

Women Participation and Rationing in the Employment Guarantee Scheme

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The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that guarantees employment of every rural household for 100 days has different progressive provisions to incentivise participation of women in the programme. Official data suggest that 47% of all MGNREGA workers are women. The extent to which the programme is inclusive of women, with a particular focus on sub-populations of women such as widows and mothers of young children who typically face serious constraints in the context of labour market participation, is examined in this study using data from the National Sample Survey. The study finds that while the MGNREGA has indeed been inclusive of women, the substantial variations both across states and the exclusion of vulnerable groups of women demand attention.

Public works programmes in India have traditionally offered a unique opportunity for women to earn cash incomes in a context where, too often, the ability of women to work outside the home is severely constrained by social norms. Existing scholarship suggests that women often participated overwhelmingly in these programmes to the extent that some of them were referred to as “women’s programmes” (Dev 1995).¹ Public works programmes have therefore been a subject of considerable interest from the perspective of gender (Quisumbing and Yisehac 2005). Public funds that provide safety nets could and indeed should offer women equal access to risk-coping opportunities. This is particularly important if women are more vulnerable to income and other shocks because of the absence of insurance mechanisms (for example, lack of assets to be used as collateral, ill health, shorter duration of paid employment). Further, public works schemes may provide resources to poor women that would enable human capital investment especially for children’s education and nutrition apart from improving women’s bargaining power within the household (Quisumbing and Yisehac 2005).

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is no exception. Implemented in 2006 over three phases, the MGNREGA guarantees at least 100 days of work per year to all rural households in India whose adults are willing to do unskilled manual labour at the statutory minimum wage notified for the programme. Work is to be made available to anyone who demands it within 15 days of receiving an application to work, failing which the state government is liable to pay an unemployment allowance. In its design, the MGNREGA perhaps goes farther than most public works programmes in its overt aspirations for women (Government of India 2012; Holmes et al 2011; Khera and Nayak 2009; Sudarshan 2011).

Two key features of the MGNREGA set it apart from previous labour market interventions from the perspective of the opportunities it holds for women. First, the Act prescribes that at least a third of all workers be women. Second, since the entitlement to at least a 100 days of work is at the household level, the allocation of the work is left to the household members allowing space for the participation of women (Khera and Nayak 2009). In addition to these two features, there are also provisions for facilities such as childcare at the worksites that aim to reduce the barriers to women’s participation (Government of India 2012). Further, there are other aspects of the MGNREGA that make work attractive for women, at least in principle, for example, the stipulation that work is within five

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kilometres of an applicant's residence. The operational guidelines too incorporate measures sensitive to gender-related issues (Holmes et al 2011). In the context of opening bank accounts for wage payments, the recommendation is that the local government should consider individual and joint accounts to avoid crediting earnings solely to the male head of household. Even in the allocation of work, the guidelines recommend that women be given preference on worksites closest to their dwelling (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines 2013: 22).²

The social audit forum, it suggests, must be conveniently scheduled for MGNREGA workers so that women and marginalised communities can participate without constraints. The Act itself also provides for women's representation in local committees and state and central councils, in staffing (Government of India 2013, Section 4.6.7: 37) and in the selection of mates (worksite supervisor).³ Last but not the least, the Act provides for equal wages for men and women, a feature it shares with public works programmes that preceded it, for example, the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana. This is especially significant in a context where women often receive a lower wage than men, even for similar tasks. All these elements of the MGNREGA collectively attempt to address the stated objective of the MGNREGA to empower women (Government of India 2013: 3).

In the seven years since its inception, there is evidence from administrative data that the MGNREGA has indeed drawn a large number of women to worksites. Testimonies from field surveys support the idea that the MGNREGA has been inclusive and empowering of women (Jandu 2008; Pankaj and Tankha 2009; Dheeraja and Rao 2010; Sudarshan 2011). At the same time however, women continue to face some stiff challenges. Large interstate variations in the extent of women's participation, for instance, indicate that the MGNREGA has not been uniformly inclusive of women (Drèze and Oldiges 2007; Dutta et al 2012). Anecdotal accounts from the field suggest that in many places, social norms against women working outside the household continue to prevent them from participating in the MGNREGA, not to mention the many constraints that they face in the MGNREGA worksite. There is also some preliminary evidence based on data from household surveys that point to greater rationing of women at worksites. This suggests that women who seek MGNREGA work face a greater probability of not obtaining work than do men, given that they have sought work (Dutta et al 2012).

The gender dimension of the MGNREGA has rightly attracted significant interest. Most of the studies have relied on field surveys and administrative data to document patterns of women's participation and their constraints. Until now, due to the nature of available data, which was at the household level, it has been virtually impossible to examine, on a large scale, if women are more likely to be rationed out or if specific sub-populations of women are less likely to work on MGNREGA sites. Nor has a detailed analysis of the pattern of women participation been possible. The recent release of the 68th Round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) however offers a fresh opportunity to examine these issues. It is possible now to understand, to some degree, at a national level, patterns of work seeking and

participation, for all adult members of rural households and the intra-household distribution of MGNREGA workers.

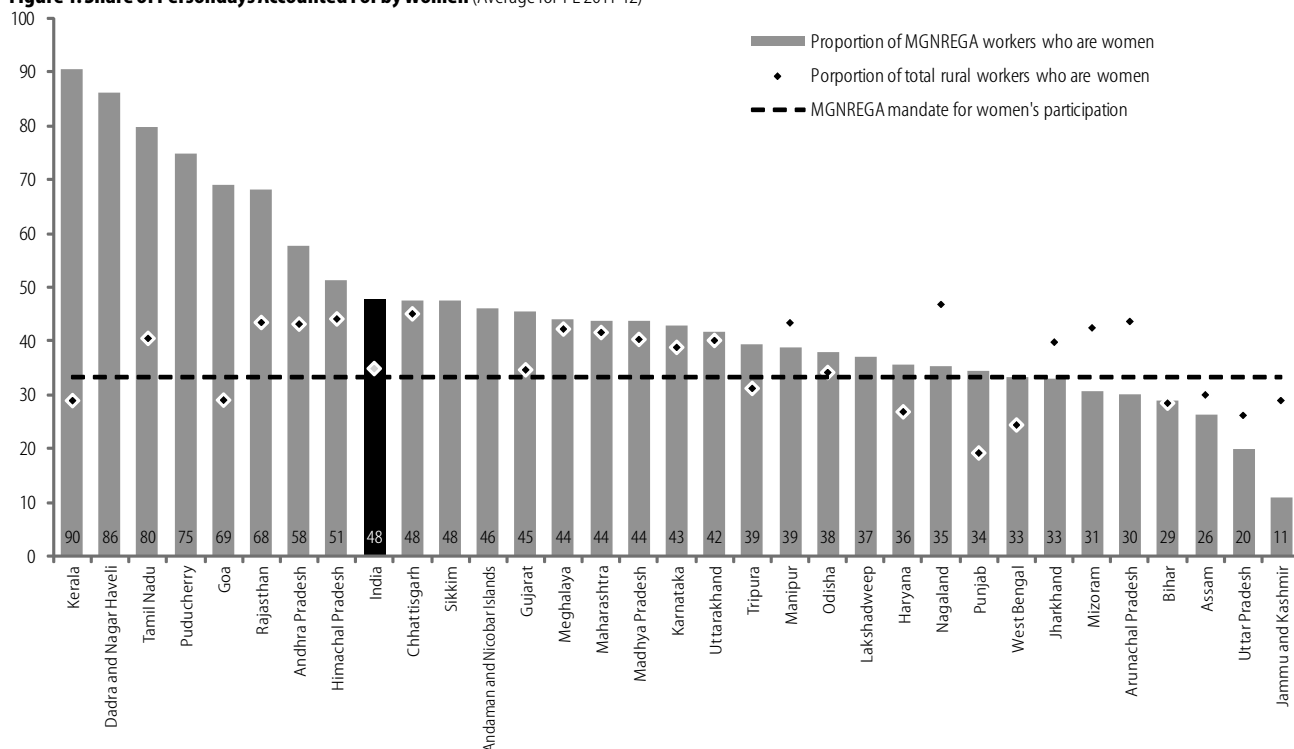
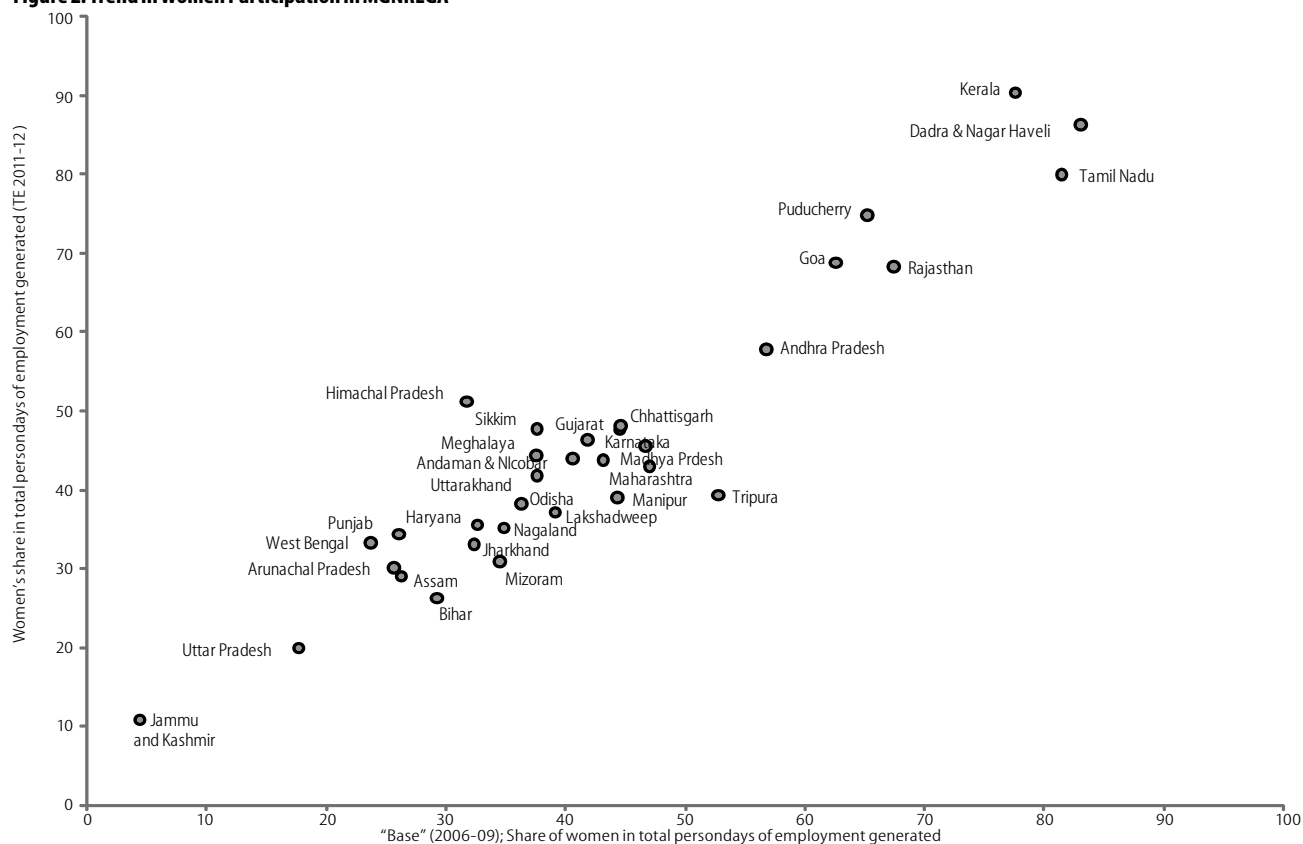
This paper uses NSS data to examine differences across men and women along a number of aspects: possessing a job card, seeking work under the MGNREGA and participation and rationing rate, defined as the proportion of job seekers who were not allocated work (Dutta et al 2012; Liu and Barrett 2012; Das 2013a).⁴ In particular, it assesses whether women face greater rationing relative to men in accessing their entitlement to work. Among women, we examine whether some groups (for example, widows, young mothers, women-headed households and those households without an adult male member) are likely to fare worse than others across these indicators. These groups are particularly constrained from participating in the labour market and one would expect *prima facie* that the MGNREGA redresses their constraints. Specifically, the paper explores and comments on the interstate variations, drawing on previous empirical evidence to do so.

Two important caveats limit the scope of this paper. First, the persistent discrepancy between the NSS data and the administrative data (discussed in Section 3a) is as yet unresolved. So the extent to which the NSS data can be relied upon for general observations on MGNREGA participation is open to debate. It is generally accepted that the administrative data and the NSS represent different things and are therefore essentially irreconcilable. This paper therefore focuses on making relative comparisons between men and women within the NSS sample. Second, it is not entirely clear that the NSS does in fact capture demand for MGNREGA work, since it is not clear what "seeking" work implies because it is not explicitly asked (Section 3a). Indicators used in the paper that incorporate the idea of seeking work are therefore coarse measures of individual desire to access the MGNREGA. This is another reason the analysis in the paper should be regarded as one of comparisons across different groups within the sample.

Following this introduction, this paper first presents the official picture on women's participation. Thereafter, the NSS data is used to assess the extent of rationing between men and women, and whether particular sub-populations among women fare worse than others. We then discuss interstate variations incorporating selectively existing evidence on women's participation based on small field surveys. The final section concludes the discussion.

The Official Picture

The official data on the participation of women suggests that in 2012-13 as much as 47% of all persondays generated was accounted for by women. This is not only higher than the mandated one-third, but is slightly higher than the share at inception and has been somewhat stable ever since all districts came under the purview of the MGNREGA. That the MGNREGA is indeed an important avenue of employment for women is evident from the fact that while the proportion of women in total rural workforce is 34.9% according to the Census 2011, their representation in the MGNREGA workforce is 48% on average for 2010-12.

Figure 1: Share of Persondays Accounted For by Women (Average for TE 2011-12)**Figure 2: Trend in Women Participation in MGNREGA**

Source: Government of India, administrative data.

The national figure for women's share in total persondays generated is well above the mandated one-third; yet, there is substantial variation across states. This was noted in the early years and continues to be the case (Drèze and Oldiges 2007;

Ghosh 2008). Women's share in total persondays generated during the triennium ending (TE) 2011-12 ranges from as low as 11% in Jammu and Kashmir to as high as 90% in Kerala (Figure 1). The southern states of Andhra Pradesh (58%) and

Tamil Nadu (80%) show a high proportion of women among MGNREGA workers along with states such as Himachal Pradesh (51%) and Goa (69%), for instance, that tend to also have better indicators of social development. Rajasthan (68%) continues to have a more than proportionate share of women workers in the MGNREGA, as it had in the early days of the programme. Interestingly, apart from the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram that traditionally have a larger proportion of women in the workforce, states where the share of women MGNREGA workers is lower than their corresponding share in total rural workforce include Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Assam and Uttar Pradesh.

Importantly, the extent of women's participation has been somewhat stable over the years. In order to get a sense of the trend in women's participation, we divide the six years of MGNREGA into two periods and compare the change in the triennium averages. The first period saw the MGNREGA roll out; by the end of 2008-09, the MGNREGA was implemented in all districts. Figure 2 (p 48) maps the change in share for each state to the "base period" share. This approximate indicator suggests that in a lot of states the women's share in total persondays generated is relatively stable. Tripura and Manipur have however registered prominent declines. Barring these two, only a few states have seen a decline in women's share in total persondays generated and for these states, the decline is relatively small in magnitude. In contrast, states such as Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bihar have seen increases of more than 10 percentage points in the women's share of MGNREGA persondays of employment (Table 1).

Evidence from NSS Data

In this section, we map specific indicators from the NSS that represent different dimensions of the extent to which women access the MGNREGA. We do this for different subgroups to document the variations across these groups, if any. The first indicator is possession of job cards. The second is whether they worked on MGNREGA sites. The other two variables we examine are seeking work and administrative rationing. The survey documents both for each individual surveyed in the household. These however come with important caveats.

The NSS records whether the household possesses a job card, and the number of job cards a sample household might possess. The 68th round goes further and records for each member of the household 18 years of age and above, whether (s)he is registered in any MGNREGA job card if the household in question is in possession of a job card. For those members whose names are registered in the job card the NSS examines their work participation in the MGNREGA. The NSS guidelines mention that the "situation will be determined with a reference period of last 365 days in respect of whether got work in MGNREGA work for at least one day or sought but did not get work and did not seek work". Each member therefore is categorised as either having worked on the MGNREGA, having sought work but not actually worked and those who did not seek work at all. Unfortunately, it is not clear as to what

"seeking work" implies or whether this was explicitly asked. The fact that in many cases, the system of applying for work has not been followed strictly and people show up at worksites when sites are opened, raises questions on what these data might represent. This has to be borne in mind in the context of this analysis.

In principle, the MGNREGA being a demand-driven programme ought to provide employment to anyone who seeks work. Ideally, there would be no rationing at all so that anyone who desires work is indeed granted work. This must be true for men and women alike. In practice, this is not exactly the case and there is some evidence based on field surveys that there could be some rationing (Bhatty 2008; Khera and Nayak 2009; Holmes et al 2011; Das 2013b). This has been inferred

Table 1: The Share of Women in the Total Persondays Generated in MGNREGA since Inception

States/UTs	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13*	Average for 2010-12	Average for 2006-10
Andhra Pradesh	55	58	58	58	57	58	57	58	57
Arunachal Pradesh	30	30	26	17	33	40	13	30	26
Assam	32	31	27	28	27	25	17	26	29
Bihar	17	28	30	30	28	29	21	29	26
Chhattisgarh	39	42	47	49	49	45	33	48	45
Gujarat	50	47	43	48	44	45	32	45	47
Haryana	31	34	31	35	36	36	27	36	33
Himachal Pradesh	12	30	39	46	48	59	44	51	32
Jammu and Kashmir	4	1	6	7	7	19	11	11	4
Jharkhand	39	27	29	34	33	31	23	33	32
Karnataka	51	50	50	37	46	46	20	43	47
Kerala	66	71	85	88	90	93	70	90	78
Madhya Pradesh	43	42	43	44	44	42	32	44	43
Maharashtra	37	40	46	40	46	46	35	44	41
Manipur	51	33	46	48	35	34	26	39	44
Meghalaya	31	31	41	47	44	41	32	44	38
Mizoram	33	34	37	35	34	23	18	31	35
Nagaland	30	29	37	44	35	27	15	35	35
Odisha	36	36	38	36	39	39	25	38	36
Punjab	38	16	25	26	34	43	35	34	26
Rajasthan	67	69	67	67	68	69	54	68	68
Sikkim	25	37	38	51	47	45	21	48	38
Tamil Nadu	81	82	80	83	83	74	58	80	81
Tripura	75	45	51	41	39	39	33	39	53
Uttar Pradesh	17	15	18	22	21	17	15	20	18
Uttarakhand	30	43	37	40	40	45	29	42	38
West Bengal	18	17	27	33	34	32	23	33	24
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	NA	NA	39	45	47	46	32	46	42
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	NA	NA	79	87	85	NA	NA	86	83
Daman and Diu	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA		
Goa	NA	NA		63	68	76	66	69	63
Lakshadweep	NA	NA	41	38	34	40	19	37	39
Puducherry	NA	NA	67	64	80	80	83	75	65
Chandigarh	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA		
India	40	43	48	48	48	48	40	48	45

*The figure for 2012-13 is not for the full year. The data for each year pertains to the districts where the MGNREGA was in implementation.

Source: Compiled from data available at www.nrega.nic.in

from national surveys as well (Dutta et al 2012; Liu and Barrett 2012).

In general, the extent of rationing can be determined based on two different datasets and both are not necessarily consistent with one another. Administrative data from the Management Information System (MIS) records document how much work is demanded and work that is provided. This information is available at the household level so that it is possible to compute the proportion of households who sought work, who did get work. An alternative is to turn to data from the NSS that collects data on whether or not a household sought work and whether or not they indeed got work. The recent 68th round of the NSS builds on the 66th round from 2009-10 to record this information at the level of the individual so that these variables are available for each adult member of the household possessing an MGNREGA job card.

The two sets of data are not strictly comparable and there has been some discussion on what each of them represents (Government of India 2012). The administrative data which comes from the MIS is real-time data that is available publicly. The data available includes the number of households who sought work and the number of households provided work, although it is not clear whether the work demanded truly reflects those seeking work through applications for work or something else. The NSS data, as described earlier, is based on a 365-day recall period with self-reported request for work and status (whether or not any member of the household worked on MGNREGA worksite).

The administrative data indicates that employment generation more or less matches the demand and that this is virtually true across the states. There is neither much variation across states nor is there variation across time. In contrast, the figures from the NSS data present a much higher administrative rationing rate for the country and a lot more variation across states. The rationing rate here is computed as the proportion of those who sought work, but did not get work and represents one kind of rationing, which is on the extensive margin. The inconsistency of estimates between the administrative data and those derived from the NSS is an open question and should serve to qualify the results that follow. For the purpose of this work, we rely exclusively on the NSS because it offers a granularity that the administrative data does not provide. Thus, if the NSS rationing is regarded as an overestimate of the true rationing rate, the premise of this work is that the comparison of rationing rates across gender would be overestimates of both men and women, but would not vary across these groups and hence will still be a valid comparison.

In this section we use data from the NSS to examine the gender differential in rationing by computing rationing rates across men and women to assess if women are more likely to be excluded from MGNREGA employment. In addition, we examine the patterns for different subgroups of women workers.

Constraints to Women's Participation

Table 2 presents the rationing rate for households and individuals (belonging to the age group 18 to 60 years), segregated by

gender for the major states. At the all-India level there are indications that, on an average, work allocation is progressive in the sense that women face a lower administrative rationing rate than men. Whereas the proportion of households who do not obtain MGNREGA work despite "seeking" work is 0.23 for India as a whole, the proportion of men who face administrative rationing is 0.28 and the figure is 0.25 for women. At the same time, for every three men seeking work, only two women seek work in the MGNREGA. The proportion of total rural population who have worked on the MGNREGA worksites also mirrors this pattern, suggesting that although there appears to be no "administrative discrimination" against women, the proportion of adult women seeking work on MGNREGA is lower than the proportion of adult men seeking work. That said, it is

Table 2: Rationing Level at Household and Population Level

States	Share of All Rural Households				Share of Rural Males				Share of Rural Females			
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
India	0.38	0.3	0.23	0.23	0.29	0.21	0.15	0.28	0.2	0.14	0.1	0.25
States where males have a higher rationing rate than females												
Andhra Pradesh	0.50	0.38	0.32	0.17	0.43	0.3	0.24	0.19	0.43	0.33	0.27	0.16
Rajasthan	0.67	0.52	0.41	0.21	0.55	0.32	0.19	0.4	0.53	0.36	0.27	0.26
Tamil Nadu	0.48	0.43	0.4	0.06	0.18	0.13	0.12	0.14	0.4	0.35	0.32	0.07
Kerala	0.29	0.2	0.19	0.06	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.18	0.2	0.13	0.13	0.05
Haryana	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.15	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.09
Himachal Pradesh	0.5	0.39	0.33	0.14	0.37	0.24	0.18	0.22	0.34	0.22	0.18	0.15
Jharkhand	0.35	0.3	0.22	0.28	0.29	0.24	0.17	0.3	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.28
Assam	0.36	0.31	0.23	0.26	0.27	0.22	0.17	0.26	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.14
Punjab	0.12	0.11	0.07	0.31	0.07	0.06	0.03	0.42	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.28
States where males and females have comparable rationing rates												
Chhattisgarh	0.73	0.62	0.56	0.09	0.58	0.48	0.43	0.1	0.47	0.38	0.34	0.1
Karnataka	0.2	0.15	0.1	0.35	0.16	0.12	0.07	0.41	0.1	0.07	0.04	0.41
Maharashtra	0.17	0.12	0.05	0.58	0.14	0.1	0.03	0.65	0.12	0.09	0.03	0.65
States where females have a higher rationing rate than males												
Madhya Pradesh	0.64	0.32	0.21	0.35	0.61	0.26	0.16	0.39	0.53	0.18	0.1	0.42
West Bengal	0.60	0.52	0.38	0.26	0.49	0.42	0.31	0.26	0.21	0.16	0.1	0.35
Uttarakhand	0.36	0.32	0.28	0.13	0.25	0.22	0.19	0.12	0.14	0.11	0.08	0.29
Odisha	0.47	0.36	0.24	0.33	0.38	0.3	0.2	0.33	0.11	0.35	0.24	0.3
Gujarat	0.24	0.14	0.07	0.54	0.2	0.12	0.07	0.46	0.16	0.1	0.05	0.48
Jammu and Kashmir	0.37	0.32	0.3	0.08	0.25	0.22	0.2	0.08	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.42
Uttar Pradesh	0.26	0.23	0.19	0.16	0.2	0.17	0.14	0.16	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.21
Bihar	0.22	0.18	0.11	0.43	0.17	0.14	0.08	0.43	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.58

noteworthy that rural male work participation rate (all types of employment) is 54% as compared to 18% for rural females.⁵ As with the previous comparison between administrative data and the Census 2011, these figures too imply that the MGNREGA is progressive when compared to overall employment trends for women.

There is another sense in which the MGNREGA is a women's programme. Of the households that report working in the MGNREGA in many states, an overwhelming majority of the households sends only its female members to work underscoring the scheme's importance as an option for women (Table 3, p 51). The proportion is over 50% in states such as Tamil Nadu (64.9%) and Kerala (85.2%). There are several other states where the proportion of households that sends only its women

to MGNREGA worksites is high relative to that of households that sends only its male members. These include Himachal Pradesh (39.1%), Rajasthan (40.7%), Andhra Pradesh (22.3%), Uttarakhand (21.5%) and also Punjab (36.7%) and Haryana (23%). This is true at the all-India level as well. In contrast, states like Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal the ratio of households where only women members constitute MGNREGA workforce to those where only male members are represented in the MGNREGA workforce is less than one.

The positive performance at the all-India level in terms of rationing and women's representation among MGNREGA belies the variable performance across states in the pattern of rationing (Table 2). For several states, we find corroborating evidence for the observation made in Dutta et al (2012) that the rationing process does not favour women, even if they might be participating in the MGNREGA. At the same time, in other states the rationing perhaps seems to explicitly favour women. In one group of states that include the southern states (except Karnataka) as well as Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, rationing rate for women is lower than that for men. This group includes states where the proportion of rural adults registered, sought work and have worked on MGNREGA sites is high. But it also includes those where these rates are somewhat low, including Haryana, Jharkhand, Assam and Punjab. In contrast in the

Chhattisgarh the rationing rate is lower and the scale of MGNREGA participation is much higher.

The large interstate variation in women's participation, however, continues to be a relevant concern because it is, indicative of many potential issues. On the one hand, it could be the case that women opt out of the MGNREGA, voluntarily or involuntarily. In the former case, women perhaps do not seek work because of competing opportunities. In the latter, there could be insurmountable social barriers, including but not restricted to norms for women working outside, especially for widows, childcare roles, etc. A lack of awareness is also a significant problem in many parts of India. Apart from factors that constrain demand for work, there might also be problems at the worksites themselves. It could be the case that women do seek work but are rationed out. An explanation for low participation rates of women could then be that women face a higher rationing rate than do men, given comparable rates of seeking work. In general, it could be a combination of the two issues described above. Indicators should thus be assessed in conjunction with one another. There exists anecdotal evidence to suggest that women are sometimes turned away from the worksites either because the work might not be appropriate for them, which in itself is reflective of a sort of gender bias or cultural considerations of what is appropriate work for women. More simply, the resistance to women's employment outside the house could also lead to them being turned away often on other grounds. Field surveys in some of the villages of West Bengal suggest women are not encouraged to seek work since they are turned away by the local authorities under the pretext that men are more efficient in labour-intensive work.

A particular concern of this paper is whether specific vulnerable populations and household types are most likely to face serious constraints. We therefore examine the indicators for such groups relative to those of other categories, first at the all-India level (Table 4) and then at the state level (Table 5, p 52).

Table 3: Proportion of Households, Where Only Males and Only Females Worked among All the Working Households

States	For Households Who Got Work		Ratio
	Females Only Participated	Males Only Participated	
Andhra Pradesh	0.223	0.006	34.80
Assam	0.052	0.141	0.37
Bihar	0.016	0.108	0.14
Chhattisgarh	0.129	0.062	2.09
Gujarat	0.035	0.022	1.61
Haryana	0.230	0.097	2.38
Himachal Pradesh	0.391	0.067	5.83
Jammu and Kashmir	0.021	0.122	0.17
Jharkhand	0.084	0.070	1.19
Karnataka	0.085	0.079	1.07
Kerala	0.852	0.002	448.37
Madhya Pradesh	0.082	0.060	1.35
Maharashtra	0.072	0.011	6.49
Odisha	0.045	0.070	0.65
Punjab	0.367	0.037	9.87
Rajasthan	0.407	0.015	27.57
Tamil Nadu	0.649	0.004	169.20
Uttar Pradesh	0.047	0.077	0.61
Uttarakhand	0.215	0.035	6.10
West Bengal	0.064	0.072	0.90
India	0.201	0.052	3.89

Source: Authors' calculation based on NSS 68th round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12).

second group of states, females face higher administrative rationing than do males. This group includes Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir where the scale of female work participation in MGNREGA is less than 6%. Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have administrative rationing rates that are indistinguishable across males and females, though in

Table 4: MGNREGA Participation of Select Groups (All India)

	Possessing a Job Card	Sought Work	Worked in MGNREGA	Rationing Rate
Female headed households	0.31	0.24	0.19	0.19
Female headed households with no adult males	0.26	0.19	0.16	0.19
Widows	0.28	0.21	0.17	0.20
Females	0.20	0.14	0.10	0.25
Females from households belonging to the scheduled castes or tribes	0.31	0.22	0.17	0.26
Females from households with children (0-5 years)	0.18	0.12	0.09	0.26
Males from households belonging to the scheduled castes or tribes	0.41	0.31	0.23	0.27
Males from households with children (0-5 years)	0.30	0.22	0.16	0.28
Males	0.29	0.21	0.15	0.28
Households	0.38	0.30	0.23	0.23
Persons	0.25	0.17	0.13	0.27

Source: Authors' calculation based on NSS 68th round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12).

Table 5: Rationing Rates for Various Sub-Populations

States	SC/ST Households		Households with Kids (0 to Five Years)		Female Headed Households		Females Widows
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All	No Adult Males	
Andhra Pradesh	0.182	0.18	0.122	0.102	0.104	0.141	0.124
Assam	0.286	0.122	0.156	0.099	0.522	0.368	0.584
Bihar	0.382	0.577	0.523	0.575	0.516	0.807	0.582
Chhattisgarh	0.131	0.11	0.099	0.154	0.021	0.009	0.048
Gujarat	0.474	0.4	0.336	0.33	0.846	1	0.432
Haryana	0.23	0.124	0.122	0.185	0	0	0.217
Himachal Pradesh	0.224	0.117	0.185	0.189	0.11	0.136	0.245
Jharkhand	0.276	0.344	0.323	0.31	0.265	0.135	0.414
Karnataka	0.37	0.306	0.378	0.363	0.212	0.045	0.242
Kerala	0.303	0.019	0.119	0.106	0.064	0.074	0.088
Madhya Pradesh	0.337	0.398	0.425	0.491	0.357	0.575	0.277
Maharashtra	0.685	0.634	0.681	0.734	0.72	0.925	0.847
Odisha	0.314	0.284	0.343	0.246	0.348	0.155	0.385
Punjab	0.434	0.311	0.501	0.416	0.512	0	0.771
Rajasthan	0.406	0.252	0.389	0.24	0.178	0.16	0.209
Tamil Nadu	0.094	0.074	0.192	0.078	0.042	0.05	0.046
Uttar Pradesh	0.159	0.201	0.125	0.204	0.125	0.087	0.116
Uttarakhand	0.163	0.321	0.086	0.139	0.2	0.207	0
West Bengal	0.231	0.316	0.274	0.348	0.27	0.258	0.368
India	0.274	0.255	0.275	0.258	0.186	0.186	0.195

Source: Authors' calculation based on NSS 68th round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12).

For India as a whole, among households, those headed by women face a lower rationing rate. The administrative rationing rate is higher for all other categories. Widows too face a lower rationing rate. While these are encouraging indicators, the difficulties faced by women-headed households are apparent in both participation rates and work seeking. For example, only 19% of all female-headed households with no adult males report having "sought" work. Those who worked in the MGNREGA sites in 2011-12 is even lower at 16%. These women are likely to value MGNREGA work a great deal and it is possible that they face substantial social barriers in accessing the programme. Single women are often routinely excluded, citing

that the nature of work demands pairs. It has been reported that widows and single women sometimes had to accompany men in order to get work (Bhatty 2008; Holmes et al 2011). Holmes et al (2011) mention that

Men are always preferred than women. Single women are excluded as some works demanded the participation of both men and women as a pair (Female Focus Group Discussant (FGD), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).... [Women] were side-lined and men given preference – there were more women than men preferring to work in MGNREGA. As women fought among themselves, it was decided that women had to accompany men (Widow (General Caste), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

Perhaps these factors manifest in fewer women from these groups demanding work. Women in households with young children appear to face constraints in accessing the MGNREGA – they are less likely than all other types to possess a job card, less likely to have sought work and least likely to have worked in the MGNREGA (only 9%) relative to say, females from SC/ST households (17%) or widows (17%).

State-level rationing rates for the different groups reveal that there are states that have systematically lower administrative rationing rates for vulnerable groups, widows, female-headed households and female-headed households with no adult male members and to a lesser extent for women in households with children. The southern states, and notably Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and to an extent Himachal Pradesh all appear to have low levels of "administrative discrimination" against most if not all of these groups (Table 5). This is noteworthy and is indicative that the MGNREGA is a credible social safety net for vulnerable groups of women.

Despite these positive indications in many states, demand rates and registration rates in MGNREGA for these groups continue to be very low in several states. The percentage of all widows "seeking work" is small in Uttar Pradesh (9.8%), Rajasthan (3.4%), Jharkhand (3.3%), Bihar (3.9%), Gujarat (5.5%), Assam (6.8%) and surprisingly perhaps, in Kerala as well (8%).

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This is despite a large proportion of them having registered for work. This probably points to persistent social barriers and lack of awareness that prevent women from these groups in making demands on the state. Similarly in households with young children, fewer shares of women seek and find work on MGNREGA sites, relative to other groups except in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, states that are known for better implementation.⁶ This pattern reflects well-recognised difficulties faced by young mothers in terms of childcare that might prevent them from participating in MGNREGA (Bhatty 2008). Even in states such as Tamil Nadu, data from worksites suggest that among those who reported harassment at the workplace, more than half of these are related to the issue of childcare (Narayanan 2008).

Concluding Remarks

Assessments on gender dimensions of public works programmes typically revolve around three issues related to women's access to the direct and indirect benefits associated with these programmes: (a) whether or not women have equal access to direct wage employment benefits, (b) factors of design and implementation that determine women's participation, and (c) whether women benefit equally from the assets created by public works.

This paper addresses the first two questions. On these counts, nationally representative data suggest that the MGNREGA has performed reasonably well. The programme is explicit in its commitment to be inclusive of women and to facilitate their access to the programme. It is beyond doubt that the MGNREGA has proven to be an important arena of women's participation in wage employment – these have been somewhat stable over time and on average above the norm established by the programme design itself.

Yet, variations across states as well as across sub-population point to significant problems which suggest that the MGNREGA operates with very different characteristics in different states. The differentiated nature of women's experience in accessing the MGNREGA underscores the need to recognise that in the different states the policy emphasis needs to be different perhaps. In states where allocation of work appears to be progressive, the state needs to continue to play a supporting role and address higher order concerns such as conditions in the workplace and women's participation in decision-making processes locally. In states where women's participation is weak and rationing indicates some sort of administrative discrimination, policies have to focus on enabling women to access work and sensitising the staff implementing the scheme.

NOTES

- 1 There is rich evidence on the Maharashtra EGS looking at aspects of gender. While women workers dominated EGS employment, observers have also commented on the progressive programme design.
- 2 Women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work on worksites nearer to their residence (Government of India 2013, p 22).
- 3 4.1.2 (ii) page 25 While designing the selection criteria for mates, preference should be given to the most deserving families and priority should be given to women and differently-abled.
- 4 As Liu and Barrett (2013) emphasise, this is one measure of rationing, on the extensive margin, and does not take into account the intensive margin, whether households got as many days of work as they would have liked.
- 5 For more information, NSSO (2013).
- 6 These results are not presented here due to paucity of space (Narayanan and Das 2014).

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