

How gender inclusive is MGNREGA?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/08/28/how-gender-inclusive-is-mgnrega/

2012-8-28

Dr Manju Singh calls for more research to determine whether India's public employment programmes such as MGNREGA are promoting gender equality.

Speaking at LSE this summer, [Dr Manju Singh](#), the 2011-12 Sir Ratan Tata Fellow at the [Asia Research Centre](#), examined the gender inclusivity of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act ([MGNREGA](#)). Launched as the largest employment programme in history, MGNREGA offers 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year for unskilled manual workers. Dr Singh explained that although promoting gender equality was not an explicit goal of the act, MGNREGA has spurred female participation in the Indian workforce. However, she argued that the non-availability of precise data on female involvement raises more questions about MGNREGA's impact on female empowerment than it answers.

At her [talk](#), Dr Singh highlighted the pro-women provisions in MGNREGA: the act is committed to ensuring that at least 33 per cent of participating workers are women and stipulates equal wages for men and women. But she pointed out that female participation in the public employment programme is far higher than the quotas mandate: nationwide female participation stands at 51.8 per cent, with even higher participation in certain states—in Rajasthan, more than 80 per cent of the workforce under MGNREGA comprises women; in Kerala, [79 per cent of the people employed](#) under the act are women, even though women account for only 15 per cent of the state's workforce.



These statistics imply that MGNREGA fosters great gender inclusivity, especially given that women form only 28.7 per cent of India's total workforce according to the latest National Sample Survey Organisation data from 2004-05. Surveys suggest that the programme attracts and poor and migrant women in particular.

Dr Singh argued that various employment policies under MGNREGA are promoting high levels of female participation: women's quotas; equal wages; predictable working hours; training opportunities; female involvement in the social audit process; and manageable distances to cover to reach work sites, usually within five kilometres. Women are also attracted by MGNREGA's requirement that 50 per cent of *panchayat* representatives tasked with overseeing programme implementation and giving input on village development plans be female. The government has also tried to work in collaboration with established local women's groups wherever they exist in an effort to recruit more female labour.

Moreover, according to Dr Singh, MGNREGA is promoting gender inclusivity because it gives women a supervisory role in projects, helps women establish savings groups and sets the precedent to bring more women into the workforce (in many states, MGNREGA is the only avenue for female employment). These gains, argued Dr Singh, help counter charges against the programme of being nothing more than an attempt at fiscal populism.

This does not mean, however, that the programme is without faults. Dr Singh pointed to MGNREGA's many shortcomings that equally affect male and female workers, including delayed payments, failure to meet job demand leading to continued distress migration, and a focus on infrastructure development rather than long-term social reorganisation and uplift. In terms of women, specifically, Dr Singh pointed to the need for more crèches at work sites and a higher quality of care for the children of working mothers who were able to avail of childcare facilities.

Dr Singh concluded by pointing out that the true impact of MGNREGA on closing the gender gap in the Indian workforce could not yet be determined owing to a lack of women-specific data (gender-segregated statistics about MGNREGA employment, details of previous female employment trends, wage expenditure and other information remain difficult to obtain). Ultimately, Dr Singh said that while MGNREGA's gender equality indicators were positive on the whole, it remained unclear whether it was having any overall impact on the Indian workforce, for example, by exerting an upward pressure on women's market wages, promoting savings among women, and transforming social mores about working women. As such, Dr Singh's talk highlighted the need for more detailed research on women's employment trends and future prospects for female participation in the Indian workforce.

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics