNREGA worker commented, ‘we do it for money as the money that we get from cultivation is not enough’ (Devibai, Udaipur, January 2016). During a participatory group exercise in Dungarpur to understand the importance of MGNREGA, women shared that ‘we have to buy clothes, ration, food, send kids to school so we have to do this work because we don’t have jobs’; some others in the group added, ‘because the field crop has not matured, we have to work here in NREGA’.



‘Watered the wheat crop’ – Girls listing all activities they did yesterday for the Activity Mapping participatory group exercise, Udaipur, November 2015

## Steps for a double boon under MGNREGA

The combination of inflexible timings in MGNREGA, hard labour, and poor facilities at the worksite on the one hand, and the time-consuming, intensive nature and drudgery of care work on the other hand, combined with high levels of poverty and deprivation has resulted in women complaining of a chronic lack of time, lack of rest, pain in various parts of their bodies, physical weakness, and mental stress related to multitasking and managing their work responsibilities. Women used expressions such as, 'my brain just doesn't function', 'thakaan/fatigue', and 'our waists and necks hurt'. Women continued to work at the expense of their sleep, rest, and personal hygiene. The effects of poverty, overwhelming responsibility of hard, onerous care tasks, and arduous paid work were felt acutely by children as well. In the wake of care and paid work deficits in the family, children stepped in as paid workers, unpaid family helpers and to perform unpaid care tasks, suffering a deficit of care in turn. Just as with women, children too had similar expressions of feeling hurt and tired as the effects of the performance of onerous work.

Based on our findings, MGNREGA could immediately consider some of the following steps to transform women's and families' current depleting scenario to an empowering one:

- MGNREGA already explicitly recognises the need to build rural infrastructure and connectivity for the development of the region. From the view of easing the drudgery involved in accessing care resources the state could contribute to reducing the burden of care work through MGNREGA by making a concerted effort in building infrastructure that would bring basic resources closer to households, especially water and fuel.
- In their aspiration to improve their land's agricultural productivity, women demanded more infrastructural development works under MGNREGA in terms of irrigation and water facilities as well as levelling of land so that more land could be made available for farming.
- In view of the demand for more days of work, MGNREGA could review the limit placed on the number of work days to either increase it to 150 days as per the current demand in Dungarpur or to make it specific to the paid work demands of an area.
- A review of schedule of rates and group-based wage calculation in Rajasthan to a time-based calculation that would enable women to earn at least the minimum wage, despite the pressures faced by arduous care burdens and pressing lifecycle scenarios such as breastfeeding and pregnancy impacting on their productivity.
- While the tasks under MGNREGA are necessarily hard and arduous, and labour-displacing devices are not an option, women could be given the option to reduce the time spent on onerous work by providing them with flexibility in the hours they spend onsite through either further job sharing or fewer working hours spent over a longer duration of time equal to 100 full days. Further, adequate gender-sensitive tools would help women ease the physical intensity of this work.
- MGNREGA needs to do more to engender women's trust in the childcare provided at their worksites. This cannot be achieved if pregnant and lactating women, and women with young children are made to feel unwelcome at worksites, and if there is no provision of childcare facilities at worksites. Civil society organisations can be entrusted with working with both programme staff and women workers to ensure demand for provision of crèches, as well as to ensure use of these facilities. However, without clear guidelines on what constitutes quality childcare provision at worksites, women will not use crèches. The operational guidelines therefore need to be revised to set criteria for the provision of quality childcare.
- In the light of childcare provisioning for children under six years old through ICDS becoming a legal entitlement through Supreme Court pronouncements (CIRCUS 2014), there needs to be a coordinated convergence between MGNREGA and *anganwadi* provisioning, while providing women with flexibility and choice in childcare provision. This will ensure that every parent is provided with a legally protected option to send their child to an *anganwadi* or a crèche, and that no child is without the option of care, either state or employer provided.
- The operational guidelines for MGNREGA (Ministry of Rural Development 2013) require five or more children under six to be accompanying women workers for a crèche to be provided at a worksite. This condition placed on the minimum number of children and the gender of the accompanying worker needs to be removed to include all children and workers under the provision, thereby making it gender neutral.
- Maternity and paternity benefits should be made available to MGNREGA workers, especially to provide relief for women who have had to work even during their advanced stage of pregnancy and/or with infants less than six months old.
- In view of reducing the time women spend on collecting firewood and the drudgery of the task, MGNREGA workers could be provided with free liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) connections and included under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana announced on 1 May 2016.
- Most importantly, and immediately, the implementation of the already existing conditions under MGNREGA needs to be ensured such that: (a) women participate in the decision-making on work to be carried out under MGNREGA; (b) they are aware of their entitlements; (c) there is timely payment of wages and immediate compensation for delayed payments, with banking infrastructure being made easily accessible to women workers; and (d) lighter work is provided for women who are physically unable to perform arduous hard labour such as pregnant and lactating mothers, and elderly women.

## Notes

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1. *Gram Sabha* is an assembly of electors of a village *panchayat* (council).
2. A block is an administrative sub-division at the intermediate level in *panchayat raj* institutions (PRI). It is a link between the village and the district council.
3. IP: Interview with WEE programme staff.

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## Credits

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## Programmatic notes for Women's Economic Empowerment Policy and Programming

Balancing unpaid care work and paid work carried out qualitative and quantitative research in India, Nepal, Rwanda, Tanzania across 16 sites. This research explores how women's economic empowerment policies and programmes can take unpaid care work into account, in order to enable economic empowerment to be optimised, shared across families and sustained across generations. It focusses on the social

organisation of care in low income households, and at the role of families, state, private sector and not-for profit sector.

Ultimately it aims to identify measures that can lead towards a 'double boon', creating paid work that empowers women and provides core support for their unpaid care work responsibilities.

The Balancing unpaid care work and paid work project explores the successes, challenges and lessons for Women's Economic Empowerment programmes and policies.



INDIA



Research was undertaken in 2016 in four sites in the Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh regions of India

Udaipur

Ujjain

Dungarpur

Indore

### PROJECT LEAD:



Institute of Development Studies

### RESEARCH PARTNERS:



Institute of Social Studies Trust

### UPTAKE PARTNER:



Alliance for Right to Early Childhood

For more project background information, publications and access to datasets and case studies, visit [interactions.ids.ac.uk/wee](https://interactions.ids.ac.uk/wee)

Balancing unpaid care work and paid work is part of the global Growth and Equal Opportunities for Women programme (GrOW) [bit.ly/1PbKwAd](https://bit.ly/1PbKwAd)



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