



India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: women's participation and impacts in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan

Ratna M. Sudarshan

CSP Research Report 06
January 2011



This Research Report was written by **Ratna M. Sudarshan**, (Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, India).

Please see the two-page Research Report Summary for a quick overview, available on the CSP website www.ids.ac.uk/go/centreforsocialprotection

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on fieldwork and analysis carried out by several people at ISST and in particular draws on reports written by Rina Bhattacharya (Rajasthan), Madhuri Karak (Himachal) and Grace Fernandes (Kerala). Thanks are due to Naila Kabeer, Ashwani Saith, Jayati Ghosh, Sarah Cook, Deepta Chopra, SPA researchers and other participants at SPA meetings, for their comments on an earlier draft. However, errors and opinions remain the author's responsibility.

This CSP Research Report series presents findings from 11 research projects conducted over the last two years, 2008–2010, for the Social Protection in Asia (SPA) policy-research and network-building programme, funded by the Ford Foundation and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The programme was managed by the Centre for Social Protection (CSP) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex, UK, and the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi, India, with projects and partners in China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

For further details of SPA programme research findings and policy lessons, see the programme synthesis report 2010, available online here:

www.ids.ac.uk/go/idspublication/socialprotection-in-asia-research-findings-and-policy-lessons

For more information about the SPA programme and links to other SPA research outputs please visit

www.socialprotectionasia.org

or email info@socialprotectionasia.org

Programme administrative coordinator: Marion Clarke

Publications coordinator: Peroline Ainsworth

Report copy editor: Paula McDiarmid





About CSP

The Centre for Social Protection was established in 2006, to provide a global focus for research, policy analysis, and capacity building in social protection. Based at IDS, the Centre supports interaction between networks of equal partners, including researchers and policy-makers who work to mainstream social protection in development policy, and to build effective social protection systems throughout the world that are national, comprehensive, sustainable and equitable, and that improve the wellbeing of poor and vulnerable people.

CSP – Influencing social protection debates and strengthening capacities to deliver sustainable policies and systems, that protect lives and livelihoods while promoting wellbeing and social justice.

Contact

Centre for Social Protection
Institute of Development Studies
At the University of Sussex
Brighton BN1 9RE
UK

Email: socialprotection@ids.ac.uk

Website: www.ids.ac.uk/go/centreforsocialprotection

Research Report submission

CSP Research Reports are produced by individuals and organisations working with the CSP. For enquires concerning the submission of Research Reports please contact us by email or by writing to the above address.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the institutions involved

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from CSP Research Reports in their own publications. In return, the Centre for Social Protection requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.

© Centre for Social Protection and IDS 2011



Abstract

This research examines women's participation in NREGS in selected areas in three states: Kerala, Himachal and Rajasthan. The Indian government's NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) has succeeded in bringing large numbers of women into paid work, many of them for the first time. This report explores the complex reasons why women's participation in the scheme varies significantly across and within states, and suggests improvements that could maximise impact. NREGS has achieved some success in empowering women, economically and socially. But the author suggests that minor changes to the scheme, to address local development challenges and priorities, could deliver better outcomes.

Keywords

Women, public works, NREGS, participation

1 Introduction

In February 2006, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) – now called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), was launched in the 200 most backward districts of India. As a component of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's Common Minimum Programme, its intention was to create waged work during the lean agricultural season through a public works programme available on demand and guaranteed by the Act.

In addition to the Act being a safety net by providing a minimum income when no other work is available, it was hoped that distress migration would be checked, village assets created, a process of sustainable development initiated and women empowered. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) legally enshrines the right to work for 100 days, is demand driven, now has national coverage and in-built mechanisms for accountability and shows a measure of gender sensitivity in its design. For example, it allows for crèche facilities to be provided on worksites and requires that one-third of all beneficiaries be women. Wages paid cannot discriminate between the sexes. Other requirements include the participation of women in the monitoring and management of the scheme.

A notable aspect of the NREGS is the large number of women who have sought work under the programme. The official data for 2009/10 shows that just over 48 per cent of those who participated were women, while in 2007 it was around 43 per cent. Under the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS) (brought into force in 1979), a forerunner of the MGNREGA, it had also been noted that women turned up in large numbers, and estimates suggest that overall between 30–39 per cent of those on the MEGS worksites were women (ODI 2006). Studies of the MEGS have further reported that there was an improvement in family food supply and nutrition as a result of the additional income from MEGS work (Jain 1979).

There are complex issues surrounding women's participation in public works programmes. As the only work on offer is manual labour, several questions arise: does this leave some skills unutilised or even lead to de-skilling; what is the effect on local labour markets and the local economy more generally; what are the conditions of work and how assured is the income; what is the interplay between paid work, unpaid work and care responsibilities; are there pathways out of public works into other, more productive work, and so on. (For a discussion on varying country experience with public works, see Kabeer 2010: 147–58.)

There are significant differences in the level of women's participation under the NREGA, both across and within states. The objectives of this study included first, to understand through fieldwork the reasons behind women's observed level of participation in the scheme in different parts of the country; and second, to identify ways in which the wellbeing of women participants could be further enhanced, and the social protection potential of the programme better realised. The broad hypothesis of this paper is that these variations are not accidental or irrelevant, and that specific factors explaining varying levels of participation in different contexts offer useful cues for the strengthening of the social protection umbrella in the country, through the NREGA as well as other complementary programmes.

Following this introduction, Section 2 offers an overview of the official data on NREGS participation, which provides the context for the study. Section 3 describes the methodology of the study, the selection of areas within three states and the research questions against which the data was collected. Section 4 presents the main findings of the study. Section 5 assesses the wider impacts of the programme, while Section 6 puts forth suggestions for policy and programme design. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2 Overview of women's participation in the NREGS

There are wide variations across states, within states and across districts in the share of work days going to women. The required proportion of work days going to women is one-third and one would expect to find a clustering around that number. In 15 states out of 26, the share of women in total work days was over 33 per cent in November 2007 (data for 2006/07), at the time that this study was started, and 20 out of the same 26 in 2009/10. Six states showed a share of 25 per cent or less in 2006/07 (but just three states were in this group in 2009/10). At the two extremes in terms of percentage share in 2006/07, we find Jammu and Kashmir with 5 per cent and Himachal Pradesh with 13 per cent at one end,

with Tamil Nadu (82 per cent), Tripura (76 per cent), Rajasthan (68 per cent) and Kerala (66 per cent) at the other end.¹ In 2009/10, Himachal Pradesh had moved into the highest share group.

As seen in Table 1, while most states show an upward trend both in total volume of work generated and the share of women in work days, there are some exceptions. In Orissa, for example, the number of work days going to women fell over this period (2006/10). In Punjab and Karnataka, the share of women work days has fallen substantially and very marginally in Rajasthan. In Kerala, the share of women work days, already high at 66 per cent in 2006/07, went up to 88 per cent in 2009/10.

Table 1 Female share of total person days generated 2006/07 and 2009/10

States	Total person days (lakhs) 2006/07	Total female work days (lakhs) 2006/07	Female share of total person days (%) 2006/07	Total female work days (lakhs) 2009/10	Female share of total person days (%) 2009/10
Tamil Nadu	182.79	148.27	82	1,982.6	83
Tripura	50.13	37.6	76	189.12	41
Rajasthan	998.87	670.68	68	3,008.86	67
Kerala	20.48	13.44	66	299.61	88
Andhra Pradesh	678.77	371.93	55	2,349.6	58
Gujarat	100.48	50.44	51	278.2	47.5
Karnataka	222.01	112.24	51	737	37
Manipur	18.57	9.45	51	146.89	48
Madhya Pradesh	1,971.77	852.53	44	1,160.55	44
Chhattisgarh	700.21	275.29	40	512.53	49
Jharkhand	520.47	205.46	40	288.5	34
Maharashtra	159.28	59.05	38	108.78	39.6
Punjab	15.57	5.88	38	20.28	26
Orissa	799.34	284.58	36	200.85	36
Mizoram	7.85	2.62	34	59.6	35
Assam	572.92	181.43	32	203	28
Arunachal Pradesh	4.53	1.36	31	2.93	17
Haryana	24.12	7.38	31	20.55	35
Uttarakhand	40.6	12.37	31	73.46	40
Nagaland	13.08	3.92	30	123.74	43
Sikkim	2.42	0.6	25	22.17	51
West Bengal	440.08	80.46	19	518.6	33
Bihar	596.87	103.72	18	341.49	30
Uttar Pradesh	822.91	136.21	17	771.36	21.6
Himachal Pradesh	29.9	3.66	13	131.32	46
Jammu and Kashmir	32.3	1.44	5	8.59	6.6
Total	9,050.56	3679	41	13,640.48	48.1

¹ Data for 2007 accessed January 2008. From NREGA website at <http://nrega.nic.in/>

Source: <http://nrega.nic.in/states/nregampr.asp>. Accessed January 2008 and September 2010.

3 Research questions and methodology

This study sought to explore, through fieldwork, the reasons behind and the implications of women's participation in NREGS in selected areas of three states, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan. The data for 2006/07 provided the basis for the selection of study areas and the fieldwork was carried out over 2008/09. The research questions included the following: What explains the observed differences in levels of women's participation across states, and what are the implications for household/ women's wellbeing? What is the role of various institutions (formal governance institutions of the *panchayat* (elected village council) system and informal governance mechanisms of women's groups, etc)? In what ways does the NREGA appear to be having a wider impact on development?

The three study states were selected for a number of reasons. Rajasthan stands out as the only state that generated a large volume of work in the first year of the programme (second in rank after Madhya Pradesh) and a very high share of the work went to women. It is also one of the poorest states. Kerala and Himachal Pradesh are often compared with each other, as they have the best performance in the country on human development indicators. Along with other hill states, all of which have small and dispersed settlements, Himachal showed a very low level of participation by women in 2006/07, although as shown in the previous section this has changed over the last four or five years. At the time of the field study, however, women's participation in the selected area was very low. Kerala, a densely populated coastal state situated in the deep south, is a complete contrast in its topography to Himachal Pradesh. Like Rajasthan, it too had a high share of work going to women, although unlike Rajasthan, a low volume of work days was generated here.

Table 2 summarises some relevant aspects of the demographic and economic features of each of the three states. Kerala shows the effects of demographic transition, with a higher median interval between births, higher age at first marriage and fewer children per woman; to this is added smaller average household size and a much greater proportion of female-headed households. Interestingly, these demographic features are accompanied by a lower level of women's work participation. Rajasthan presents a sharp contrast: larger household size, lower age at first marriage, more children per woman, fewer female-headed households and, at the same time, higher work participation.

Table 2 Key demographic characteristics

Indicator	Kerala	Himachal Pradesh	Rajasthan
Average household size	4	5	5
Female-headed household	25%	19%	9%
Age at first marriage	21	19.7	15
Average number of children per woman	1.9	1.9	3.2
Median interval between births	41 months	30 months	30 months
Women employed in last year (15–49)	29%	31%	56%
– of which unpaid workers are	7 %	More than 50%	More than 25%
– and % in agriculture	18%	67%	75%

Source: 2005-06 National Family Health Survey, NFHS-3 (2005–6)

The relevance of these differences becomes clearer when we consider the inevitable interplay between women's care responsibilities and paid (or unpaid) productive work. This is discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

In all three states, the state government has shown a high level of commitment to the implementation of the programme. There are, however, many differences in the policy and programme environment. Rajasthan has a number of active civil society groups that have engaged with the programme from its design stage. It has a prior history of large-scale public works programmes, popularly known as 'famine works'. The state government has shown initiative in introducing revised wage-productivity norms so as to increase actual earnings. Early in 2009 it introduced regular training for 'mates' (site supervisors), reducing the qualification required for women so as to encourage them to work as site supervisors, and set up a committee chaired by the Minister and including civil society activists that meets once a month to discuss implementation issues.

Kerala is usually regarded as one of the best performers with regard to education and health indicators, and in terms of decentralisation and local governance. It also has a women-focused poverty alleviation strategy.

Himachal is one of the more prosperous states in the country and the nature of vulnerability here is linked to difficulties in physical access and connectivity, and dependence on natural resources. Like Kerala, Himachal performs well on education and health indicators. The

NREGS is being implemented in the pockets of deprivation that exist even in this relatively rich state.

Data on the Human Poverty Index in Table 3, although for an earlier date, gives an idea of the relative situation of the three states within the all-India picture. Urban areas in Himachal Pradesh, according to this data, have the lowest prevalence of poverty.

Table 3 Human Poverty Index 1991 (selected states)

State/union territory	Rural		Urban		Combined	
	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Lakshadweep	15.67	2	12.26	2	13.89	1
Delhi	21.02	3	17.99	12	18.23	3
Himachal Pradesh	21.67	4	9.91	1	20.90	5
Kerala	24.57	6	17.23	8	22.73	7
Rajasthan	51.17	30	26.73	29	44.73	26
Bihar	53.65	31	29.70	31	50.48	32
All India	42.25		23.03		37.42	

Source: *National Human Development Report 2001*, Planning Commission, Government of India, March 2002: 144

The three states are dissimilar in many ways and it is expected that this diversity will help to build a more nuanced picture than is possible through a focus on one state alone.

Fieldwork was carried out in areas selected from the first 200 'most backward' districts where NREGA implementation began in 2006. Roughly 100 people, mainly women, were interviewed in each of the three 'most backward' districts, one in each state. However, the sample was distributed across nine villages in Kerala, 13 in Himachal Pradesh and two in Rajasthan. In Rajasthan, where the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) had conducted a survey in two villages in 2006, very soon after the programme was started, the same villages were re-visited to see how the programme had developed since then. It must be emphasised that the findings of the study are in no way representative of states or even districts. This is because, even though certain norms and guidelines are set at the state level (such as wages to be paid, etc), the actual outcomes are influenced by the individuals managing the programme, the extent to which villagers are organised and aware, the economic status and social networks of the particular villagers, and so forth, so that significant differences emerge. Moreover, a special effort was made to include areas with the most remote and difficult-to-access terrain, and populated by marginalised social groups. (See Appendix 1 for details of the sample.)

The focus of the study is on women's participation and the outcomes of participation. It was expected that levels of women's participation would be influenced by the design of the programme and the efficiency of its implementation. But, furthermore, participation would also be affected crucially by the interface between the institutional framework through which the programme is implemented and women as individuals or as collectives, by intra-household allocations of care and provisioning responsibilities, and by the local economy that determines what other opportunities there might be.

The methods used in the study were qualitative. Fieldwork used semi-structured questionnaires for individual interviews and group discussions with all stakeholders, who included state government representatives, programme managers, women who were participating as well as those who were not, men, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and researchers. Data on the programme was taken from both the official website and the district programme office; other related studies have been reviewed. Although just one of many evaluative studies of the NREGA programme, this study is unique in focusing on the context-specific nature of both demand and supply sides of the participation question. It therefore argues that a differentiated design responding to local contexts would enhance the positive outcomes from the programme.

4 Main findings

This section presents the main findings of the study. At the outset, in Rajasthan and Kerala the issues to be probed were what factors would explain the high participation of women and what were the observable or likely impacts and outcomes of this participation. In Himachal Pradesh, the questions concerned what factors would explain the low participation or non-participation of women, whether the programme was irrelevant or not needed, or whether there were factors related to implementation or other reasons why it had failed to attract women.

Awareness of the programme

There is greater awareness of the NREGS than of other government programmes. Specifically, people know this is a programme offering '100 days of work in the year', but are less aware of the details (see also ISST 2006, 2007). Within the village it is the responsibility of the *panchayat* (elected village council) to ensure that people are fully aware of the programme. In Himachal, one of the elected members of the panchayat said that since 'villagers do not attend the *gram sabha* (village assembly)', members go to people's homes to ensure they are aware of the programme. Lower awareness about procedures – such as that one must apply for work, what types of work are possible, worksite provisions (eg shade, crèche, medical kit) was reported here and also in Rajasthan. In Rajasthan, there was a high level of awareness that drinking water should be provided on worksites, much less awareness about provision of shade and even less about crèche facilities. Almost no one was aware of the provision for unemployment allowances or social audit requirements. Overall, it seems that the programme's offer of '100 days of work' has been largely publicised throughout eligible areas and populations, but existing systems for communicating information have been unable to publicise the details of programme implementation.

Creating work opportunities

In many rural areas there are few work opportunities outside of agriculture. Therefore, poor households dependent on agricultural work for their survival are forced to migrate during lean seasons or somehow survive through borrowing, etc. This is precisely the situation that NREGA is intended to address, through the creation of additional work opportunities during agricultural lean seasons. The type of work created, that is paid work on public works, is well suited to the prevalent traditions round women's work in some states. In Rajasthan, there is a well-established tradition of paid

work for women as well as men, and when other work is not available within or near the village, most men and some women commute to work some distance away.

In Kerala, women have organised themselves into *Kudumbashree* groups, self-help groups of eight to ten women organised for savings and various microenterprises, which provide alternatives to agricultural work. The state government has placed Kudumbashree in charge of managing the NREGS, so women have easily been directed into this work. In one of the tribal blocks visited in Kerala, however, there were previously no work opportunities and NREGS has filled a pressing need for employment.

A tradition of paid work for women provides partial explanation for women's quick response in coming to work on NREGS sites in Kerala and Rajasthan. Of the women met in Rajasthan, 75 per cent of those who had accessed NREGS had been doing so since 2006. Over half of the eligible women (ie over 18 years of age) were participants in the programme. In Kerala, fieldworkers found it difficult to locate women who were not participants because participation was practically universal.

However, in the hill states, of which Himachal is an example, and perhaps also in hilly and forested areas in other states, it is much less traditional for women to do paid work. This is partly because of the time they must spend on getting provisions for their families. Land reform measures in Himachal in the 1960s and 1970s have led to small average farm sizes and to widespread land ownership. Traditionally determined gender roles include much time being spent by women in collecting fodder for the animals. Over the years, with deforestation, timber, grass and water resources are all retreating further uphill, so the collection time required has steadily increased. Additionally, while women do agricultural work on their own fields, it is not conventional for them to work on other people's land, and work at home takes priority: 'Sometimes when agricultural work needs urgent attention, we take leave from the worksite for a couple of days.' Several women commented upon the time they needed to complete their household chores: 'Women are not able to be present today because they are busy collecting fodder for animals', 'Women have many responsibilities such as collecting water, grass for livestock and wood', 'There are no natural sources of water, so it is difficult for women to balance house work with NREGA.'

There are differences across social groups, however. Women from scheduled castes or migrant worker households, who tend not to own land, do seek out paid work, but they constitute a small proportion of the population. But even they have been slow to come out

and work on NREGS sites, and in Himachal, the programme managers have had to make special effort to reach out to migrant and landless communities.

The problems that women face in household provisioning in areas of high dependence on natural resources lie in ecological poverty, not just a shortage of cash income. At present, NREGS design does not clearly address this issue.

Attracting non-working women into NREGS work

In both Rajasthan and Kerala, fieldwork showed that many women have been persuaded to come out of the house for paid work for the first time in response to the NREGA programme. The main reasons cited for this were convenience of working close to home, no job search was needed and the government is a trusted employer. Women in Kerala said they complete household work in the morning and then come to the worksite:

'I was a housewife till NREGS started. Ladies normally go for construction work locally or else domestic work. As this work is provided close to the house, we normally go and have food and then continue work. This is easier and we do not find it a burden. In the initial days we used to get back pain and body pain as we were not used to such work but now all are happy – no pain but gain as wages.'

In Rajasthan, roughly one-fifth of the women said that for them the programme had provided work where earlier there was none. Although NREGS work is occasional and has more of the character of 'marginal' than 'main' work, it is at least possible that working on a NREGS site might encourage more women to join the regular workforce.

In Kerala and Rajasthan, there are more women workers on NREGS sites than in the workforce overall, indicating, perhaps, a latent demand for work among women. According to the 2001 census, women make up roughly 30 per cent of all workers in rural Palakkad, Kerala; however, NREGS sites show that 85 per cent of all applicants given work in Palakkad were women.² In rural parts of Abu Road, Rajasthan, around 25 per cent of women were workers; the ISST survey in villages here showed that over 50 per cent of women in the two villages visited were participants in NREGS.

In Himachal in 2001, the overall female work participation rate was 38 per cent and in the district visited, Sirmour, it was 41 per cent. The share of women work days generated through NREGS in 2007 was low overall, at 13 per cent, and was even lower in Sirmour, at 3 per cent.³

Wages

MGNREGA states that workers will be paid minimum wages (for rural unskilled manual labour in the state, subject to a national minimum). States have interpreted this provision differently.

In Rajasthan, wages are linked to tasks completed. Workers are paid on the basis of a simple formula of 'value of work completed' divided by the number of workers listed on the muster roll for each worksite. There is room for uncertainty on two counts: workers do not know in advance how much work they need to do to be eligible for the minimum wage; and there were names on the muster rolls of people not actually present at the worksite. In October 2007 the Rajasthan government reduced by 30 per cent the tasks prescribed for calculating wages under the NREGA, in view of the fact that women and old labourers were unable to complete the allotted task and thus were deprived of minimum wages. However, official data confirms the finding from fieldwork that wages are generally below minimum wage in Abu Road, Rajasthan.

Since 2006 there has been some increase in average wages. Table 4 shows the official estimates and fieldwork confirms that there has been an increase. This has been accompanied by an increase in actual numbers and proportions of men on worksites – or at least on muster rolls.

Table 4 Abu Road, Rajasthan: wages paid

Year	Minimum wage paid (Rupees)	Maximum wage paid (Rupees)
2006/07	9	73
2007/08	14	73
2008/09	44	100
2009/10	38	100

Source: BDO office, Abu Road

In 2009, over half of those surveyed in Rajasthan reported earning 61–80 rupees (Rs) on average from NREGS; the number earning less and number earning more were roughly equal. This confirms that most people were actually earning less than the minimum wage, then Rs100. An earning of Rs70–80 per day corresponds to the reported market wage for women. In this part of Rajasthan, most women on the programme were therefore earning more or less what they would earn elsewhere. Choosing to work here is therefore most likely explained by factors discussed earlier – convenience and availability of work.

² Data for 2007/08, available from the programme office.

³ It should be noted that overall the share of women in person-days has gone up since then in Himachal, but in Sirmour district it remains close to 4 per cent.

Field data from the two villages surveyed showed that 9 per cent of eligible men worked on the NREGS in 2006, whereas 34 per cent did so in 2009. In the case of women, the corresponding figures are 22 and 52 per cent. While women were 70 per cent of the NREGS workers in 2006, they were just under 60 per cent in 2009.

In Kerala, the minimum wage of Rs125 is paid to all workers for each day worked on NREGS. This is well above the prevalent market wage for women (Rs70–80), but well below that for men (Rs200 or above). For the state as a whole, as Table 1 shows, women's share in total work days has gone up over the period. Fieldwork in Kerala suggests that there has been a switching effect, or partial switching, due to the difference between market and minimum wages for women, ie the regular implementation of the NREGS has created a shortage of agricultural labourers, and in turn led to some upward movement of female unskilled wages. Women reported earning only Rs70–80 per day from agricultural work prior to NREGA, and there is an upward pressure on this wage given the higher wages on NREGS sites, as well as an emerging shortage of women workers for agricultural work. The response to this shortage has taken two forms. In some areas, NREGS works are kept open only when agricultural work is not available. Thus, one panchayat has developed a work calendar. Six months are set aside for NREGS works (March–June and November–December) and six months for agricultural work (July–October and January–February). This prevents clashes and consequent labour shortages and wage fluctuations, and ensures year-round employment. In another area, rubber and coconut plantation owners were forced to raise the daily agricultural wage to keep labourers away from NREGS worksites after a request to the panchayat to cease works during the harvesting season went unheeded.

Marginal farmers in Kerala requested that the state government seek permission from national government to use NREGA funds to subsidise farm labour on the land of poor and marginal farmers. This was refused. This means there is demand for NREGS work during peak agricultural seasons even though the scheme is intended to be a source of income when there is no agricultural work.

Whether the upward pressure on women's wages will have any effect on gender wage gaps will depend on the trend of men's wages, which could not be ascertained by this study. Gender wage gaps are high across the country, and among the highest in Kerala. (See Annex 2 for details on gender wage gaps across the country.)

In Himachal, there is little gender disparity in market wage rates, which were seen to be around Rs150 for both male and female unskilled workers, well above the minimum wage of Rs100 (revised to Rs110 in March 2009).⁴ Although the state government initially made payments according to minimum wage rates, as in Kerala, more recently (mid 2009) a task-based system was introduced. However, workers reported that they continued to receive the minimum wage, which suggests that the task-based system did not lead to reduced earnings. Market wages are kept high because of the increasing industrialisation in the vicinity of the area visited.

Equal wages were paid to men and women on all sites visited in the three states. However, some responses from Kerala suggested that men were hired as 'skilled labour' earning higher wages even though they did similar work to 'unskilled' women workers.

Deciding which member of the household should work on NREGS sites

The NREGS offers a household employment guarantee. Given that the volume of work that could be generated, particularly in the early years of implementation, was less than the potential demand for work, states have chosen to apportion the available work to as many households as possible. In that way, more people participate and get some benefit and available work is not given to just a small number of households. Therefore, although the Act gives the right to 100 days per household but does not rule out two people or more from the same household working at the same time on a worksite, in practice, work is given to one person per household in the areas studied.

This means that each household has to decide who will do NREGS work. Fieldwork showed that the number of earners in the household is an important factor in determining who will go for NREGS work, or if anyone will go. A survey carried out by ISST in 2006 in selected sites in four states showed that, on average, households had three eligible members per household (ISST 2006). Where there are two or more earners, given the gender disparity in market wages, it is usually the woman whose time is allocated for NREGS. However, in Himachal, it is largely recent migrant workers accessing the programme, as opposed to long-term residents in the area, and this may also explain the larger proportion of men in the NREGA workforce here.

The poorest households, households with a single earner, and particularly single-women households, prefer daily wage payments, whereas NREGS payments usually are

⁴ The data on wages is as observed in the field. The relation between minimum and market wages across states is also confirmed in Chavan and Bedamatta 2006.

made monthly. NREGS is not the first option in Kerala and Rajasthan but in Himachal fieldwork showed that single women (widows, unmarried women) were working on NREGS sites.

Despite high levels of unemployment in Kerala, the high levels of literacy mean that unemployed men are educated and even though many men signed up initially and had job cards made, they do not want to do unskilled manual work and therefore have not applied for work on the scheme. Women too are educated but have not felt NREGS work to be beneath their dignity and, in fact, women frequently said that as it 'government work', it gave them higher status. Table 5 shows literacy rates for each of the districts visited, for each state and for India as a whole; it can be seen that Kerala has a higher literacy than the other states studied here. Despite the relatively low literacy gap between men and women in Kerala, there is a big gap in labour force participation, suggesting that employment outcomes of education are different depending on one's sex.

Table 5 Literacy rates, by sex and district/state, compared to India as a whole

District/state	Literacy levels	
	Male	Female
Sirmour (HP)	79.36	60.37
Himachal Pradesh	86.02	68.08
Palakkad (Kerala)	89.73	79.31
Kerala	94.20	87.86
Sirohi (Rajasthan)	54.39	37.37
Rajasthan	76.46	44.34
India	75.85	54.16

Source: Census of India, 2001; Literacy rate is the percentage literate among the population aged seven years or over.

Income and savings

Income generated through NREGS is determined by actual wages and the number of days worked. The average number of days worked per household was around 35 in Palakkad, Kerala at the time of the study. The field survey in Abu Road, Rajasthan found that around 30 per cent of households received less than 50 days of work while 70 per cent received more.

Because women are so dominant in the NREGS workforce, a large part of programme income accrues to women. Fieldwork showed that women have been

enabled to undertake some personal expenditure – such as the purchase of clothes or lunch boxes (proudly displayed by women in Rajasthan to the research team) for their own use. In Palakkad, Kerala, the programme office estimated that around 40 per cent of the payments, made directly into banks, were not withdrawn for consumption. Their records show that household earning ranged between 11 and 40 per cent of the maximum possible across the district (computed as expenditure on unskilled wage component divided by the total number of households given employment in 2007/08, in each block). The shortfall is because of the number of days worked being less than the permissible 100.

In Rajasthan, while all the women met said they had a bank or post office account in their own name where the wages were deposited, only 38 per cent said they were able to decide themselves how to use these earnings. Almost a fifth of women respondents reported adding to household assets or paying back loans. In Kerala, women reported using the money for specific 'bulky' expenses.⁵ Thus, even though all households working on NREGS are poor and the money is largely spent on basic consumption needs or health, there is a very strong motivation among people to save towards large expenditure and for the future.

Interface with women and women's groups

Features of the NREGS specific to Kerala are that worksites are managed by women and that most women coming for work have already been mobilised into self-help groups. The prior experience of working together and existing female managerial capacity both help to make the NREGS more accessible to women. The Kerala state government has entrusted the line management and implementation of the NREGS to Kudumbashree (the state poverty eradication mission and a programme that has mobilised women into self-help groups for economic activity) (see Annex 3 for more on Kudumbashree).

The Area Development Society of the Kudumbashree represent 30 to 40 'neighbourhood groups'⁶ at ward level. It provides a volunteer area development supervisor (ADS) who is in charge of NREGS work and ensures proper maintenance of muster rolls and provision of worksite facilities. The ADS is usually the head of an existing self-help group and an emergent village leader. She looks after two to three sites, depending on the size of the village.

In Attapady, a tribal area, the Kudumbashree is the first point of contact through which villagers learn about and

⁵Note on NREGS Best Practices, Palakkad District, made available by Programme Co-ordinator.

⁶Neighbourhood groups typically consist of all women in a neighbourhood; several self-help groups with eight to ten women each may be formed out of one neighbourhood group.

participate in the programme. Mutual mistrust led to the dissolution of mixed groups of tribal and non-tribal members. It was found that tribal illiteracy impaired the spread of information about the scheme and some tribal ADSs remain unclear about procedures, even after orientation programmes and trainings. About 100 entirely-*adivasi* Kudumbashree groups were created in early 2009 to ease the process of assimilation. According to Chathukulam and Gireesan (2007), NREGA implementation in these tribal communities has been hindered by ignorance of tribal life and faulty targeting.

By giving the responsibility of NREGS implementation to Kudumbashree, the Kerala state government has further consolidated women's position in the programme. Fieldwork showed that women believe one needs to be a member of Kudumbashree in order to work on NREGA sites. This is not the case, but women are joining to make sure of getting work.

In Rajasthan there is no comparable mobilisation of women. NREGS implementation is largely left to panchayats. However, there are active youth groups and other social movements (around the right to information, for example) that have been deeply involved in the programme. As a result, general levels of awareness are much higher than they would have been if advocacy had been left exclusively to the district administration. Several of these groups have participated in social audits as a way of drawing attention to irregularities, gaps, etc and improving implementation. While the state government had initially encouraged such independent audits, this policy has been changed because it was strongly resisted by panchayats. The state government decided that each panchayat would set up its own social audit group. But active mobilising by youth continues, leading to periodic reports of local conflicts. Although self-help and other women's groups are present, fieldwork did not find evidence of these groups playing any active part in NREGS audit or implementation.

In Himachal, as mentioned earlier, programme managers have had to work hard to persuade women to come and work on NREGS. This effort has enabled them in most places to gradually reach the mandatory quota – and even exceed it in some areas, but in the particular area visited for this study participation was still very low. Himachal Pradesh has an important history of active *mahila mandals* (women's groups) that were set up through earlier government programmes even before the self-help group movement of the 1990s. In one village the fieldwork team found a group that had been formed in

1974/75 and which is still active. Regular activities are linked to social and religious functions (the group has collective ownership of cooking utensils, for example) but the group has also engaged with development activities such as the construction of an approach road to the village in 2005, which was organised by the women, though the manual work was done by men hired for the purpose. Such groups have not sought to get involved with the NREGS. Migrant women are less likely to be members of these old established mahila mandals.

Care responsibilities, unpaid work

The management of care and other household responsibilities influences women's participation in different ways. The programme design takes into account the need to support women's childcare responsibilities and therefore requires that crèches are provided on NREGS worksites. Of the three states, it was in Rajasthan that a large number of young children, of varying ages, were seen to accompany mothers to worksites. Despite the requirement that crèches should be provided, none were seen. In focus group discussions women pointed out that there was often no carer and children were left unattended, or that the '*jhoola*' (cradle) had gone missing: '*site par koi jhoola nahin hai, woh to sab panchayat mei hai*' (there is no cradle at the site, it is in the panchayat). Or, as one site supervisor noted, there were two cradles provided on a site where there were 180 workers. Women managed to combine work and care through the help of in some cases husbands or others in the family, but very often by older daughters. Women said, 'Nobody is there to look after the child. Women have to take care of their own children. Some women do come with a small baby but they bring along an older son or daughter to take care of the infant while the woman carries out her work.' The older child may be 10–12 years old. When asked if these children go to school, one woman said, '*Madam jo site par jayega woh school kaise ja sakta hai?*' (If a child has to go to the site how can she go to school?). At another place, the response was, 'Women do not come with their children but leave their children at home with other siblings who look after them.'

Other studies report similar findings regarding childcare for working women. A study in Viluppuram district, Tamil Nadu, found that almost 50 per cent of the women left their children at home; 76 per cent of children under one year were left at home (Narayanan 2008). In another study in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, it was noted that, 'Since the men have migrated and the women are now at the worksites, where there are no childcare facilities, children are simply

left at home alone. In case after case we were told of five- or six-year old siblings looking after infant children all by themselves while their parents are away at work' (Bhatty 2006).

In Kerala, no children were seen on the sites. While few young women were seen at work, suggesting that there may be an inadvertent exclusion of this group, this was not suggested by any of the interviewees. Given lower fertility levels here, the demographic characteristics of the female population is also very different from Rajasthan. From what the women say, a major reason for the attraction of NREGS work is that since this work is close to home, it is possible to perform care duties while also going for NREGS work. For example, one woman said, 'My husband has been an invalid for the last ten years but in NREGS I get work near the house so I am able to take care of my husband during the lunch break.'

In Himachal, too, children were not seen on worksites. Women said they work when free from household chores, which include collecting water and fodder, and children might help with these tasks. As one woman working on an NREGS site said, 'I can work here because my children take the animals out to graze.'

Programme management and implementation

As per the Act and its operational guidelines, the panchayats are responsible for providing information, registering workers and supervising works and payment. In order to respond to demand for work, panchayats need to have a shelf of technically feasible projects ready to roll. Efficient implementation requires capacity for planning as well as for administering the programme. It has several aspects, including: at gram sabha or village level, monitoring the extent and nature of people's participation; administrative capacity including record keeping abilities, compatible software, etc; and planning across programmes or building up convergence across departments.

In Kerala, the panchayat works closely with the Kudumbashree system and with this non-conflictual partnership the implementation has been generally smooth. Also, a convergence of schemes and resources from different government departments and programmes has been possible in the state, allowing for micro-level development planning. Thus, in the tribal area visited for this study, NREGS has been linked with the Forest Department and pending work in the latter was made eligible for NREGS schemes. To compensate for the greater distance that workers must travel to get to these

worksites, an additional payment is made to them from the Forest Department's budget. An interesting example of conscientious performance was seen in the same area, where one tribal site supervisor actively maintained the medicine kit, taking the trouble to collect medicines from the Tribal Hospital and handing out medicines as needed.

One problem noted by the study was the lengthy time taken to complete the required administrative work. This led to delays in opening new works, delays due to banks and panchayats using incompatible software and online entry being interrupted by power cuts. In the tribal area there was a shortage of technical staff, leading to long delays after completion of work in checking the completed work, computing wages due and making the payments.

In both Himachal and Rajasthan, women reportedly did not attend panchayat meetings, even though several women are appointed to positions in the panchayat institutions. One woman in Himachal was clear that she was missing nothing: 'Yes, we do not attend gram sabhas. Nothing happens there, it is a waste of time. No problems get solved.' A persistent problem in relation to NREGS, as one *sarpanch* (elected head of the village council) pointed out, is the lack of technical input during gram sabha proceedings: 'Works get suggested, but there is no one to assess the proposed works' technical practicability and financial requirements given the NREGA's restricted means. Junior engineers usually do not attend gram sabhas.' Women's disinterest in attending gram sabhas, as one respondent from Rajasthan explained, is also because 'if a woman tries to make a point she is not given any importance... a list of projects is formulated by the sarpanch or people close to the sarpanch.' Respondents reported that gram sabhas are not held regularly and they are not aware of when the meetings are to be held. As a result the gram sabhas are not well attended, which results in a list of projects being formulated by a small group close to the sarpanch, then passed off as a proposal from the village as a whole.

The role of district officials continues to be crucial to the scheme's implementation, as there is a need for technical input – particularly in building up a shelf of projects. State resource staff appointed by the government in Rajasthan are playing an important role in building up the capacities of newly appointed site supervisors.

Migration

One of the objectives of the NREGA is to reduce distress migration. Such reduction could also be seen as an indicator of successful implementation and optimism in

NREGA's ability to stimulate development within the village. Although some households or individuals may migrate long distances to other states, the dominant type of migration observed in this study was short distance migration to neighbouring urban or peri-urban areas. Fieldwork in Abu Road explored this aspect to some extent and it emerged that such migration continues, with 40 per cent of households reporting migrant members in December 2009. About 70 per cent of households with migrant members reported receiving remittances. Similarly, no clear evidence was seen in Himachal that the NREGA has had an impact in stalling inter-state migration, although in some villages visited during fieldwork it was reported that when NREGS works were open men put off the decision to migrate or went for shorter periods. One of the interviewees pointed out that he had stopped migrating because he was able to get NREGS work, and that although these wages were lower, it was cheaper to stay at home. In the area surveyed in Kerala, there was seen to be a similar process of migration to neighbouring areas, again largely by men.⁷

⁷ Some studies suggest there has been an impact on migration. For example, 57 per cent of the sample suggested that NREGA had 'helped them avoid migration' (Reetika Khera and Nandini Nayak, Women workers and perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, EPW 24 October 2009: 49–57, at p52)

5 Wider impacts

The main objective of the study reported here was to examine the immediate factors influencing women's participation. However, participation will, in a sense, be influenced by the wider impacts of the programme. Observations relating to this are briefly summarised below.

Local development and women's priorities

As part of a developing social protection umbrella in the country, NREGA can contribute in two ways. One is by transferring income to the poorest, though only to those who are able to perform manual labour. The other is in supporting local development and hence reducing the social protection deficits. There is a need to move away from a static approach to social protection to one that is equally concerned with developing the capacity to move out of poverty and vulnerability (see, for example, Cook and Kabere 2010: 1–28).

Based on this study, there is considerable evidence that income is being transferred to the poorest households, although there is indirect evidence of leakages. However, some people lack the physical ability to do manual labour or are not mobile because they have to look after the sick or disabled. From a social protection perspective, simple cash transfers to such people should complement the public works.

Support for local development could be provided by, for example, directing resources into creation of productive assets. However, at the time of fieldwork for this study, few durable assets had been created.

In Kerala, a decision had been taken at the outset that rural road construction would be a last priority and, at maximum, up to 10 per cent of the value of all works. Between 2007/08 and March 2009, out of all expenditure on completed works in the district studied, 27 per cent was spent on flood control and protection, 26 per cent on renovation of traditional water bodies, 23 per cent on micro-irrigation works and only 3.5 per cent on rural connectivity. In an innovative example of interdepartmental coordination in Attapady block starting in 2009/10, a tribal and forested area, the Forest Department offered an additional daily payment as an incentive and work in forest areas was planned jointly with the NREGS.

In Himachal, water conservation, water harvesting structures, micro-irrigation and flood control and protection account for roughly 40 per cent of all works up to 2008/09. In contrast to Kerala, however, cumulative

figures up to 2008/09 show that over 47 per cent of all works related to rural connectivity, though this may reflect local need as Kerala had a well-developed infrastructure at the start. While the building of roads in hill areas requires very careful assessment from an ecological perspective, local officials felt that instructions from the centre in 2009 not to allocate NREGS funds for road construction did not take account of local priorities. Several hamlets, often populated by marginalised social groups, are not connected to the main road, and even a gravel road makes a big difference to people living here.

In the selected district in Rajasthan, road construction accounted for 5 per cent of all works, based on cumulative figures from 2006 to 2010. The same data shows that 66 per cent of the works approved remain incomplete; 50 per cent of works relate to construction of a new well or deepening of an existing well. During focus group discussions, villagers repeatedly said that all the structures which had been constructed were washed away in the monsoons.⁸

Soil and water conservation has been prioritised by India's Ministry of Rural Development, which holds the programme. Assets constructed under NREGA have to meet the 60:40 ratio of wages to materials and this is one of the main reasons why permanent structures or capital intensive technological solutions to water management problems are ruled out.

Looking ahead, as the ability to plan at village level improves and interdepartmental initiatives come to fruition, the assets created may display more development potential. Some examples of improved productivity were encountered in the course of the fieldwork; in one panchayat in Kerala, it was reported that a large tank restoration job in 2007 turned single-crop rice fields into double-crop areas.

One of the problems evident in Himachal was that, in the absence of integrated planning, assets created under NREGS may not be part of the longer-term development agenda. Thus, conflicting trajectories of development persist, with an emphasis on mining and large dams on the one hand, which will displace many villages, and, on the other hand, small structures being constructed with NREGA funds on some of the areas slated for submergence. For assets created under NREGA to contribute to local development, such damaging conflicts will need to be resolved.

NREGA funds can be used only in a limited way for skilled labour or materials. It is only as planning and

⁸Or, as a recent study points out, not knowing how to construct useful rural infrastructure can translate into 'excavation and re excavation of ponds'. See Dey and Bedi 2010: 23.

convergence across departments and budgets becomes possible that a systematic impact on local development is likely, through creation of durable and locally relevant assets.

In terms of relevant development, it is essential to examine the roots of poverty in a given area. In Himachal, for example, those who worked on NREGS sites were typically from landless households and did not own cattle. This might look like good targeting, but there is a question about the nature of poverty experienced in hill areas. Income poverty is not the only issue; ecological poverty affects most hill households. As Madhav Ashish put it, 'The health of the rural economy is founded on the natural wealth of the land in terms of its material productivity, and not on the economy's purely monetary aspect.' Failure to recognise this leads to 'economic policies for raising monetary incomes, instead of policies for the restoration of yields from the depleted resource base' (Ashish 1989: 937). By targeting its programme on income poverty alone, the NREGS is missing the opportunity to address the roots of rural poverty, especially in mountainous regions.

One important outcome of a national programme that is backed by legal guarantee and which requires regular reporting for each area is that developmental problems or concerns of especially remote or underserved populations will become visible. For example, in the tribal area of Kerala studied here, much effort was needed to find the appropriate composition of Kudumbashree groups, to make links with the Forest Department to develop a shelf of viable projects, to introduce mobile banking and so on. This developmental stimulus can be attributed to the NREGA.

Empowering women

The extensive participation of women in NREGS works has been discussed above. Participation in the scheme has meant that women are coming out of their homes, not only to work but also to visit banks and panchayat offices, which they may not have done previously. This enhanced mobility comes with the higher status of being income-earning workers. Although this study did not find any evidence of changing gender roles within the household as a result of women working on NREGS sites, it did find evidence of increased confidence among women. 'Now I am not afraid of meeting officers at the site and explaining what work has been done'; 'Women can now be seen moving around in places like gram panchayat office, banks, schools, block office without anybody to accompany them.'

The presence of infants and young children at worksites was observed mainly in Rajasthan. When asked, women here said they prefer to leave their infants with an older child, rather than demanding crèche facilities at the worksite. This is mainly because they have more trust in their older child than in an unknown caregiver, and because no active caregiving is seen to be taking place in the rare event of a '*jhula*' (cradle) being provided.

An unintended consequence of the programme, which this study observed, was that older daughters supporting the work of their mothers by looking after younger siblings missed out on their own schooling in the process. This is a result of what has been well described by Palriwala and Neetha as the '*gendered familialism* of employment and wage policy'. 'Gendered familialism reiterates that care work is the responsibility of women...Women remain embedded in family relations in employment and in the formulation of social protection policy. There is a refusal to accept women's double day or the issue of care responsibilities as a collective concern of the state. In fact, the implicit and explicit concern is that the family is essential if the minimalist welfare regime is to work and women's care labour is essential to the family' (Palriwala and Neetha 2009).

Because women remain caregivers even if they take on paid work, their preference is for work near the home, flexible timings, etc – all of which are fulfilled by the NREGS. Although the operational guidelines of the programme require the provision of crèches on worksites, this study suggests that more attention needs to be given to the quality of care on offer.

Labour market impacts

Given the gender wage gaps prevalent in the market, the NREGS has made little difference to the labour market for adult male workers in the areas studied. However, there has been a substantial impact on adult female workers, especially in Kerala, resulting in an upward pressure on market wages and emerging labour shortages in agriculture. As a result of the task-based wage payment and the inaccuracies of muster rolls, actual wages earned seemed to roughly correspond to market wages in Rajasthan, therefore having little wider labour market impact, although this is an unintended outcome.

The other observable impact, again in relation to women workers, is that the number of women willing to take on paid work has increased with provision of more jobs near the home.

6 Suggestions for policy and programme design

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

Involving women

This study has confirmed the significance of the NREGS for women in many ways and also their limited participation in choice of works. One suggestion emerging from the study is that programme managers could usefully draw upon informal groups, where they exist – such as mahila mandals in Himachal – to understand local priorities from women's perspective and beyond those expressed in the gram sabha.

Strengthening active citizenship

In most areas visited, gram sabhas are not fulfilling their theoretical role of being inclusive village assemblies through which democratic process people's preferences are articulated. Women's participation in gram sabhas is likely to increase as they become more aware of their citizenship rights and duties. Investing in informal groups is one way of doing this – policy has prioritised investment in training of elected leaders, which needs to continue, but democratic processes require active citizenship by all and this fact needs to find a place in resource allocations too.

Broadening the understanding of poverty to include needs of women

The programme could have a greater impact on poverty reduction and on development if there were a broader understanding of the nature of poverty, and especially the constraints faced by women. For example, in most parts of the areas studied in Rajasthan and Kerala, the provision of additional cash income is a good way to address poverty and vulnerability, but in hill regions or the forested tribal tracts of Kerala, cash income does not easily compensate for the shortages that poor women face, such as a lack of grass for cattle or drinking water. The programme needs to find ways of improving its relevance to the daily lives of people (especially women) and addressing ecological poverty, not just income poverty, through suitable modifications to programme design. This will not happen through ad hoc creation of small and isolated tanks or wells. It requires an explicit framing of the development discourse within which NREGA is located.

Systems of wage payment

Women are employed as unskilled labour on NREGS worksites. Over a longer period, enhancement of skills and productivity will be one way of increasing earnings. At

present, however, women are most affected by payment systems that link wages to tasks completed and which, in practice, as seen over the last four years, lead to persistent differences between minimum wages payable and actual wages received in Rajasthan. Given that the intention of the programme is income transfer, our study recommends either an immediate revision of the schedule of rates and stricter supervision to prevent leakages, to allow higher earnings, or else payment on the basis of days worked without productivity considerations.

Complementing the NREGS for different needs of women

The programme design is perceived to be inclusive, as it is open to all irrespective of age or any other consideration. However, for elderly women or young women with infants who need to earn their living, hard manual labour is not desirable from the point of view of their own health or that of infants. As a social protection system, NREGS reaches out to the able-bodied; to reach out to meet the needs of women who are at different stages in their lifecycle, a cash transfer or other kind of intervention may be better and more efficient.

Improving quality of childcare

The programme design includes a recommendation that crèches be opened at workplaces. Fieldwork confirms that workplace crèches are rare, and even if there is a facility, it is of a very minimal nature. Fieldwork also confirms that women are not willing to leave their children in such a facility unless they are sure that the care provided will be of a good standard.

From a policy standpoint, our recommendation is that in debates around women's work and childcare, the issue of quality needs to be brought to the forefront and not treated as something to be addressed at a later stage after issues of access or infrastructure have been dealt with.



7 Conclusion

To conclude, the observed variations in women's participation are found to be closely linked to the characteristics of the local economy – what alternatives are available, how do market wages compare with NREGS wages, how do men's market wages compare to women's market wages and is there enough work available. High levels of participation in Kerala and Rajasthan are rational household responses to the wide gender gaps in market wages and higher market wages for men. A second major factor is women's care responsibilities, which limit their mobility and available time for paid work. Worksites near the home and some flexibility of timings have drawn women out to work. The role of the Kerala kudumbashree in programme management has helped to ensure that NREGS draws in women as both workers and managers. Small modifications in the design of the programme would enhance its wellbeing outcomes – for example, recognising the value of assets that respond to local needs and contribute to development, providing cash transfers for those who are unable to work, and creating different activities for those who are less fit. The productivity-linked method of wage payment in Rajasthan has, at least until now, led to average earnings that are less than the minimum wage.

On the whole, this study confirms the value of the programme from the point of view of empowering women and suggests that greater differentiation by locality would be a way of enhancing wellbeing outcomes and better embedding the programme into a process of needs analysis and policy response.

Appendix 1 Sample information

The district selected for study in Kerala was Palakkad, where over 85 per cent of the population is rural. Fieldwork was carried out in two blocks within this district, Malampuzha (which is largely agricultural and has some industry) and Attapaddy. Almost 40 per cent of the population in Attapaddy is tribal and severely impoverished. Interviews were conducted with a total of 96 people: 85 women and 11 men. Interviewees included participants and non-participants in NREGS, area development supervisors in charge of worksite management, NGO workers and government officials. A total of nine villages from seven panchayats were visited.

In Himachal, the study was conducted in Sirmour district, in Sangrah and Shillai blocks. Sirmour has the highest proportion of Scheduled Caste households in the state. In both blocks, livelihood strategies are a combination of

rain-fed agriculture, livestock rearing and seasonal migration. A total of 106 women were interviewed from 13 villages in six gram panchayats in the two blocks.

In Rajasthan, the area studied was Abu Road block in Sirohi district. Sirohi district is situated in the southwest part of Rajasthan and a survey was carried out of 115 households in two villages, Mahikhera and Nichlagarh. Sirohi is a rain-fed, drought prone area; 70 per cent of the inhabitants are from the tribal community of Garasias. ISST had carried out a previous survey of the same two villages soon after the start of the programme, in June 2006. The re-visit in 2010 showed that some of the challenges noted in 2006 still persist.

In each area, there is considerable diversity within the sample. Data was collected through field visits and interviews over the period July 2008 to December 2009.

Sites of fieldwork

State and district	Block	Panchayat	Villages	People met	
Palakkad, Kerala	Malampuzha	Malampuzha	Malampuzha	In all: Women: 39 workers, ten non-workers; 36 ADS Men: seven workers, four non-workers Government officials, NGOs (total 85 women, 11 men)	
		Elapally	Mpuzha		
		Marutarode	Polpully		
		Polpally	Elapully		
	Attapaddy		Marutarode		
			Polpully		
		Agali	Nakupathy		
	Pudur	Nakupathy Ooru			
	Shaloyur	Vannanthara			
Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh	Shillai	Drabil	Drabil	21	
			Bhagnol		
		Kando Bhatnol	Kando		
	Sangrah		Dakkar	85 (or a total of 106 women, along with officials, etc)	
		Sangrah	Sangrah, Kiroli		
			Kakog		
		Baunal Kakog	Mohutu, Shaachi		
		Khud Drabil	Trimilti		
			Dabrog		
			Ganog		
	Ganog	Lawalli			
Sirohi, Rajasthan	Abu Road	Bahadurpura	Mahikheda	51 households	
		Nichlagarh	Nichlagarh	65 households (total 116 households including men and women)	

Appendix 2 Gender wage gaps

The table below indicates the prevalent gender wage gaps in different states based on National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data for 2004. (Wages reported as market wages in the paper are as reported by respondents.)

Daily minimum wages and actual wages of male and female agricultural labourers, by state, 2004 (in rupees)

State	Minimum wage	Actual wage (Male)	Difference (Male)	Actual wage (Female)	Difference (Female)
	1	2	3 (=2-1)	4	5 (=4-1)
Andhra Pradesh	52.00	59.88	7.88	32.71	-19.29
Assam	50.00	69.70	19.70	55.06	5.06
Bihar	50.00	58.27	8.27	44.47	-5.53
Gujarat	50.00	69.15	19.15	51.41	1.41
Haryana	84.29	84.73	0.44	75.87	-8.42
Himachal Pradesh	65.00	123.00	58.00	84.60	19.60
Jammu and Kashmir	45.00	121.71	76.71	n.a.	n.a.
Karnataka	56.30	59.29	2.99	36.23	-20.07
Kerala	100.00	238.71	138.71	100.13	0.13
Madhya Pradesh	56.96	50.95	-6.01	36.58	-20.38
Maharashtra	48.00	63.00	15.00	34.09	-13.91
Orissa	52.5	54.11	1.61	39.33	-13.18
Punjab	87.59	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Rajasthan	67.30	82.94	15.64	48.58	-18.72
Tamil Nadu	54.00	117.21	63.21	39.61	-14.4
Tripura	50.00	74.33	24.33	n.a.	n.a.
Uttar Pradesh	58.00	60.56	2.56	50.58	-7.42
West Bengal	107.99	84.48	-23.51	49.63	-58.36

Source: Chavan, P and Bedamatta, R. (2006) 'Trends in agricultural wages in India 1964-65 to 1999-2000', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 September 2006: 4041-51, adapted from Aruna Kanchi, June 2010, 'Women workers in agriculture: expanding responsibilities and shrinking opportunities', ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series.

Appendix 3 Kudumbashree

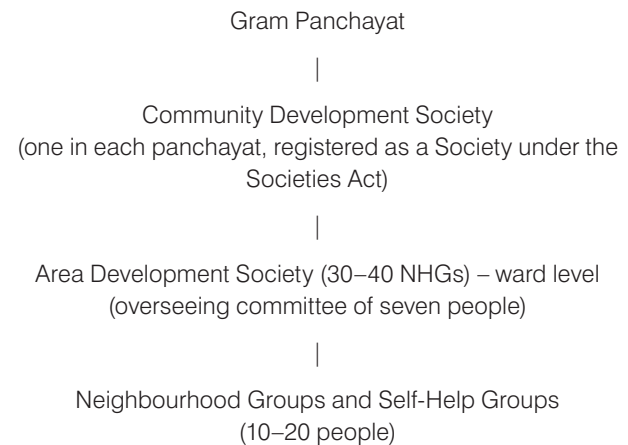
The mission statement of Kudumbashree (literally, 'prosperity of the family'; name given to the State Poverty Eradication Mission) reads as follows:

'To eradicate absolute poverty in 10 years through concerted community action under the leadership of local governments, by facilitating organizations of the poor for combining self help with demand led convergence of available services and resources to tackle the multiple dimensions and manifestations of poverty holistically.'

The Kudumbashree programme started in urban areas in 1998, and was later extended to rural areas. Women's self-help groups are formed and microenterprises started. The first step is to bring together families into neighbourhood groups of between 15 and 40 families, which are then federated at higher levels of administration. In the urban areas, these groups are made up of families assessed as being below the poverty line. In rural areas, however, anyone in the gram panchayat can be a member of the neighbourhood group (NHG), although care is taken that a majority of office bearers are from below-poverty line families. A number of different strategies are used to eradicate poverty, provide minimum social protection and stimulate economic activity. These include information and training, including skill development, through the NHGs, which normally meet once a week and provide a forum for dissemination of information and other discussion. Thrift and credit groups have been formed and, while not all the groups

are linked to regular banking facilities, they are able to provide small loans to members of the group. Attempts are made to ensure the provision of basic infrastructure, including sanitation and water, and to develop micro-plans, which are then incorporated into district plans. At least one microenterprise is to be initiated for each NHG. A wide range of economic activities has been started by the self-help groups – for example, nurseries, vermiculture and composting, floriculture and even data entry work on computers. For many of these activities, for example data entry, the demand is mainly from government departments as the Kudumbashree groups are able to perform a good service at reasonable prices.

The Kudumbashree structure can be represented schematically, as below.



Glossary

Adivasi

Umbrella term for a set of tribal groups

Ayah

Nanny

Garasia

Name of tribal group

Gram panchayat/panchayat

Elected village-level body

Gram sabha

Village assembly

Jhula

Cradle

Kudumbashree

Literally 'prosperity of the family'; name of the State Poverty Eradication Mission in Kerala

Mahila mandal

Women's group

Sarpanch

Elected head of village council



References

- Adhikari, A. and Bhatia, K. (2010) 'NREGA wage payments: can we bank on the banks?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 January 2010: 30–37
- Ashish, Madhav (1989) 'New look at rural planning', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 April 1989: 937–41
- Bhatty, Kiran (2006) 'Employment guarantee and child rights', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 May 2006: 1965–67
- Census of India (2001) District Profiles
<http://censusindia.gov.in/> accessed 15.1.2010
- Chathukulam, Jos and Gireesan, K. (2007) 'Employment to the tribal communities under NREGS : A case from Wayanad, Kerala', monitoring report
- Chavan, P. and Bedamatta, R. (2006) 'Trends in agricultural wages in India 1964–65 to 1999–2000' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 September 2006
- Cook, Sarah and Kabeer, Naila (eds) (2010) *Social Protection as Development Policy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Dey, Subhasish and Bedi, Arjun S. (2010) 'The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Birbhum', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 October 2010: 19–25
- Institute of Social Studies Trust (2006) 'Study on women and NREGA', mimeo, New Delhi: ILO and ISST
- Institute of Social Studies Trust (2007) 'Women and NREGA', mimeo, New Delhi: ISST
- Jain, Devaki (1979) 'Impact on women workers: Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme', mimeo, New Delhi: ISST
- Kabeer, Naila (2010) *Gender and Social Protection Strategies in the Informal Economy*, New Delhi: Routledge
- Ministry of Rural Development (2005) 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005: Operational Guidelines'. http://nrega.nic.in/Nrega_guidelines.pdf accessed 15.12.2008
- Narayanan, Sudha (2008) 'Employment guarantee, women's work and childcare', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 March 2008: 10–13
- ODI (2006) *The Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme*, India
- Paliwala, R. and Neetha, N. (2009) *The Care Diamond: State social policy and the market*, Research Report 3 – India, UNRISD Project on Political and Social Economy of Care
- Sharma, R. (2003) 'Kerala's decentralisation: idea in practice', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 September 2003: 3832–50
- Vanaik, A and Siddhartha (2008) 'Bank payments: end of corruption in NREGA?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 April 2008: 33–9

