

Women's Work and Well Being: Experiences in Programme Implementation in India

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Abstract

This paper is based on two evaluative studies of national programmes, STEP (Support for Training and Employment Programme) which was started over 20 years ago, and targeted only women, and the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) 2005, which is an employment guarantee at the household level so that the participation of women varies from place to place. The paper draws on fieldwork carried out in different parts of the country. The question that it tries to answer is, do such policy interventions lead to 'empowerment' of women, and if so under what conditions/ in what situations; and therefore, what are the implications for policy. To the extent that data allows, the interplay between 'work' and 'voice' and implications for well being outcomes, are examined.

The paper starts by briefly discussing some of the assumptions behind the two programmes, and the expected outcomes of each. The STEP programme was initiated in 1986 by the then Department of Women and Child Development as a centrally sponsored programme. Based on the view that economic empowerment is a route to all round empowerment, it was a response to the findings of the National Commission for Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector. It was intended to make an impact on selected sectors that employed women in large numbers by enabling a critical mass of women to begin to play a more decisive role in these sectors. For this reason STEP grants have been large grants expected to cover a large number of beneficiaries and hence make a difference not just to the individual's income earning ability but also to the contribution of women in that sector. The assumptions behind this programme were first, that the provision of a package of assistance (including training,

credit, marketing support) would lead to a sustained increase in income, and that this would lead to an over all empowerment of women. Second, that the 'critical mass' aspect of the programme would engender the sector and the institutions through which technical and other inputs are channeled to the sector.

The NREGA includes among its specific objectives the 'participation of women workforce' and to enable this, a number of provisions have been put in place, including that one-third of the work undertaken should go to women, men and women are to be paid equal wages, and women through self help groups can be part of local vigilance and monitoring committees. Acknowledging the importance of women's reproductive work, an important provision in the Act states that if there are five or more children, below the age of six, accompanying the women working at any site, one of the women workers should be deputed to look after the children. Further, the person who is deputed to look after young children is entitled to the same wage as other labourers.

The paper discusses some findings from fieldwork in different states with a view to examining the framework guiding these programmes from a perspective of women's well being. The actual or potential role of 'voice' in mediating outcomes is discussed. It concludes by drawing out some of the main learnings and some of the implications for policy in this area.

Participation in paid work outside the home is critical to survival for most households. Women's work participation, while lower than that of men, is also different in that the set of feasible choices is generally more tightly constrained. Individual attributes (education, skills, health status) are one set of influences on the level and nature of women's work force participation; the need to manage care demands of the household, and cultural and social expectations is another set of influences.¹ What appear to be opportunities in the market place are mediated and transformed by various institutions including the family and household. It is interesting to note that against this complex background of opportunity, necessity, choice and constraint, there is a long history of engagement by the state and non state actors in India to find ways of strengthening women's bargaining power in order to improve the quality of work participation.

To explain the context, women's workforce participation rate as measured by the National Sample Survey Organisation is considerably below that of men, and is higher in rural than urban areas. In 2004-5, about 24.9 % of women in rural areas and 14.8 % in urban areas were in the workforce, compared to 54.6 % of men in rural areas and 56.6 % in urban. In the age group 30-44 in rural areas, labour force participation rate of women was 46.6 % and that of men 98.7 %; in urban areas the corresponding figures are 26.6 for women and 98.4 for men. A time use survey carried out in six states by the Central Statistical Organisation in 1998-99 estimated the weekly average time spent by men on SNA activities as 42 hours compared to 19 hours for women; while for extended SNA activities (including household and care related activities) men spent around 3.6 hours compared to 34.6 hours for women.

Programmes designed to support women's work and enable empowerment through work, are examples of initiatives by a democratic state committed to equality and citizenship. Bringing about 'equality' between men and women is a part of the larger project of making the transition from a hierarchical to a democratic society, and is enshrined in the Constitution. In the words of Andre Beteille, 'The Indian Constitution ...is not merely a set of rules relating to governance, but a design for a new kind of society. The older society that had prevailed for centuries and millenia was based on the principle of hierarchy; the new society envisaged in the constitution was to be based on the principle of equality.....'(Beteille 2000: 267)

A review of Plan documents reveals the shifts in approach from welfare to development and rights, at

¹ Thus, for example the fact that over 50 % of women workers in non agriculture are home based reflects social norms on women's mobility and responsibilities within the home as much as the cost advantages of this form of outsourcing to the employers.

least at the level of conceptualisation of programmes. It is in the late seventies/ early eighties that an accelerated effort to mobilise women as workers becomes much more evident in government programmes. This is also the period that significant non government efforts at mobilising and organising women workers begin to increase in scale. It is also, ofcourse around this time that policies directed at opening up the economy and favouring globalisation began to be formulated.

This paper argues that government programmes seeking to enhance work opportunities for women as a way to empower them, have met with less success than expected largely because of the reliance placed upon formal structures in implementation. Strategies need to be developed that will allow the energies of informal associations to catalyse the change we seek.

1. Empowerment through work: Indian approaches

Enhancing women's access to opportunities for paid work, as a route to overall 'empowerment', thus has a fairly long history in modern India, and there is at least thirty years of experience with this approach to reflect upon. The appointment by the Government of India of the Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, and the publication of its report, *Shramshakti*, in 1988, can be seen as the start of a new direction in the planning for women's economic empowerment. *Shramshakti* pulled together data on women's work, its nature and characteristics, and recommended a supportive policy framework. The report provides an excellent review of organising efforts and the different kinds of women's groups present in the country. It drew attention to the fact that 94% of women workers were in the informal sector,² and to the need to find ways of bringing them into the mainstream of economic activity and organising effort.

Shramshakti chose to emphasize the economic aspects of women's situation, although the underlying social realities and the linkage between the social and the economic would naturally need to be dealt with in the implementation of its recommendations, and form the subject of this paper too.

'Economic empowerment' has been defined as 'economic change/material gain plus increased bargaining power and/or structural change which enables women to secure economic gains on an on-going and sustained basis' (Carr, Chen, Jhabvala 1996:11). An improvement in both economic status and bargaining power could be reflected in the exercise of organised voice in a public sphere, as well as in negotiations within the household. The movement from economic empowerment to overall empowerment is necessarily complex, since it requires some change to be evident in several dimensions. As Mira Seth, a former civil servant, put it 'Ultimately the success of empowerment through employment which goes against Indian cultural norms of home based industry and agriculture for women, would require a tremendous awareness generation effort among young girls and their parents about making them self reliant through the capacity of earning their own livelihood' (Seth p.264). Or to put it another way, the entitlement to work, which women have through the constitution and law, and further through reservation and subsidies, has to be supported and supplemented by efforts to make the required changes in the ordering of roles, responsibilities and social life in general, easier and more acceptable.

Government programmes can influence women's work participation either directly or indirectly. An improvement in the social and economic infrastructure, or in the levels of education and skill, and in the overall rate of growth, will indirectly influence the level and manner of women's work force participation. Programmes that directly support women's work do this usually in one of two ways, either by ensuring women's inclusion in general employment generating programmes by specifying a quota or reservation (usually one third of beneficiaries), or through specific programmes that target women workers. For example one third of the beneficiaries of major poverty alleviation programmes (such as IRDP, TRYSEM

² A term replaced today by 'informal economy' to note the fact that informal employment is present in both organised and unorganised enterprises.

and NREP³) are expected to be women. The percentage share of women in IRDP and TRYSEM which are self employment programmes, is estimated at 57.59 in 2005-6, 35.75 % in 1997-8, showing steady increase from just 11.52 % in 1985-86. For wage employment programmes, (NREP+ RLEGP +JRY +EAS)⁴ the percentage share of women beneficiaries is 25.7 in 2005-6, having dropped from the 33.4 % in 1997-8 although just 9.67 % in 1985-86. (CSO 2007). Among the women specific programmes are STEP and NORAD; other schemes which include skill training and the organisation of women into groups for marketing and credit have been introduced, as in the *Swa Shakti* Programme and the setting up of the *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* (see Seth 2001 pp 189-231 for a useful review of official approaches to women's economic empowerment).

All the programmes for women's economic empowerment in India also support their organising – in the case of government programmes, while earlier programmes more usually spoke of women's co-operatives, today the focus is on 'self help groups' (SHGs) and all government programmes channel financial support through women SHGs⁵. *Shramshakti* (1988) spoke of 'voluntary agencies, *mahila mandals*, co-operatives, and trade unions' as being able to play an effective role in organising women in the informal sector, and strongly recommended that these should be supported. (294) The 'self help group' idea and method of organising is a product of the 1990's.⁶ While originally a self help group probably referred just to a women's group, today the term is almost synonymous with savings and credit groups. In Andhra Pradesh, self help groups have been associated with the literacy movement. The expansion of micro finance in the country has largely taken place through the institution of SHGs.⁷ This 'self help group model' of organising women has been viewed as a good way of organising women in the informal economy more generally.

To quote,

'It is a suitable model to meet the economic needs for the working poor, especially women. SHGs can serve the different needs of their members like savings and credit-oriented functions and business-oriented functions or a combination of these.....The savings of the SHGs can be utilized in more productive areas such as, upgrading skills of members and helping them start their own businesses, such as garments making with a sewing machine, street vending, large farming, animal husbandry or a micro-enterprise. Later, the SHG could be transformed as a cooperative, which can be collectively managed by the SHG members. Consumer goods produced can be marketed collectively and the profits shared equally among the members. In addition to the economic empowerment, SHGs can be used as a channel to interact with local government administration for statutory welfare measures. The function of the SHGs could gradually veer towards rights based approaches through extended education programs, to function as a trade union.....'

³ Integrated Rural Development Programme, Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment, National Rural Employment Programme

⁴ Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, Employment Assurance Scheme

⁵ In fact perhaps the only 'work' related government scheme that does not require women to be part of a group is the Working Women's Hostels scheme! I am indebted to Shrayana Bhattacharya for pointing this out.

⁶ Perhaps a link exists here with globalisation, renewed stress on encouraging enterprise in the market economy, and the need to find ways of reaching out to the 'bottom end' entrepreneur

⁷ The formation of SHGs for savings and credit, and their linkage to commercial banks, was initiated in India by MYRADA in the mid-1980s (Fernandez 1998). NABARD management had also been exposed to similar experiences in Thailand and Indonesia, and they responded favorably to MYRADA's suggestion that this could be a useful way to bring formal financial services to the rural poor.

http://www.microfinancegateway.org/files/3249_3249.rtf

The South Asian Wing of the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) based in Delhi has used a SHG model for organising forest workers in the state of Orissa. The BWI in partnership with the Orissa Kendu Patra Karmachari Sangh (OKKS) and Orissa Forest and Minor Forest Workers' Union (OFMFWU) has been implementing an organising project since 2005.The OKKS was able to increase its membership by 12,000 and the OSMFWU by 14,000. Therefore, SHGs are not only instrumental in empowering the poor but also in increasing the size of unions.

The 'ILO/ACTRAV Workers' Education Project' ...operational since 2001 in Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh...succeeded in forming 791 SHGs as of December 2006, which benefit 11,232 women members. All members of SHGs joined the unions.'

(Pong-Sul Ahn 2007: 40-41)

Seeking to empower women through work is thus also closely associated with the growth of small women's groups of various kinds, whether subsequently federated or absorbed in larger groupings, or not. In that sense, there is an institutional mechanism that has been created to link work and voice, although the outcomes cannot be immediately assumed. The creation of women's groups in order to access public funds is one aspect of such organising. In addition, organising women around work and related concerns has been the effort of many independent agencies including importantly the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Working Women's Forum (WWF), and many others. At times, the two efforts overlap, and groups created and facilitated by NGOs or trade unions are able to access government funds. However, there are also significant differences between the two sets, turning around their ability to enable the emergence of 'transformational leadership'.⁸ As *Shramshakti* had pointed out and as is likely true today as well, 'spontaneous organising' of women in the informal economy rarely occurs.

2. STEP and NREGA: Two programmes

This paper presents some findings from two evaluation studies recently carried out at ISST.⁹ Both programmes seek to enhance work opportunities for women in rural areas. The two programmes are different in several ways - STEP (Support for Training and Employment Programme) is focussed on women only, is an older programme targeting women in selected sectors and seeking to enhance skills and enable asset creation. The recently enacted National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) provides for a reservation so that one third of the beneficiaries is to be women, and offers unskilled manual work. STEP as originally formulated spoke of the formation of women's co-operatives as a mechanism for the implementation of the programme, although today the formation of SHGs as well as co-operatives marks the programme. The Operational Guidelines for the NREGA stipulate that self help groups can play a role (along with other groups) in ensuring community participation and as implementing agencies.¹⁰

⁸ It has been argued by us elsewhere that women's groups that have evolved organically show greater capacity to generate leadership when compared to officially constituted groups. See ISST 2005.

⁹ Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi and Bangalore.

¹⁰ Community Participation: The Gram Sabha is the statutorily mandated institutional mechanism for community participation. In addition, other methods of community participation could be evolved: local Vigilance and Monitoring Committees, workers' associations, local beneficiary committees, self-help groups, user groups and other grass-roots structures. Active community participation is particularly important for ensuring transparency and public accountability.

Implementing Agencies: In addition to Panchayats, Line Departments, NGOs, and Central and State Government Undertakings, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can also be identified as Implementing Agencies. From Operational Guidelines.

These two programmes share certain common features reflecting the manner in which women's empowerment and gender equality is approached in law and policy. The Constitution created a framework within which rights and entitlements are bestowed upon an individual, that is, where citizenship ensures equal treatment. The significance of this is well captured by Andre Beteille:

Not only the constitutional state, but citizenship as well is a novelty in India's long historical existence. ...We will not appreciate the significance of citizenship as a social, historical and jural category if we fail to recognise its novelty. Traditional Indian society was a society of castes and communities, and not a society of citizens.The subordination of the individual to the group was a feature of most, if not all, pre-modern societies. The individual as an autonomous legal and moral agent, entitled to respect and responsibility in his own right, is not the starting point of social evolution, but the end-product of a long historical process. That process faces many obstacles in India where the loyalties due to caste and community are not only very strong but often reinforced by the democratic process itself. The rights of citizenship can be respected only in a society in which the autonomy of the individual is valued. (p.182)

Both programmes seek to enhance the access to work, with the expectation that this will set in motion a process of overall change. The role of groups of different kinds can perhaps be seen as a way of enabling 'communities of practice' to develop and to counter if necessary the influence of 'communities of birth'.

Fieldwork carried out in seven states for a national evaluation of the STEP programme between January and June 2007, and in two states to track the progress of the NREGA since January 2006 onwards suggests that these projects do succeed (but only in 'best practice' situations) in their primary objective of enhancing income. This may or may not lead to 'economic empowerment', but it is possible to find examples where this has been observed. It also suggests that women can be empowered (economically) without seeking to make the kinds of changes that would take us in the direction of 'gender equality'.¹¹

STEP¹²

About the programme

The STEP programme was started in the mid-eighties during the Seventh Plan period, by the Department of Women and Child Development, as a centrally sponsored programme. It emphasized the critical need to increase and improve employment opportunities for women. Women's involvement in economic activities was seen as a necessary pre condition to build up their self reliance. The Eighth Plan put emphasis on Right to Work – a positive thrust area to empower women by raising their status and bringing them into the mainstream of national development not as beneficiaries but as equal contributors along with men. The design of the programme was influenced by advocacy of the women's movement and in particular by the discourse on informal work.

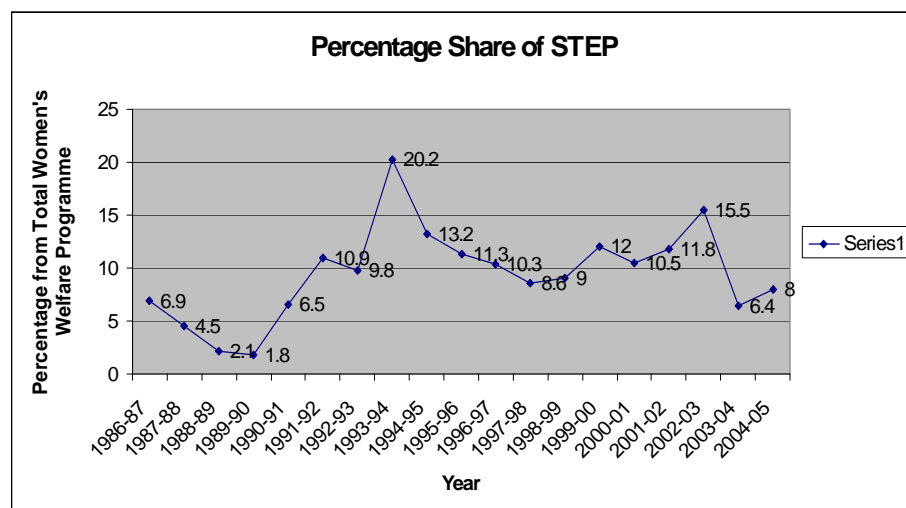
The objective of the STEP programme is to provide support for training and other inputs with a view to creating sustainable self employment for women in selected sectors in which a large number of women were to be found; the endeavour was to enable a critical mass of women to begin to play a more decisive role in these sectors. For this reason STEP grants have been large grants expected to cover a large number of beneficiaries and hence make a difference not just to the individual's income earning ability but also to the contribution of women in that sector. A review of annual budget allocations for the STEP programme shows that overall roughly 9 percent of the total budget for women's welfare has been allocated to STEP over the period 1986-2006. The relative size of the programme has fluctuated, reaching a peak of 20

¹¹ For example, women workers are reluctant to file cases under the Equal Remuneration Act, and willing to do so under the Minimum Wages Act.

¹² This section on STEP draws on the national evaluation of the programme carried out by ISST for the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India.

percent in 1993-4, and 15 percent in 2002-3, and a low of 1.8 percent in 1989-90

Chart: STEP allocation as a percentage of Total Allocation for Women's Welfare, 1986 – 2005 (Revised Expenditures)



Source: Annual Budgets

The aims of the programme can thus be stated as:

- Providing a package of assistance under the STEP programme which would lead to economic empowerment of (individual) women; and economic empowerment will lead to an over all empowerment.
- Gender sensitisation of the relevant institutions in the sectors selected so that gender mainstreaming is accomplished

Eight traditional sectors of employment i.e. agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, *khadi* and village industries, sericulture were selected for the programme. Later, two more sectors, social forestry and waste land development, were added. These sectors were identified as being 'sheds' where women were found working in large numbers and in the informal sector. Despite the numbers, the 'value added' activities or operations were traditionally done by men. The sectors selected were those which had both large numbers of women working and where the infrastructure existed to mainstream the employment of women (having received large investments in each of the Plans and having extensive infrastructure in the public sector, with R & D supported extension services both at Centre and State levels).

The programme offered support for training and upgradation of skills in the existing areas of activity, along with providing linkages for marketing of products and a range of support services intended to help in empowering women. Thus, work was an entry point and a holistic intervention was intended.

The success of the programme was to be assessed by seeing what difference had been made to income earned. Other criteria were suggested initially, including numbers of women and per capita earnings of

women workers in the sector, but ultimately it was felt that the key criterion would be the level of earnings of the direct programme beneficiaries and the change observed in this.

The programme intended to use a range of strategies, including training for skill upgradation; mobilizing women in small viable groups and offering training and access to credit; enabling groups of women to take up employment-cum-income generation programmes of their own (through self employment); providing support services for further improving training and employment conditions of women.

It was expected that the available technical expertise in the identified sectors would be made available to women workers in the sector. This technical expertise would likely be found in established public sector institutions. At the same time the project required sensitivity to the situation of women, and a willingness to adapt training methods as required. It was felt that the involvement of reputed NGOs in the project would be essential to ensure sensitivity to gender issues.

Initially, the STEP programme had expected that the grants would be made to public sector organizations already in existence in these sectors. These could include boards, federations, universities, home science colleges, semi-government agencies, central social welfare board, state social welfare boards, DRDAs,¹³ district women development agencies, and so forth. This is because it was expected that, in light of the large size of the grant, official and semi official agencies would be able to manage the money as well as follow accepted financial norms and procedures; and that there would be less demand for creation of facilities and instead greater emphasis on utilizing available facilities more fully. Other organizations, such as *mahila mandals*, registered voluntary organizations, public trusts, co-operative societies, charitable companies, local bodies, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, etc., were expected to be involved in the selection of the target group of beneficiaries, delivery of package of other supportive services by the implementing agencies, and gender sensitization of all those involved in the project.

Observations from the field

ISST's evaluation of the STEP programme carried out in 2006-7 was based on interviews with recipient institutions, project managers, beneficiaries, and experts, from seven states, Assam, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. These states were selected so as to include the states receiving the largest share of STEP funding, and to cover the north, south, east, west and north east of the country.

Work and the household

STEP is designed as a woman specific programme. All its beneficiaries are therefore women. STEP seeks to include the poorest women as its beneficiaries, but this did not always happen, mainly because of the risks associated with self employment and the difficulty of advancing credit without any collateral. Those women who did participate, and who were able to take up self employment in the activity in which they received training, earned varying amounts of additional income. Obviously, an increase in women's earning will also benefit the household, but in order for women to increase their time and other commitments to any income earning activity, some changes in roles within the homes will need to be accepted by others in the family too. The fact that the family needs to support the participation of women has interesting implications.

Men continue to play a role in this woman specific programme. In Uttarakhand it was seen during field visits that men manage payments, records as well as milk delivery. This kind of participation by men was needed because of work within the household - *'it is normal for me to deliver milk as she has so much work at home'*; it is needed in interacting with the rest of the world - feeling safer while traveling to the centre, talking to men from the dairy unions. Thus the insistence of the programme that women should

¹³ District Rural Development Agency

hold the key (and paid) positions of Secretary and Treasurer was intended to give them greater control and is adhered to on the face of it; but in actuality men continue to control several decisions.

In Uttar Pradesh in the first phase of the dairy project supported by STEP and implemented by the Pradeshik Co-operative Dairy Federation (PCDF), men were not involved at all. Experience showed that this was a mistake and men's co-operation was needed; hence in the second phase of the project, the PCDF oriented men before orienting women.

In an analysis done during field work in Andhra Pradesh, it became clear that men shared the work, but not that work which did not have immediate economic outcomes. Thus men did help with buying cattle, fodder, pouring milk, going to the vet, collecting money, attending meetings....but rarely or never with activities like giving water to the animals, bathing animals, cleaning the shed, and so on.

In Karnataka, one of the STEP grants was for medicinal plants. It was seen that only 4 % of those who had received training were actually putting their training to use in commercial cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants. Possibly, the fact that land use decisions are usually taken by men, who had not been directly engaged in the programme, was a reason for this.

Recognising that men continue to be associated with women's activities so that they continue to take strategic decisions that the programme intended should be taken by women, has at times led to the recommendation or approach that men should be removed from all official positions. That is, it has become necessary to insist that women must be seen to exercise their position and show autonomy in taking decisions. But such an approach can lead to backlash and the more gentle approach of persuasion and involvement of men is preferred in most places.

Thus, providing women with a source of income earning - additional to what they were getting earlier - does not easily translate into any real change in gender relations within the home and forcing such change may lead to worsening of the situation.

Sensitising implementing agencies

Recognizing that 'empowerment' means more than economic benefit, the programme has a holistic conception – literacy and general awareness to go hand in hand with economic aspects – but these aspects of training and programme intervention are not sustained. It was seen that only the minimal training required for the programme was usually implemented. In West Bengal it was observed for example that only half of the beneficiaries received any training. In addition, while technical training relating to animal care and vet services are usually provided at least to the office bearers, this is not true of the legal literacy, awareness, nutrition etc that was supposed to be a part of the services offered. To understand why, one needs to look at the organisations offering the programme, most significantly Dairy Federations. The lack of enthusiasm or appreciation for these multi faceted other aspects in most cases are a reminder that the intervening agency is hugely important in understanding outcomes and impacts. That is, we need to keep in mind that the institutions through which the women's empowerment programmes are being managed themselves may have little appreciation of the various nuances of gender inequalities. The programme cannot achieve more than is desired by them, and what they understand as the objectives of the programme.

To quote Beteille,

'the contemporary discussion of empowerment tends to overlook the requirements of these institutions and sometimes their very existence.....It is ofcourse tacitly acknowledged that the empowerment of disadvantaged classes, communities and sections will affect at least indirectly the major institutions of society. But what the advocates of empowerment seek to alter here is above all the social composition of these institutions and not necessarily their mode of functioning; and their attention rests mainly on those institutions that are believed to be the major repositories of power in society' (Beteille 2000: 282)

One comment that came up repeatedly in field findings is that of 'insufficient motivation' on the part of the women. This presumably suggests that giving information and training is in itself not enough, continuous hand holding is needed. This kind of role is difficult to build into government programmes but is essential if the desired outcomes are sought.

Collectives and emergence of voice

As in any programme implemented over as large an area as India, there are examples of success and examples of failure. In Karnataka and Andhra, there is evidence that organising women into groups can lead to their gradual participation in other public or community forums and to an entry into the public sphere - organising for work leading to voice. (While the specific examples reported here relate to the STEP programme experience, it is relevant that in these two states there are many other experiences of effective action by self help groups, in contrast to states in the North.) It was reported from some parts of Karnataka, for example, that women who start with being members of a dairy co-operative have graduated to active participation in the local *gram panchayat*. But in Uttar Pradesh, while exploring this issue, it was argued that a three year horizon of the programme is too short to allow this sort of progression, as once the STEP grant ends the implementing agency loses the impetus for continuing to support and organize women's groups. In Uttaranchal, data shows that the women's dairy co-operatives tended to have a short life. In a sample survey of the women's dairy co-operatives in 129 villages it was found that close to 30 % were defunct. Moreover of those that were functioning, it was newly formed groups that dominated; only 39 % of the groups set up in the first phase of the programme were still operational after ten years.

The findings also vary from one state to another. In Karnataka, there was some evidence that the mobilization and organization of women through the STEP programme in the dairying sector has also led to some kinds of collective action. 'From a situation of not going out of their houses unaccompanied, women have begun to come together first to sell their dairy produce, and then to network to address other issues affecting their communities, e.g., in Malligere, in Chikkanayakanahalli *taluk*, women from the dairy cooperative society succeeded in closing down the only liquor shop in the village. No one is allowed to be drunk in the village, and "offenders" pay a fine of Rs. 50. In Mettinadaka village, women negotiated with the *panchayats* to solve a serious water supply problem. Groups have also been able to negotiate favourable settlements in property related issues for women'.¹⁴

In Andhra Pradesh, it was noted that where the NGO that received the STEP grant has shifted its area of focus, the women's groups it had mobilized have also not survived. In another place in Andhra Pradesh, however, we learn that 'In Utoor village, the women said that after coming together as a society, they learnt to be in collectives and this helped them to form the SHGs easily in their village. They also claimed that they are able to address issues related to violence against women in the group meetings. They remembered a certain case in their village where a girl was raped and murdered. The women had rallied together protested at the police station and got the accused punished. The women supervisor played a lead role in mobilizing women and organising protest.'

To sum up, two issues seem to emerge with some clarity and to have relevance for the strategies we use. First, even if we see the primary purpose of the STEP programme as being the tangible and measurable outcome of additional income, these findings confirm that motivating women to take on new activities and new roles has implications for the household. The positive economic changes are more likely to be sustained where men are not excluded from the programme but rather where some effort is made to orient them to the desirability and advantages of changes in women's roles and responsibilities. Such orientation, in turn, requires capacities for support and education that cannot simply be assumed to be present in the intervening agencies.

¹⁴ Karnataka Report, ISST Bangalore, page 10

Second, the role of women's groups in encouraging and enabling the emergence of voice is clearly stronger when there is a continued presence or facilitation by the agency that initiated these groups; the group itself dissolves if the activity collapses (as seen in the case of sericulture in Andhra) or proves unsustainable (as with dairying in Uttarakhand).

NREGA ¹⁵

About the programme

The Employment Guarantee Act was passed in 2005, and schemes launched from February 2, 2006. While initially launched in 200 districts (or around 80,000 *Panchayats*) identified as backward, the government is committed to extending it over the whole country and indeed a Cabinet decision to that effect has recently been taken.

The Act provides that employment on public works is to be provided to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. 'Household' is to be interpreted as a nuclear family comprising mother, father, and their children, and may include any person wholly or substantially dependent on the head of the family. A household may also comprise a single member family. Work is to be provided for up to 100 days in the year, upon demand.

Wages are to be as prescribed under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 for agricultural labourers in the state, against the completion of stipulated tasks. The linking of work completed to payment made is an aspect not present in earlier public works programmes.

The Act requires that all persons seeking such employment are to be registered by the *Gram Panchayat* after due verification and the household is to be provided a Job Card. Employment is to be given within 15 days of application for work by an employment seeker, failing which, unemployment allowance is to be given.

Works are to be prioritized by the *Gram Sabha* and *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) have a principal role in planning and implementation.

Worksite facilities are to be ensured by the implementing agency, including medical aid, drinking water, shade, crèche if there are more than five children below six years.

The NREGA builds upon a long history of wage employment programmes in India. It is different from earlier programmes in that it offers a constitutional guarantee, not reversible with any changes of government; provides scope for implementation by local groups and agencies; devolves considerable powers to local *Panchayats*; mandates a high quality of conditions of work through provisions for medical aid, drinking water, shade, crèche, on the worksite; and encourages the use of the Right to Information and Social Audit to ensure transparent and effective implementation.

The Act seeks the 'creation of durable assets and strengthening the livelihood resource base of the rural poor'. Among the outcomes expected, the following are listed:

- an increase in employment and purchasing power
- participation of women workforce
- strengthening of rural infrastructure through creation of durable assets
- regeneration of natural resources that provide the livelihood resource base of local rural economy
- increase in productivity

¹⁵ This section draws on studies on the NREGA carried out by ISST in partnership with the ILO, New Delhi.

- reduction in distress migration.

The NREGA provides some explicit entitlements for women, including payment of equal wages; that one-third of the beneficiaries should be women; that work should be provided close to the home (and within 5 kms of residence); that a crèche should be provided at the work site. The Act recognises single persons as a 'household' and thus makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work. Moreover, the Act has special relevance for women in light of the feminisation of agriculture:

Agriculture is increasingly dependent on women farmers due to the changing demographics of the sector. There is a growing feminization of agriculture. While women have always played a key role in agricultural production (crop cultivation, animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry), their importance both as workers and as managers of farms has been growing, as an increasing number of men move to non-farm jobs. Today 53% of all male workers but 75% of all female workers, and 85% of all *rural* female workers, are in agriculture. Women constitute 40% of the agricultural work force and this percentage is rising. Also an estimated 20 percent of rural households are de facto female headed, due to widowhood, desertion, or male out-migration. These women are often managing agriculture and providing family subsistence with little male assistance.¹⁶

The extent to which men have been able to move out of agriculture far exceeds that of women; such a programme which seeks to fill in some of the deficit in the income earned from agriculture and the minimum needed for basic needs, has direct well being implications for women.

It has been strongly influenced by the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS) and it is useful to review the evidence from the MEGS on women's participation. Scholars like Devaki Jain (ISST, 1979), Dattar (1987), and Krishnaraj (2004) have found that the level of participation by women was higher than that of men in most observations, with more women than men being seen on sites, and more women reporting for work than were registered. However, the reasons for this high participation were not necessarily positive. Work provided under MEGS was usually unskilled, short-term and discontinuous work, and more women are casual and subsidiary workers. Hence, much MEGS work was perceived as 'women's work'. From 38% in 1995-96, women's employment as a percentage of the total employment in person days in the scheme went up to 73% in 1998-99, but fell to 57% in 1999-2000. (Krishnaraj et al., 2004). Skilled women workers did not participate in MEGS, and the scheme did not provide for acquisition of any new skills by women. The majority of the women participants belonged to landless, small or marginal farming families. However, unlike the men, who were quick to consider migration as an option for improving the family's economic status, women looked on schemes like the MEGS as an important component of basic survival strategies (Krishnaraj & Pandey, 1990). They reported an improvement in family nutritional status as a result of participation in the scheme (ISST, 1979) as well as improved status in the family because of an increase in core income. Jain (ISST, 1979) also noted that there was greater participation by women who were already a part of some organized group.

Whether the NREGA will be able to address both 'practical' and 'strategic' needs of women will depend on factors other than participation per se. Does this work enhance women's ability to take decisions within the household, are women engaged in planning and management of works as well as in carrying them out, is the selection of works responsive and sensitive to gendered priorities, and so on.

Observations from the field

ISST has been engaged in a process of documentation and information dissemination of the NREGA in two areas in the states of Rajasthan and Orissa since January 2006. A survey was carried out in 2007 in the 2 states which gives some clues on the current situation of women's participation and benefit from the

¹⁶ Bina Agarwal, in her submission to the Committee of Feminist Economists, has articulated the extent of feminization of agriculture and its policy implications.

programme. In all, 1412 households from 33 villages in 11 *Panchayats* were surveyed in two clusters in Hemgir and Badgaon blocks of Sundargarh district, Orissa; and 1251 households from 11 villages in 8 *Panchayats* in two clusters (hill and plain areas) in Abu Road block, Sirohi district, Rajasthan.

Women's participation

In terms of participation, women were found to be actively participating in both areas, although more so in Rajasthan. The NREGA works offer an opportunity for supplementary work within or near the village. The survey found that 91 % of households in the hills of Abu Road, and 83 % in the plains, (or around 88 % overall) reported participation in the NREGA. While both men and women participate, the works have encouraged women to go out for work as the distance to travel is within 5 kms. Of all those reporting participation, 44 % are men and 56 % women. However, of those who have completed 100 days of work on the NREGA, 68 % were women.

The place of work for all working household members was analysed to show that while in the case of men, 52 % find work within 5 kms of their residence, 39 % find work outside the village but within the block (and only 9 % may be migrating longer distances). However in the case of women, 81 % work within 5 kms of the place of residence and 15 % outside the village but within the block (with just 3 % going beyond). The availability of NREGA work within the village further affirms this pattern.

In Orissa however, only 38 % of households in Sundargarh was found to have participated in the NREGA works. Of all those reporting participation, 31% are women and 69 % are men. While the reported activity in terms of numbers of work sites opened and functioning was lower than in Rajasthan, the level of migration is also much higher in this area with only 7 % of men and 23 % of women reporting that their place of work was within five kilometers of home.

Managing care work

The participation of women in NREGA raises the question of how their household responsibilities are managed while they are away at work. In both places, it was reported that the older daughter and husband assist women in coping with household responsibilities; other children and other members assist in a much smaller degree.

Lack of crèche facilities at the worksites has meant that women with infants who are unable to make arrangements at home are not able to join the works. Crèches are a requirement as per the operational guidelines but no separate financial allocation has been made for this purpose.

Activities usually handled by women include care of infants and young children; care of the sick and elderly; tending to domestic animals; and other household chores. The Rajasthan survey found that when the woman is unable to do so, these responsibilities are shouldered by husbands, followed by elder daughters. (Husbands presence at home is due to the fact that there is high prevalence of short duration migration, interspersed with spells of stay at home).

Of the total responses, 15 percent said that the elder daughter is responsible for taking care of the other children while the mother is away for wage work. Further, in 3 percent households in the hilly areas, women could not participate in the NREGA work though they wanted to, because they had very young children and there were no creches on site.

Does this mean absenteeism from school for the elder daughter, where she is enrolled in school? Discussions at a workshop confirm that this often happens. As one woman put it, food comes before education: '*Pet pahale bharenge, padhai baad me sochenge.*' Her own grand daughter had dropped out of school to look after the younger siblings at home while her mother was away at the work site for wage work.

Despite the stated intentions of the Act, therefore, while work is being provided, no support systems have been put in place for the management of care responsibilities. In the absence of well functioning crèches or other institutional solution, families seek private solutions, which most often involve older girls.

Providing crèches is part of the national policy, yet enough financial resources and technical guidance have not been given to the *panchayats* for providing these on the thousands of work sites being opened under the NREGA. The consequences - exclusion of some poor women with infants, absenteeism of older daughters from school, and the historical over burdening of women - will continue until such time as matters are set right.

Choice of works

Gender sensitivity of the programme needs also to find reflection in the choice of works. The Centre for Science and Environment has reported that water conservation ranks on top, although not given equal priority by all the 27 states. Rural connectivity, i.e. road construction, features as the second priority in works. Drought proofing and plantation related works seem to be low in priority, with only 6.3 per cent of total works coming in this category, despite the fact that 94 out of the 200 districts have been officially declared drought- prone, and another eight of them are under desert development schemes.¹⁷

The ISST survey in Rajasthan found that though there is an acute shortage of water in this drought prone area, and more so in the hilly segment, road construction seems to have taken a lead among types of works. Households were asked if the works undertaken under NREGA had made any difference to their lives. The actual benefits of water conservation structures (availability of potable water, availability of water for animals and other uses) were acknowledged by only 7% of the households. 32 percent of the respondents reported having benefited from improved road connection - now vehicles can be driven to the villages, and sick people taken to hospital more easily.

Collectives and voice

The field study carried out by ISST aimed at exploring the likely impact of the existence of collectivities on the programme. The extent of prior collectivization showed that 24 % of women in Abu Road were members of SHGs (30% in the hilly region, 17 % in the plains). No other significant grouping was found here. In Sundargarh, 46 % were members of SHGs (41 % in Badgaon and 52 % in Hemgir) and 13 % were members of *mahila mandals* (multiple responses permitted) (15 % in Badgaon and 10 % in Hemgir).

The numbers organized into SHGs is clearly sizeable in both places. The formation of SHGs has been around issues of savings and credit. Although once organized a group can evolve into concern with other and wider issues, however, this has happened only in some places and usually where there has been sustained hand holding and facilitation by some agency. Since NREGA works provide wage employment there is no direct link to, or need for, credit inputs.

There is no evidence that women's groups have tried to advocate for issues such as provision of crèche facilities or the choice of works and nature of assets created.

What appears to be missing is the catalyst that would allow women's groups (where they are present) to actively engage in the NREGA process, since the direction is being set by the *gram panchayat* as it is at present, and the active recognition of the role and potential of women's involvement is not guaranteed by the mere fact that a third of its members are necessarily women.

The potential of the NREGA has been assessed as being substantial:

'The NREGA in India which ensures 100 days of employment for every poor household or equivalent income to the 100 days work, provides an opportunity to trade unions to make inroads into rural areas, by helping the poor and marginalised to claim their entitlements and form workers' organisations. Trade unions can play an external facilitator's role in furthering community development and poverty alleviation efforts.'

¹⁷ <http://www.cseindia.org/programme/nrml/e-pov-august07.htm>

(Pong-Sul Ahn 2007: 45)

As of now, however, there is little evidence of group activity either in participation or planning.

The NREGA is still a young programme and this needs to be kept in mind. These initial findings suggest that if the programme is to be 'gender sensitive' the programme has to do more than allow/ encourage the participation of women. At the least, the management of care responsibilities has to be addressed directly through independent financial allocations that will support these responsibilities. Over time, it needs to be seen what determines the choice of productive assets that are created through the programme, and the extent to which they strengthen women's work and reduce drudgery. The ability of women's groups to influence the details of implementation and the choices made will depend on their ability to influence the discourse within the *gram sabha* and the *panchayat*.¹⁸

Overall then, the two programmes discussed offer pathways to empowerment through work, based on some assumptions. It is assumed that if women are enabled to access additional opportunities for paid work this will represent additional income for the household. However, it was observed with some of the STEP projects that women have to spend very many hours in earning a meager additional income so that if women's time is to be valued the net benefit is extremely marginal. It is further assumed that this additional income will actually accrue to the woman and that she has some control over how it is spent. In the usual situation, this is very dependent on the household and the manner in which relationships within the household mediate the spending of the income earned. Our fieldwork suggests that women generally seek cooperative rather than conflictual solutions. Both programmes allow women to participate as a member of a group – self help groups and co-operatives or any other group - and thus build in a role for collectivities. They therefore also offer the potential to find a pathway to empowerment through voice. Little evidence was gathered on any effective exercise of voice in either programme, presumably because these are essentially top down programmes: the creation of a formal institutional framework allows the exercise of organized voice, but voice and leadership usually emerge through a slow and evolutionary process. It is only where these two independent processes happen to intersect that we might observe the exercise of voice within the framework of the programme and its implementing agencies.

3. Reflections and Proposals

The evaluations discussed above lead to some general reflections. The first is that while it continues to be appealing to attempt change from the top - essentially using the framework of law and constitutional rights - to bring about change in the social situation of women, the reality on the ground suggests that the actual observable impact is far less than expected or intended, because the strength of existing social norms or values is very strong. Our commitment to the objectives remains as strong as it ever was; but it is perhaps time to question the strategies we use to achieve the desired ends. We need to build upwards.

The second general reflection consists of the faith we have in existing local level institutions – *gram panchayats* and other local bodies as specifically mentioned and intended as active participants in the NREGA, and the implementing agencies for the STEP programmes. Obviously the central government and its officials cannot manage and implement programmes across the country and its millions of villages. It thus transfers the responsibility for implementation to these institutions. We need to understand more clearly the motivations and the characteristics of these institutions. There is also need to reflect on the role of informal organizations, by which is meant groups of various kinds that have evolved around

¹⁸ At a recent seminar on local government in Delhi, Niraja Jayal suggested that democratisation has proceeded much further than decentralisation in India; the limited influence of women on local decision making may therefore reflect limitations of the decentralisation process more than the weakness of women's voice.

thematic concerns and to which power and authority is rarely delegated, which display commitment and energy: and the possible ways of enabling the energies of local actors to find their own paths and solutions.

This debate is hardly new. It has implications for the ways in which resources are allocated. For example, there is abundant evidence that the presence of strong women's groups offers a source of support and solidarity that cannot be replaced by formal governance institutions such as the *panchayats*. The creation of 'communities of practice' that are able to displace or re-orient 'communities of birth' is likely a slow process, but offers a way forward which may be more sustainable than one that works exclusively through formal governance institutions.

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