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**Women's participation in the NREGA: the interplay between wage work and care**

Ratna M. Sudarshan

A component of the UPA government's Common Minimum Programme, the NREGA – now MGNREGA - was launched in February 2006 in 200 most backward districts of the country. The scheme was expected to create wage work during the lean agricultural season through a public works programme available on demand as guaranteed by the Act. In addition to providing a floor to income, it was hoped that distress migration would be checked, village assets created and a process of sustainable development initiated. The rural employment guarantee 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<sup>1</sup> in its design. Under the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (1979), a forerunner of the MGNREGA, employment on public works was seen to attract women, and in turn women reported an improvement in family food/ nutrition as a result of the MEGS work (Devaki Jain/ISST 1979; Krishnaraj et.al, 2005). There are complex issues surrounding women's participation in public works: would the ratio of men and women on worksites change if wages offered were higher, at what cost to children or women's own health is such work done, are there pathways out of public works into other, more productive work. This paper has the objective first, of trying 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 well being of women participants could be enhanced and the potential of the programme better realized. The interplay between 'wage work' and 'care' is seen as being fundamental in attempting a gendered analysis of the programme.

The NREGA and the public works programmes started under this Act offer an assurance of a basic income to adult members of rural households who are willing to undertake manual labour and as such is an important component of an overall social protection policy. Official data shows that in 2009-10, roughly 48 per cent of workdays generated overall went to women.<sup>2</sup> There are however wide variations across states, within states and across districts in the share of work days going to women. In 2007, at the national level around 43 per cent of the total person workdays were provided to women. Out of 26 states we find 10 states had between 25 and 38 per cent female work days. Five states had less than 25

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1 It allows for crèche facilities on worksites and insists that 1/3rd of all beneficiaries be women. Wages cannot discriminate between the sexes. Other entitlements include mandatory participation of women in the monitoring and management of the scheme.

<sup>2</sup> [http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mpr\\_ht/empgenst.aspx?fin=2010-2011](http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mpr_ht/empgenst.aspx?fin=2010-2011) accessed 8 June 2010.

per cent and 11 had over 40 per cent. At the two extremes we find Jammu and Kashmir with 5 per cent and Himachal with 13 per cent on the one hand, and Tamil Nadu (82 per cent), Tripura (76 per cent), Rajasthan (68 per cent) and Kerala (66 per cent) on the other.<sup>i</sup> This data informed the choice of areas for the study presented here.

The study sought to explore, through fieldwork, the reasons behind and the implications of women's participation in NREGA in selected areas of three states, Kerala, Himachal and Rajasthan. These states were selected for study for a number of reasons. While Kerala and Rajasthan show a very high proportion of work days generated being taken up by women, Himachal is a contrast with very low share of women. Rajasthan leads the country in the total number of work days generated, has a number of active civil society groups that have engaged with the programme, and has a prior history of large scale public works programmes popularly known as 'famine works'. Kerala is usually regarded as one of the best performers with regard to education and health indicators, also on the decentralisation and local governance front, and has mobilised women from low income families into 'Kudumbashree' groups which take on micro enterprises. Himachal is one of the more prosperous states in the country and the nature of vulnerability here is linked to remoteness and natural resource dependence. Like Kerala, Himachal performs well on education and health indicators. The NREGS is being implemented in the pockets of deprivation that are present even in this relatively rich state. Between them, the three states are dissimilar in many ways and it is expected that this diversity will help to build a more nuanced picture than possible through a focus on one state alone.

The first section below details the choice of areas, sample and method of research. Section II presents the key influences on women's participation, including the role of institutional structures involved in implementation. Section III explores the implications for well being, with special focus on the interplay between care and wage work, and some of the wider impacts of the programme. Finally, Section IV presents the policy implications of the study.

## **1. Study Areas**

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 districts visited. It must be emphasised here that the findings of the study are in no way representative of states or even districts; moreover a special effort was made to include areas with the most remote and difficult-to-access terrain, populated by marginalised social groups, and areas that lacked other employment opportunities.

In Kerala the district selected 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. They included both participants and nonparticipants in NREGS; Area Development Supervisors in charge of worksite management, NGO workers and government officials. A total of 9 villages from 7 *panchayats* were visited.

In Himachal, the study was conducted in Sirmour district, 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 6 *gram panchayats* in the 2 blocks.

In Rajasthan, the area visited is in Abu Road block in Sirohi district. Sirohi District is situated in the south west part of Rajasthan and a survey was carried out of 115 households in 2 villages, Mahikhera and Nichlagarh. Sirohi is a rain-fed, drought prone area. 70 per cent of the inhabitants here are from a tribal community of *Garasias*. ISST had made a previous survey of the same two villages soon after the start of the programme, in June 2006. The re-visit in 2010 shows that some of the challenges then noted still persist.

In each place, there is considerable diversity within the sample. Data was collected through field visits and interviews over the period July 2008- December 2009. Key findings are reported below.

Table 1

Sites of fieldwork

| State and district        | Block                       | Panchayat  | Villages  | Persons met   |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Palakkad, Kerala          | Malampuzha<br><br>Attapaddy | Malampuzha<br>Elapally<br>Marutarode<br>Polpally<br><br>Agali<br>Pudur<br>Shaloyur         | Malampuzha<br>Mpuzha<br>Polpully<br>Elapully<br>Marutarode<br>Polpully<br><br>Nakupathy<br>Nakupathy Ooru<br>Vannanthara      | In all:<br>Women: 39 workers, 10 non-workers; 36 ADS<br>Men: 7 workers, 4 non-workers<br>Government officials, NGOs<br><br>(total 85 women, 11 men) |
| Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh | Shillai<br><br>Sangrah      | Drabil<br><br>Kando Bhatnol<br><br>Sangrah<br><br>Baunal Kakog<br>Khud Drabil<br><br>Ganog | Drabil<br>Bhagnol<br>Kando<br>Dakkar<br>Sangrah, Kiroli<br>Kakog<br>Mohutu, Shaachi<br>Trimilti<br>Dabrog<br>Ganog<br>Lawalli | 21<br><br>85<br><br>(or a total of 106 women, along with officials, etc)  |
| Sirohi, Rajasthan         | Abu Road                    | Bahadurpura<br>Nichlagarh  | Mahikheda<br>Nichlagarh   | 51 households<br>65 households<br><br>(total 116 households including men and women)  |

## 2. Women's participation in the NREGA

The first observation from fieldwork was that many women have been persuaded to come out of the house for work for the first time in response to this programme in both Rajasthan and Kerala. In Malampuzha, Kerala, the scheme has encouraged non-working women, widows and the elderly to participate. The usual routine for these women is to complete household work in the morning and then come to the work site. Women are attracted by the pay rate, since the minimum wage of Rs 125.00 being paid on the sites in Kerala is well above the prevalent market wage for women (Rs 70.00-80.00), but well below that for men (Rs 200.00 or above). In Rajasthan too, the minimum wage of Rs 100.00 is greater than the prevalent market wage for female unskilled workers. In contrast in Himachal, market wages for both male and female workers are slightly above the minimum wage of Rs 100.00.<sup>ii</sup>

It is to be noted that the ratio of women to men on work sites does not correspond to the ratio of women to men in the work force, so that we need to probe deeper to understand the response to the NREGA. The level of female work participation in general was just over 15 per cent in Kerala, according to the 2001 Census, while in Palakkad, the district studied here, it was a little higher at 21 per cent. However on NREGA sites in Palakkad, 85 per cent of all applicants given work were women.<sup>iii</sup> In Rajasthan, women's work participation overall stood at around 33 per cent, and in Abu Road at 25 per cent. The share of women in total work days generated by NREGA at state level was almost 70 per cent in 2007; while the ISST survey in 2009 showed that over 50 per cent of women in the two villages visited were participants in NREGA. In Himachal in 2001, the overall female work participation rate was 38 per cent and in Sirmour district 41 per cent. However, the share of women in work days generated through NREGA in 2007 was low overall at 13 per cent, and even lower in the district visited, Sirmour, at 3 per cent.<sup>iv</sup> This data for Rajasthan and Kerala suggest that non-working women are being drawn into the work force, but the same effect is not seen in Himachal.

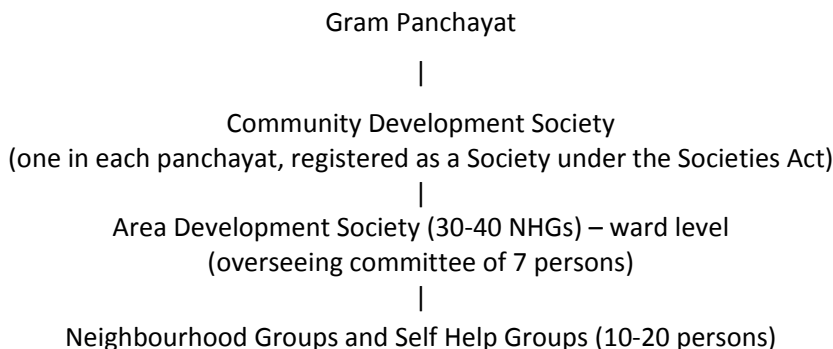
Even when market wages may approximate what is earned on the NREGA sites, work is often not available. Given the distinctive geography of Kerala and the close proximity of rural and urban settlements, workers in Palakkad are able to access work in agriculture, small local factories and services spanning rural and urban areas. Additionally, women have been organised into various micro enterprises through their *Kudumbashree* groups.<sup>v</sup> But in other places, such as the tribal areas in Attappady block, there was no other work – neither forest nor agricultural – available for tribal women. Similarly in Abu Road, other work is not available within or near the village so that most men and some women commute to work some distance away.

A feature of the NREGS specific to Kerala is that the sites are managed by women and that most of the women coming for work have already been mobilised into self help groups, so that there was prior experience of working together and already existing female managerial capacity, both of which help to make NREGA 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 mobilized women into self-help groups for economic activity). 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 micro enterprises started. The first step is to bring together families into neighbourhood groups (NHG) of between 15-40 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 level plans. At least one micro enterprise is to be initiated for each NHG. A wide range of economic activities have been started by the self help groups. For example, there are 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 schematically represented :-



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<sup>3</sup> The poor are identified based on the following risk factors. *No Land /Less than 5 cents of Land, No house/Dilapidated House, No Sanitary Latrine, No access to safe drinking water within 150 meters, Women headed house hold/ Presence of a widow, divorcee / abandoned lady / unwed mother, No regularly employed person in the family, Socially Disadvantaged Groups (SC/ST), Presence of Mentally or Physically challenged person / Chronically ill member in the family, Families without colour TV.*

The Area Development Society of the *Kudumbashree*, representing 30 to 40 'neighbourhood groups'<sup>vi</sup> at Ward level, provides a volunteer Area Development Supervisor (ADS) who is placed in charge of the NREGS work and ensures proper maintenance of muster rolls and provision of work-site 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. Typically a woman between 30 and 45 years, the ADS is educated, and has been associated with *Kudumbashree* for a few years. One ADS described her NREGS responsibilities as follows: 'My responsibility includes visiting panchayat office and looking for work, collect estimate of the work, fill forms for members and collect them, give job card and account book. Give form to panchayat, collect muster roll, provide water at worksite, shelter, and keep an ayah if there are small kids'.

In Attapady, the *Kudumbashree* is the first point of contact through which villagers learn about and 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 impairs the spread of awareness 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 Chathukalam and Gireesan (2008), NREGA implementation in these tribal communities has been hindered by ignorance of tribal life and faulty targeting.

#### **Roles and Responsibilities of ADS**

1. The Estimate of the work should be displayed in the board. Number of people working on that day, number of implements used and cost should be mentioned in the board.
2. They should provide all the necessary to the workers
3. Provide tools/implements at the worksite and return it back without any damage and see to that they are used carefully.
4. Get signatures of the workers in the muster roll before starting the days work and at the end of each day in the presence of everyone.
5. Muster roll should be closed every week and handed over to the panchayat. The daily attendance should be intimated to the secretary, Gram Panchayat.
6. ADS should ensure that the workers are coming on time and doing the correct amount of work. She should make the lazy ones work and if disobey give the details of such workers to the gram panchayat secretary.
7. ADS should make sure the measurement of the work to be done in the site and finish it at the stipulated time and date.
8. Site diary to be maintained giving details of income and expense, number of implements used; number of people and days worked by each one. A copy of the same should be handed over to the Secretary, GP once in two weeks.
9. If there are children below 5 yrs, a shed to be made and an ayah to look after the children.
10. First Aid Box to be provided at the worksite and if needed the injured to be taken to the hospital.
11. Interact with the Panchayat and other officials and ensure that the work is done without any hindrance.
12. Ensure that the wages are given on time.

(Source: NREGS booklet prepared by KILA, July 2008)

The NREGS offers a household guarantee. The number of earners in the household is an important factor in determining who would go for NREGS work, or if anyone would go. In a household with a single earner, wage work with daily payment is preferred and NREGS is not the first option. The poorest, particularly single women households prefer daily wage payments to NREGS, where payments are made usually after a month. Where there are two or more earners, given the male-female disparity in market wages it is usually the woman whose time is allocated for NREGS.<sup>4</sup>

The management of care and other household responsibilities influences participation in different ways. In Kerala, those who are less visible on site include young women with young children (although fieldwork did not uncover any latent demand from this group for work and demographic factors might also be at play, with falling fertility levels here). 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.

From Kerala – ‘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 backpain and body pain as we were not used to such work but now all are happy – no pain but gain as wages’. ‘The NREGS is very helpful and once we finish the household work and send the children to school, we come and work and are still in the neighbourhood’. ‘My husband has been an invalid since the last 10 years but in NREGS I get work near the house so I am able to take care of my husband during the lunch break’.

From Himachal, it is seen that women work when free from household chores as well as the necessity of provisioning water and fodder: ‘We report for work after finishing household chores, feeding the animals and weeding in the fields. Sometimes when agricultural work needs urgent attention, we take leave from the site for a couple of days’. ‘Women are not able to be present in this discussion today because they are busy collecting fodder for the animals. Timber, grass and water resources are retreating further uphill. Women have many responsibilities: water, grass for livestock and wood’. From a woman working on an NREGS site ‘My children take the animals out to graze’. Or as another woman said ‘There are no natural sources of water, so it is difficult for women to balance house work with NREGA’. ‘No women worked under the NREGA at Dabrog. They are busy between 5 am and 12 pm, collecting fodder for animals, sometimes walking up to 6/7 km.’

From Rajasthan, about the work sites: ‘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’.

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<sup>4</sup> A survey carried out by ISST in 2006 in selected sites in four states showed that on average households had 3 eligible members per household.

Other studies report similar findings regarding the care of children. In a study in Viluppuram district, Tamil Nadu, Narayanan was found that almost 50% of the women left their children at home; 76% of children below 1 year were left at home (Sudha Narayanan 2008). In another study, in Dungarpur, Rajasthan Bhatta noted that 'Since the men have migrated and the women are now at the work sites, where there are no childcare facilities, children are simply left at home alone. In case after case we were told of five-six-year old siblings looking after infant children all by themselves while their parents are away at work' (Kiran Bhatta 2006).

In Himachal, traditionally determined gender roles reportedly constrain women from accessing NREGS, especially time spent by women in collecting fodder for the animals, and the fact that timber, grass and water resources are retreating further uphill. While women do agricultural work on their own fields, it is not the convention for women to work other people's land. But women from scheduled castes or migrant worker households, do seek out wage work. In one village dominated by an upper caste and another with 'other backward castes', both of which had negligible participation of women in NREGS, women reported that the works were too heavy and they were not comfortable with the idea of lifting stones on the road. However, in the adjacent village dominated by a Scheduled Caste, women were favorably disposed towards the scheme and during interviews said they were proud to have bank accounts and spent their earnings primarily on their children and daily household expenses.

In contrast to Kerala and Rajasthan where single women (widows, single women) might prefer other work, in Himachal this group was seen to be participating in the NREGA.

As per the Act and its operational guidelines, the *panchayats* are responsible for providing information, registering workers and supervising works and payment. In Kerala, the *panchayat* works closely with the *Kudumbashree* system and with this non conflictual partnership the implementation has been generally smooth. But in Himachal and Rajasthan, it was seen that women did not usually attend *panchayat* meetings, although there were female headed *panchayats* and the mandatory number of female *panchayat* members. The *mahila mandals* in Himachal (women's groups which are not linked to the government, unlike the groups in Kerala) have not attempted either to contribute to disseminating awareness about the NREGA or auditing the programme. Their activities in the villages are usually restricted to kitchen gardening, goat rearing and so on.

In Abu Road, Rajasthan, an NGO had facilitated the organizing of youth groups. It was seen that these groups kept up a continuous scrutiny of the *panchayat's* work, with active contestation in case of irregularities. Thus the presence of informal organised groups in Rajasthan appears to have a watchdog effect and improve the functioning of the formal institutional structure.

In the Kerala context, decentralisation has a long history. The People's Campaign in Kerala, evolving in the wake of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (1992-93), generated large scale decentralisation and devolution of powers to local governing bodies. The state's capacity for public mobilisation combined with its achievements in both male and female literacy placed it in a position to make village planning successful (see Sharma 2003). Often, in other parts of the country, it happens that resources are distributed across departments and allocated to specific schemes, leaving little



flexibility to design programmes at village or *panchayat* level. However in Kerala a convergence of schemes and resources from different government departments and programmes has been possible, allowing micro-level development planning. The parallel but linked *Kudumbashree* organisation has meant that there is a strong effective presence of women in village-level bodies.

While the *panchayat* structures in the other states exercise formal control over the programme, they cannot wholly determine its outcomes. An absence of technical input during *gram sabha* proceedings was also reported in Himachal as adversely affecting the scheme, as there was no one to assess the proposed works' technical practicability and financial requirements, given the NREGA's restricted means. The role of district officials is significant. In particular the segments of the population that are not well integrated into society are the ones who might find the formal institutional structure especially unfriendly – for example migrant, non-Himachalis in Himachal, who do not own land as the local population does. Their ability to access NREGS depends as much on the commitment and ability of government officials to reach out proactively as on their constitutional right to 'demand' work from the *panchayats*.

One of the changes made (since September 2008) to the NREGA implementation is the requirement that all payments be made into individual bank or post office accounts. In Himachal it was observed that NREGA wages were being paid into a bank that was approximately eight kilometres away from the village. Villagers were forced to spend a whole working day travelling to the bank, queueing and collecting the payment to ensure they were there during banking hours. While in Kerala no problems were reported relating to bank payments during the fieldwork, in Rajasthan over 70 per cent of the respondents said they faced delays in payment while withdrawing money from the post office. Other problems related to distance of the post office, and filling out forms, since the help of literate persons would be required (for other similar assessments of NREGA banking experience see also Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008; Adhikari and Bhatia, 2010).

### **3. Implications for households' and women's well-being; wider impacts**

The additional income from the NREGA work improves household well-being but also importantly has enabled women 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. The actual impact depends crucially on the wages paid and the number of days of work generated. Fieldwork showed that in Kerala and Himachal workers were paid the minimum wage for the number of days worked. There was no uncertainty regarding the payment that was earned and due. In contrast in Rajasthan the payment was linked to tasks completed. Workers were paid on the basis of a simple formula of value of work completed divided by the number of workers. There was room for uncertainty on both counts: workers did not know in advance how much work needed to be done in order for them to be eligible for the minimum wage; and there were names on the muster rolls of persons not actually present at the worksite. While the Rajasthan model is often flagged as 'good practice' because it seeks to link earning to effort and productivity, the actual outcome of very low wage payments for very hard work is not acceptable. It needs to be considered whether the practice of payment by daily norm is not superior in its well-being impact.

Even though Rajasthan took the initiative in reducing the task prescribed for calculating wages under the NREGA by 30% on Oct 2007, in view of the fact that women and old laborers were not being able to accomplish the allotted task and thus were deprived of minimum wages, official data confirms the finding from fieldwork that wages paid are generally below minimum wage in Abu Road, Rajasthan.

Table 2

Abu Road, Rajasthan

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

Source: BDO office, Abu Road

The table above shows that although there has been an upward trend in wages paid, not all workers earn the minimum wage. ISST's own fieldwork in 2009 shows that 70 per cent of those sampled earned between Rs 51 and Rs 80, on average. However, no male-female wage discrimination was seen or reported.

The other aspect is the number of days of work generated; none of the states has been able to assure households of 100 days of work and in practice an informal rotation system is followed with the available work being shared out among applicant households. For example, the average number of days generated 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.

Fieldwork did not reveal any changes in the allocation of household responsibilities as a result of women's participation in this work. An unintended outcome is the large presence of young children on worksites observed in Rajasthan. Children accompany women to the worksites; sometimes help with sibling care; at times also were seen to be working in lieu of other members of the household. The one place where the fieldwork found a reasonably well functioning crèche facility was in the tribal block in Kerala where an *ayah* was observed to be looking after four young children. In Himachal, in the *gram panchayat* which reported the highest participation of women in the block, nearness to home was cited as a crucial factor in attracting so many women to the site, since women could work without worrying about their children. Some lived as close as 250m from the site and even went off to milk cows and have lunch in the middle of work. Children were mostly left in neighbours' houses. Women reported for work after finishing household chores, feeding the animals and weeding in the fields.

In Abu Road, Rajasthan, while all the women met said that they had a bank or post office account in their own name where the wages were deposited, only 38 per cent said that they were able to decide themselves how to use these earnings. In Kerala the programme office reported that 40 per cent of the earnings were not immediately withdrawn from the bank, and women reported using the money for

specific ‘bulky’ expenses.<sup>vii</sup> In Rajasthan, similarly, almost a fifth of women respondents reported adding to household assets or paying back loans.

Results from the Kerala fieldwork suggest that the regular implementation of the NREGS has led to some upward movement of female unskilled wages. Women reported earning only Rs. 70.00–80.00 per day from agricultural work prior to NREGA, a wage which had increased, although the level varied from place to place. Given the higher wages on NREGS sites, there is also an emerging shortage of female workers for agricultural work. The response to this shortage has taken two forms. In some places, 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 place, rubber and coconut plantation owners were forced to raise the daily agricultural wage to keep labourers away from NREGS work sites after a request to the *panchayat* to cease works during the harvesting season went unheeded. Whether the upward pressure on female 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.

Another impact expected from NREGA’s successful implementation is a reduction in distress migration from the villages. Although some households or individuals may migrate long distances to other states, the dominant type of migration observed was short distance migration to neighbouring urban or periurban areas. Fieldwork in Abu Road was able to explore this aspect to some extent and it emerged that such migration continues with 40 per cent of the households reporting migrant members in December 2009. About 70 per cent of households with migrant members reported receiving remittances. Men continue to migrate, although women access work on NREGA. 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 than earlier.<sup>5</sup> In the area surveyed in Kerala there was seen to be a similar process of migration to neighbouring areas, again largely by men.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, it might be noted that while the officially stated ‘non-negotiable’ focus on water and soil conservation is important, a blanket restriction on connectivity works obstructs development, failing to *take into account the specificity of local circumstances* where roads are an immediate and real necessity, such as in Kando village, Kando Bhatnol GP, Shillai block. There is no road leading to the nearest school. Children clamber up and down the hillside, not much unlike grazing animals. Medical emergencies pose graver logistic problems. Trimilti is an especially underdeveloped village, in Khud Drabil GP, Sangrah block, and possesses no roads. Anganwadi worker, Leela Devi described her daily ordeal of escorting children to the centre (2 km away in the adjacent village of Shaachi) as an accident waiting to happen. Migration in search of better opportunities and facilities for children gets encouraged.

<sup>6</sup> Some studies suggest there has been an impact on migration. For example, 57 % of the sample suggested that NREGA had ‘helped them avoid migration’ in a study reported by Reetika Khera, Nandini Nayak, Women

The objective of the NREGA is both to provide an income transfer to those dependent on agriculture and without other means of earning a living, and to create useful local assets which in turn will stimulate local development. The work, as observed through fieldwork, largely engages in creating useful but temporary assets. These include roads and different forms of storing rain water. Many structures do not last beyond one rainy season.

#### **4. Emerging Implications for Policy**

NREGA works create public assets, and at its best, NREGA could act as a catalyst and set in motion a virtuous cycle of development. It is important for this to happen that the assets being created are embedded in the existing local economic activity and the social framework. It is presumed in the programme design that the central role given to the *gram panchayat* ensures such embeddedness. Given the observation that women do not actively participate – with some exceptions – and that there are other, informal institutions in villages that have evolved in various ways, a suggestion from our fieldwork is that the programme design would benefit if more spaces were created for the engagement of other nongovernmental local groups (local youth, women's groups), not just as watchdogs but as contributors of ideas for projects, and as participants in implementation and outreach work.

The potential of the programme for allowing women to make some savings was observed everywhere. Facilitating their ability to save toward specific purchases through easily accessible bank accounts is a way of enhancing well-being. At present, even when money is deposited in a bank or post office, access is often difficult, making frequent withdrawals inconvenient, and hence encouraging withdrawal of the full amount. Better systems of mobile banking might be able to improve this situation.<sup>7</sup>

Over the last four years the difference between minimum wages payable and actual wages received has persisted in Rajasthan. There is an urgent need to immediately revise the schedule of rates and implement the revised rates to allow better earning, or else pay on a daily wage basis.

The composition of women workers seen on worksites, and the nature of the work offered, suggests that there is need to give some serious thought to developing a wider range of activities under the NREGA. For example, while elderly women and young women with infants coming to sites confirms their need to earn a wage, hard manual labour is not desirable from the point of view of their own health or that of infants. The design of the programme needs to accommodate these variations in life cycle and physical ability to undertake hard manual labour.

The presence of infants and young children at worksites was observed mainly in Rajasthan, out of the places studied, in the ISST study. When asked, women here said they prefer to leave their infants with

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Workers and Perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, EPW October 24, 2009 pp 49-57, at p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> In this context an interesting experiment was launched by Andhra Pradesh with technology company FINO to disburse NREGA wages via smartcards and with the success of the pilot, it is suggested that 'a targeted relaxation of this restriction (wages being routed through banks) in the case of disbursement via smartcards could both reduce the time spent by beneficiaries waiting for their payments as well as cut down on the cost of payment delivery.' Doug Johnson, Government payments through smart cards in Andhra Pradesh: a study report, CAB Calling January-March 2009, pp22 – 27.

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 care giving is seen to be taking place in the rare event of a '*jhula*' being provided. In Kerala, young women with very young children were not seen at the worksite; this could reflect the demographic fact of falling fertility, possibly better functioning schools, and/or a social pressure on women in such situations to stay home. In Himachal nearness to home was a crucial factor in attracting women to the site and children were left mostly in neighbours' houses.

The programme design includes a recommendation that crèches be opened at worksites. Fieldwork confirms that it is only in rare instances that a crèche is seen, and even when there is a facility, it is of a very minimal nature. The question of childcare needs to be discussed more widely and a menu of choices offered: as suggested above, women with infants could be offered work other than hard manual labour; and clearly the quality of care is an important determinant in women's decisions on where and with whom to leave very young children.

Studies of the care economy in India show that while there is a presence of facilities at each node of the 'care diamond' – market, state, community and family – the dominant care giver here is women in the family. Observations of the interplay between NREGA and care burdens are just one example of a phenomenon seen across the country. The dominance of informality in women's work and hence limited ability to pay for care; the fact that the state sponsored ICDS network performs poorly from the perspective of child care and often limits itself to feeding young children; and that community initiatives are present in a few places but there is no widespread culture of organising child care within groups or localities. The presence of deep divides by caste and ethnicity poses further challenges and community mobilising usually requires a strong facilitation and constant reinforcement of equality ideals. In a context where the need for support for care work has not been accorded sufficient policy priority it is not surprising that the impact of wage work on women's well being and household well being is mediated by the alternative arrangements possible for managing women's care work. Social policy for women in India has been 'undergirded by the *gendered familialism* of employment and wage policy' (Palriwala and Neetha).<sup>8</sup>

It has been noticed that in states where there is a high density of population and a tradition of wage work by women, NREGA has been able to draw out large numbers of women. This study suggests that given the absence of care facilities, while households may benefit through some additional income, the conclusion that Palriwala and Neetha come to – 'where poverty is the stimulus for most women to enter non-domestic, paid work, the latter adds to women's burden or to that of other female members of the household or care is neglected' should be heeded. But in areas where this is not the case – and this includes the areas where tribal populations live deep inside the forest as in Kerala, or a state like

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<sup>8</sup> 'Gendered familialism reiterates that care work is the responsibility of women, thereby defining the pool of carers as well as women's possibilities to acquire the resources necessary to enable care in the best manner possible. 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.' Rajni Palriwala and N. Neetha, *The Care Diamond: State Social Policy and the Market*, Research Report 3 - India, UNRISD

Himachal where the population is very dispersed and scattered, the combined effect of these factors leads one to question whether public works are always the best way of ensuring a basic income, or whether some other form of conditional cash transfers might be more suitable in some situations.

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### **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

*Kudumbashree* - literally ‘prosperity of the family’; name of State Poverty Eradication Mission in Kerala

*Mahila mandal* - women’s group

### **Endnotes**

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

<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> Data for 2007-8, available from the programme office.

<sup>iv</sup> 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.

<sup>v</sup> Self help groups of 8-10 women organised for savings and microenterprises

<sup>vi</sup> Neighbourhood groups typically consist of all women in a neighbourhood; several self help groups with 8-10 women each may be formed out of one neighbourhood group.

<sup>vii</sup> Note on NREGS Best Practices, Palakkad District, made available by Programme Co-ordinator.

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