

# Policy Brief on Gender Responsiveness of MGNREGS



# 1. Enhance Participation of Women with Small Children

The scheme design provides for a crèche and a helper for taking care of children at sites where more than 5 women are engaged. In practice, however, very few sites have actually been found to have such facilities. This brings the responsibility of organizing care for the children back on the women workers, who either keep an elder sibling at home to look after them (at the cost of their education), drop off and collect their children from the Anganwadi Centre/ School and also adjust timings of their work to match the AWC/ School timings, reducing the productive hours they can spend on site. Sometimes the worksites are away from the AWC/ Schools in which the woman and her children are enrolled/ linked. As a result, despite the scheme's suggestion to link the site to the nearest AWC, in the absence of effective collaboration between departments and schemes as well as the existing work pressure of these institutions, it becomes difficult to provide such facilities for children of the women workers. Primary data in the form of case studies have been collected and found that many women, especially young mothers, said the situation becomes more difficult for mothers with infants that need full-time supervision and care in the absence of a child creche facility at work site.

In the absence of these facilities and due to periodic child care, even during the limited hours when the woman is working, it is difficult for her to complete one person-days of work in one day and spreads to 2 or 3 days, making working on MGNREGS economically unviable and disadvantageous. In addition, many sites involve deep excavation (wells, small harvesting structures), unorganised storage of construction material, and the presence of wildlife, which poses severe risks to child safety. In addition, sometimes these sites are not safe for young women who often face sexual harassment and abuse during the course of work, which often gets unreported and unattended.

## Key action areas:

1. There is a need to collect information about the women workers and their children below the age of 3 years at the time of generating demand for work. This will automatically determine the requirement of a crèche at the worksite or facility for an attendant to take care of the children.
2. During the annual planning of MGNREGS and GPDP, one-third of the works or budget in a village should be reserved for pregnant or lactating women. These designated works should be exempt from the ratio of 60:40 labour and material, by issuing relevant guidelines.
3. There is an extended list of 264 works published during the COVID period that has many women-friendly works. It is pertinent that district teams monitor the type of work being taken up in each village to encourage more work for the women, especially those with small children.
4. Prasooti Sahayata Yojana or Matratva Bhatta (scheme in Chhattisgarh) i.e. incentives to pregnant women should be effectively applied so that MGNREGS women workers get cash benefits during pregnancy.

**Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** was enacted as a transformational Scheme/ Act to provide social protection to the most vulnerable households of the country, by providing assured, legally enforceable rights to employment. It has been more than 16 years since the Act came into force and in this period the scheme (MGNREGS) has been able to bring millions out of poverty, provided much-needed local employment to the less mobile and also partially arrested distress migration for India's vast rural labour force. The program has especially responded to the challenge of providing local employment to women by earmarking one-third of the total workdays for women, contributing towards their economic empowerment, and providing income opportunities for women-headed households, apart from creating gateways for promoting women's political leadership. However, there are some design flaws as well as structural, social, and institutional barriers and chokepoints that prevent women from benefiting from the scheme to the extent aspired. Firstly, there are some deeply embedded constraints that put women at a disadvantage- a) they are not as footloose as their male counterparts, b) they have substantial caregiving responsibilities within the family, especially towards children, the elderly and the infirm, c) face disadvantage due to low literacy- education, financial, digital, d) have low agency within the society and in some regions even within the household.

When reviewed from a gender lens and using the Gender Transformative Framework, several aspects of the program emerge as being gender insensitive- Gender Blind or Unequal, which if addressed, can lead to sustained and transformational impacts, leading to positive social and economic outcomes for rural women workforce of India.

Some of the key action agendas have been detailed put in the following section, based on the gaps identified during the study:



## Key action areas:

1. Time and motion study should be undertaken and if already been done recently, recommendations should be utilized to develop a separate measuring index for the work done by women for equitable wage compensation.
2. Flexible work hours should be allowed to women so that they may choose a work schedule as per their convenience to fulfill their home care responsibilities.
3. Preference should be given to pregnant and lactating women to choose some of the lower intensity labour works viz. kitchen garden, soak pit construction, plantation, etc.
4. NMMS should be suitably adapted to meet the needs of women as workers and caregivers. The attendance system should be simplified by allowing women to send attendance from the worksite by themselves or by their mates taking a picture of the workers.
5. Appointment of women mates should be pushed to achieve at least a ratio of 50 per cent and their rigorous training should be conducted on technical and social dimensions to deal with women workers with sensitivity.
6. Training of men mates and district-level MGNREGS staff/officials on the issues of patriarchy and its implications on gender equality should be conducted by gender specialist trainers



## 2. Create Favorable Work Norms for Women



Standardization of the amount of work to be completed to qualify as a work-day under the scheme has been gender blind. Wages are determined on the basis of work done; however, no differentiation has been made for measuring the work done by women based on their physical limitations. Although women are able to partially compensate for it through greater diligence and hard work, they are disadvantaged both due to physical limitations as well as a lack of enabling environment to support them in providing care for infants/ children, especially for younger women workers. Women with small children feel more disadvantaged as they have to feed and take care of small children at the site or visit home which results in less work done in stipulated work hours.



In addition, women prefer working in the early hours of the day so that they can finish work by late afternoon and be at home to attend to their domestic responsibilities. There may also be other preferred working slots for women in different seasons and cultural contexts. However, the provision that the work needs to be opened and closed only after the approval by mates and verification by the engineers or designated MGNREGS functionary means that she cannot start work for the day unless other relevant stakeholders are present at the site. This means a loss of productive hours which the women workers could have utilized if they had the flexibility to choose their working hours. A pilot experiment that was started in May 2021 by the Government of India to capture attendance two times a day of workers at worksites through the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) has been made compulsory from May 2022. This has serious constraints for the women workers as it takes away the flexibility of working hours for the women to take care of small children and other family needs.

### **Key Action Areas:**

1. Monitoring of payment process, the accuracy of wage transfers, the vigilance of bank kiosks and correspondents for fair payments, etc. at the district level to ensure that workers get wages within the prescribed time limit
2. Access to credit to wage labourers by linking the MGNREGS wage payments due with the SHGs platform or bank kiosks. SHGs or bank kiosks should provide easy credit to workers with a ceiling of half of the wages earned but not paid. Advance payment should be recovered through an integrated online payment system at the time of wage payments. This will help them smoothen their cashflows and partially address the issue of delayed wage payments.

## **4. Sharpen Gender Lens to Monitor the Scheme**

Monitoring of the scheme does not use a gender lens to look at the extent to which the scheme has been accommodative of the needs of women workers and other marginalized social groups. While the MGNREGS MIS is exhaustive it does not help track some key indicators that can show the extent to which the scheme is gender-responsive. For example, the scheme does not track how many sites established temporary crèches or deployed an additional woman to look after the children at the site, or provisioned resting areas/ shades and drinking water at the work location. Similarly, at the time of recording demand for work by the labourers, there is no information column to register details of their small children under the age of 3 years or single women, differently abled women or women-headed households, etc. As a result, there is no possibility of monitoring of scheme on indicators sensitive to women.

### **Key Action Areas:**

1. Review the dashboard and monitoring system from gender sensitive lens and include information areas that are relevant but missing
2. Organize district-level orientation of GP functionaries and GP representatives on the relevance of gender-sensitive monitoring of planning and implementation of the scheme
3. Engage civil society organizations for undertaking a qualitative assessment of the scheme on the gender sensitive indicators to prepare special reports on various themes periodically
4. Review and improve the framework of social audits to include issues and voices of women more prominently and train facilitators to identify gender sensitive and transformative action areas

### **3. Timely Wage Payments and Improved Access to Banking Services**

The delayed payment of wages is another barrier which prevents women from regularly seeking employment under the scheme unless there are no alternate local employment options available. The scheme has created provisions and timelines within which FTOs have to be generated and payments released. However, the number of approvals and sanctions required for finally releasing the payments to the job cardholder expects coordinated effort among multiple sets and layers of players to ensure the on-time release of payments. In several cases, lack of proper documentation, procedural omissions or bureaucratic delays only end up penalizing the last person in the chain, that is the recipient of the wage. Several studies and evaluations by Reetika Khera, Nandini Nayak (2009), Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tankha (2010) and Narayanan, R., Dhorajiwala, S. & Golani, R. (2019) have brought out that payments often get delayed by months, which prevents improved participation, especially by women, who like to use these payments for making their weekly purchases to meet the nutritional and other immediate needs of the family. Delays in payments and uncertain cash flows mean that they are unable to meet their regular family expenses. This not only creates disincentives but also weans them away from MGNREGS towards less rewarding and more exploitative jobs, especially as agricultural or urban, migrant labor.

In addition, low digital and financial literacy among women workers also means that they are also challenged in withdrawing funds from bank accounts. While Banking Correspondents have improved women's access to banking services and are available at the doorstep in most cases, in some remote villages these services are still not available. This means that there is a significant transaction cost involved in going to the nearest bank/ correspondent to access their accounts and withdraw funds. Apart from this, there are several instances where women job cardholders have also been duped of their funds by the correspondents or bank staff and funds withdrawn from their accounts.

#### **Dindori district proactively engaged Self Help Groups to enhance participation of women**

Dindori district has attained high rank in all the three composite indices viz. Women Participation Index, Gender Parity Index and Shock Responsive Index. The district has been awarded for providing significantly high level of work opportunities for women. The best practice of the district has been proactive engagement of SHGs in generating demand for work. Moreover, women mates have been identified from the SHGs. The mates have been trained on key features of MGNREGS and areas of convergence of SRLM with MGNREGS. The women mates visit to potential households for MGNREGS register their demand and co-ordinate with GRS and GP Secretary. Many women reported use of wages to build assets and cash income has empowered them to attend Gram Sabha for raising their demands for basic amenities.

## Actions to make MGNREGS Gender Responsive and Transformational

S. No.	Gender Gap	Current Status	Actions needed make MGNREGS	
			Gender Responsive	Gender Transformational
1.	Low Participation of Women with small children	Gender Unequal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure data gathering of women with small children to register demand for creche services</li> <li>Extend timings of Anganwari centers to keep children of the workers beyond lunch time and create additional facilities/ capacities</li> <li>Improve worksite facilities viz. temporary shade facility for women to rest and breast feeding</li> <li>Effective implementation of Prasooti Sahayata Yojana/ Matratva Bhatta for MGNREGS workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reserve one-third of MGNREGS activities/ budget in annual plan for women in reproductive age</li> <li>Orientation of men and adolescent boys to share domestic responsibilities</li> <li>Orienting and preparing Gram Panchayats to become women and child friendly delivering their function of 'social justice'</li> </ul>
2.	Adversarial Work Norms	Gender Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender specific definition of person-day of work</li> <li>Flexible work hours to suit needs and designing of women sensitive attendance software</li> <li>Sensitization trainings of mates and site engineers on patriarchy and gender empowerment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appointment of at least 30% women as mates</li> <li>Block level tracking so that both light &amp; heavy works are sanctioned in agreed ratio</li> </ul>
3.	Delayed Wage Payments and limited access to banking services	Gender Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transparent monitoring of wage payments, vigilance of bank kiosks</li> <li>Credit access from SHGs in lieu of outstanding wage payment advance ( 50% of due wages) to meet daily consumption needs</li> <li>Financial literacy trainings aimed at women job-card holders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure all female job-card holders are part of NRLM collectives for economic, social and political empowerment</li> <li>Greater convergence and preferential support from NRLM to women's groups of job-cardholders</li> </ul>
4.	Gender blind planning frameworks and implementation processes	Gender Unequal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participatory annual planning engaging women workers to identify women and children sensitive works</li> <li>Create special activities in plans for SC/ST, differently abled, old and single women to participate equitably in MGNREGS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Block level tracking so that both light &amp; heavy works are sanctioned in agreed ratio</li> <li>Approval of individual works that aim to enhance women's income- cattle or poultry sheds</li> </ul>
5.	Absence of Gender Lens to Monitor the Scheme	Gender Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop specific metrics/ gender sensitive indicators for MGNREGS dashboard</li> <li>Orientation of functionaries and elected representatives to track performance on gender sensitive indicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review and improve framework of social audits bringing in new dimensions/ child and gender sensitive indicators</li> <li>Independent studies by the CSOs on performance of the scheme on women and child sensitive implementation</li> </ul>

## 5. Incorporate Gender-Sensitive Planning Frameworks and Implementation Processes

There are several NREGS-supported activities in the list of more than 264 types of permissible works like kitchen Nutri-garden, poultry shed construction, fisheries, plantation, and playfield that do not involve strenuous or hazardous work and are gender sensitive. The others involve earth and civil works, including handling construction materials for prolonged hours. However, the former works are not taken up due to the preference of program managers for creating large, visible assets and also due to the risk of disturbing the 60:40 labour-material ratio under the scheme. Although the primary objective of MGNREGS was to create rural employment and in the process also create useful rural assets, in reality, over the years the latter has come to get more primacy over the need to create employment, leaving women workers disadvantaged.

One of the reasons for the lack of balance in the selection of works (strenuous and light) in the scheme and sub-optimal work norms is the lack of appreciation (because of the absence of orientation and capacities) among the planners, specifically the elected representatives and panchayat/ block officials) about the need to make MGNREGS more gender-inclusive and plan measures to create an environment that accommodates the needs of women workers. In addition, much of the scheme planning, while supposed to be undertaken as part of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), actually takes place independently of the Panchayat planning. Whatever local priorities that emerge from GPDP including those of women or women's groups do not get transferred to the NREGS annual plans/ labour budgets and do not emerge from participative planning processes.

### **Key Action Areas:**

1. Develop annual implementation plans/GPDP in consultation with the women to identify various relevant activities that are less labor intensive and close to women's houses.
2. In order to execute gender and child-sensitive work under MGNREGS, a system for review of labor and material ratio (60:40) should be developed at the block level to scrutinize work plans and all the activities in the village plans. Better calibration can be achieved by adding more labour-intensive works or judiciously removing less labour-intensive works to attain a 60:40 ratio without tampering with the activities identified by the women with small children for their participation in the scheme.
3. Training of GP elected representatives and functionaries at the GP needs to be organized to introduce gender sensitivity in MGNREGS planning and implementation. This will create more enabling conditions for women to participate in the program and empower women as equal contributors to development.