

# Employment Guarantee, Women's Work and Childcare

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A social audit in Tamil Nadu finds that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has brought about major changes in the lives of women. However, the act overlooks the fact that childcare is a problem for many of the working women, especially for young mothers.

Recent social audit of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) indicates that the programme can have a positive impact on the social and economic well-being of rural labourers and their families.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it holds the powerful prospect of bringing major changes in the lives of women. This is especially true in a state like Tamil Nadu, where women constitute an overwhelming proportion (more than 80 per cent) of NREGA workers.

At the same time, however, some significant challenges frustrate this transformative promise of the NREGA. One of them is the issue of childcare, which is easily overlooked. To examine this aspect, a survey of crèche facilities and childcare practices of working women was conducted in the Viluppuram district (Tamil Nadu) in July 2007, on the sidelines of a social audit of the NREGA.<sup>2</sup> The findings indicate that childcare is a significant problem for many of them. This is particularly true for mothers of children below the age of three years. This article elaborates the difficult predicament of young mothers in the Viluppuram district who work under the NREGA, even as it plays a positive role in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

## Women's Participation in NREGA

The survey, conducted on July 29-31, 2007, covered 11 villages<sup>4</sup> and 15 NREGA worksites located in two blocks of the Viluppuram district (Tirukoviloor and Tiruvannainallur). Of these works, two had been completed at the time of the survey, while the others were ongoing.<sup>5</sup> A total of 104 women workers with at least one child below the age of six years were interviewed. The questions relating to childcare focused on the youngest child of the respondent.

The average age of the women was 27 years, ranging from just 19 years to 40

years (Table 1). The mother of the youngest child in the sample was already at the worksite despite having given birth just 17 days prior to the survey. At the NREGA sites, all these women were involved in 'mannuvelai' or earthwork – mainly carrying mud from the site to its peripheries using minor implements.

Most of the women interviewed belong to the scheduled castes, "backward classes" or "most backward classes".<sup>6</sup> In a state where the literacy rate for women is 65 per cent (in 2001), close to half the respondents (49 per cent) were illiterate. A mere six of the 104 respondents had studied beyond primary school, although one was a graduate (Table 1). Only around a third of the respondents reported that

**Table 1: Socio-economic Background of Women NREGA Workers**

Average age	27 years
Average household size	4.5
Proportion who are illiterate	49%
Proportion who have completed middle school	5%
Proportion who belong to landless households	60%
Proportion who belong to SC, BC or MBC communities	87%
Proportion who belong to agricultural labour households	39%

Source: Survey of 104 women with at least one child below the age of six years, who are working at NREGA worksites in Viluppuram district. The survey was conducted on July, 29-31, 2007.

their household owned any land, and the average land ownership (among those who did own land) was only around one acre. The main occupation of a majority of these women was working on others' fields as agricultural labourers. Even among those who owned land, many nevertheless eked out a living working on others' land. The respondents were clearly from marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

It is not surprising therefore that for some of these women, the NREGA was indispensable – a lifeline, they said. Some of them even said that they would "starve" without the NREGA. As many as 41 per cent declared that the NREGA had been the only source of income for the household in the past few months (Table 2, p 11). At that time of the year (in late July), no agricultural work was available in the area. Some respondents claimed that their land was "uncultivable" anyway, so they had to abandon cultivation leaving the land fallow. In the absence of alternate livelihoods, the NREGA was the only option.

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In general, even women who were not so utterly dependent on the NREGA perceived it as giving them a sense of independence and security. It also offered the possibility of staying on in their village.

The wages they earned as NREGA workers enabled them to accomplish a number of things – ranging from paying their debts or retrieving pawned gold to spending on children's health and education or saving in chit funds, apart from meeting day-to-day household expenses. One woman used her wages to work her fallow land, and another bought insurance for her children! The fact that most of the women interviewed either kept the wages they earned (51 per cent) or shared them with their husbands (19 per cent) possibly indicates one kind of independence (Table 2). An overwhelming proportion of the respondents preferred to receive cash for

**Table 2: NREGA as an Employment Opportunity for Women**

Proportion of respondents who:	
Said their household had no other source of income in the past few months	41%
Stated that it was their own decision to work on NREGA	95%
Prefer wages in cash (rather than in kind, or as combination of cash and kind)	84%
Keep all or part of the wages they earn on NREGA	70%
Felt that NREGA is "very important" for the economic well-being of their household	73%

Source: Same as in Table 1.

their work (rather than grain, or a combination of cash and grain). Some commented that they knew "better than the government how to spend the money" (Table 2). Others pointed out that since subsidised grain was available from the public distribution system, they were happy with cash wages.

The NREGA offered security too, as agricultural work was only intermittently available. Now, said a woman, "we no longer have to go place-to-place looking for work. It is available right here at our village." They explained that without the NREGA, they would migrate to Bangalore or Chennai, even Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, to work on construction sites under difficult conditions.

One woman's husband was a "drunkard" and she felt the NREGA was something she could fall back on. The NREGA offered, in their words, a "more comfortable life" and "a little happiness". One of them said simply that she was "happy to work with others".

As the survey found out, however, the NREGA can be transformative in less obvious ways. For instance, in Vengur village, earlier (before the NREGA works commenced) there was a severe problem of water scarcity. Now, we were told, the problem had been largely resolved, as water was available from a pond constructed under the NREGA when it was not in the pipe. This made things easier and life was "more comfortable". Another woman pointed out that NREGA had enabled her to purchase insurance for her children, as she is now recognised, for the first time, as "working".

The NREGA can sometimes empower whole communities as well. In Thathanur village, residents were all dependent on one single family that owned all the land surrounding their hamlet. Over the years, a woman explained, these 'zamindars' had expanded their sugar cane fields and steadily encroached on their hamlet. Yet, they could not protest, since they were at the zamindars' mercy. Now with the NREGA providing an alternative, they did not feel this dependence anymore.

### NREGA and Childcare

Despite the obviously beneficial role of the NREGA, these young mothers face some difficulties on a daily basis. Chief among them, it seems, is the issue of childcare.<sup>7</sup>

The NREGA clearly states that in the event where there are at least five children under the age of six years at the worksite, one of the female workers should be deputed to look after them and she should be paid the same wage as other NREGA workers.<sup>8</sup> Yet, around 70 per cent of the women interviewed said that there were no childcare facilities at the worksite. Of the remaining 30 per cent, many were unsure if the "shed" at the worksite was really meant to be a crèche. Only a few worksites seemed to have some arrangement for childcare, with one or two

elderly women taking care of the children brought to the worksite. Disturbingly, close to 65 per cent of the respondents were unaware of this basic entitlement.

### Whereabouts of the Children

Where then were the children while their mothers worked on the NREGA? Of the 104 women, almost 50 per cent left their children at home, while 19 per cent brought their children to the worksite. About 12 per cent of the respondents reported leaving their children at the 'balwadi' or 'anganwadi' and around 11 per cent at schools (Table 3).

Most of the children who accompanied their mothers to the worksite were either left in the shade nearby or kept near the spot where the mother was working. One mother worried that the child "kept following her around the worksite". While keeping a child at the worksite is difficult enough on "normal" days, it becomes even more problematic in harsh weather or when the child is sick, if there is no childcare facility. At the worksite, children who were not breastfed ate what their mothers brought for themselves. For most, this is simply rice, sometimes cooked the previous day. For others, it is rice with vegetables or 'sambar', and still others it is 'koozhu' (a kind of porridge).<sup>9</sup>

In general, it seemed that women were being dissuaded from bringing their children to the NREGA worksite. Some were apparently turned away from the worksite if their child accompanied them. Others were told, "If you want to feed your child, don't come here, go home". A few women reported that whenever they brought their children to the worksite, their wages were cut. Those who brought their children regardless were often "harassed" by the supervisor or by their co-workers. For instance, one was told "If you keep breastfeeding your child, who will do your work?". In fact, of those who reported

**Table 3: Whereabouts of NREGA Children (Age 0-6 years)**

Age Group	Number of Children	Where Was the Child While the Mother Was Working on NREGA? (Percentage Distribution)					Total
		Home	Worksite	Anganwadi or Balwadi	School	Worksite Creche	
Below 1 year	21	76	14	5	0	5	100
1 to 3 years	44	52	25	5	5	13	100
3 to 5 years	25	44	16	32	0	8	100
5-6 years	14	7	14	14	65	0	100
Total	104	49	19	12	11	9	100

Source: Same as in Table 1.

some form of harassment at the workplace from supervisors and colleagues, close to half stated that such harassment was related to childcare.

Consequently, even women who preferred to have their children in their own care often had no choice but to leave them at home. In most cases, these children were looked after either by their siblings or by older relatives. Other children were left to their own devices – sometimes roaming around the streets, with their mothers relying on the neighbours' goodwill to keep an eye on them. One child was tied to a table at home, with food left on a plate beside it. There were even cases where babies as young as five to 10 months old were left at home, unattended. As one might expect, mothers were anxious about the welfare of their children. One NREGA mother worried about her child all the time – constantly carrying the image of the open water tank near the house where her toddler would be playing.

Women with older children (within the reference age group of 0-6 years) did not seem to face such difficulties. A large proportion of mothers of children over the age of three years reported sending their children either to the anganwadi or to schools. For instance, one-third of the children in the age group three-five years were sent to the anganwadi. Among those aged six years, four-fifths went to either school or the anganwadi.

It has been argued recently that childcare facilities at NREGA worksites are not required in Tamil Nadu, as there are anganwadis and balwadis in every village.<sup>10</sup> It is certainly true that Tamil Nadu has an impressive network of balwadis and anganwadis. In this respect, Tamil Nadu is far ahead of most other Indian states.<sup>11</sup> Where these facilities work well, the mothers seemed quite content to leave their older children there. Some of them, in fact, felt that the worksite was “no place for children”. In the better cases, the anganwadi was open regularly, the helper fetched and dropped the children, and nutritious food (including eggs) was being provided.

However, as the survey reveals, this does not obviate the need for crèches at NREGA worksites. In some villages, the anganwadis were in poor shape. One mother complained that the anganwadi

provided only food and little else. Some complained that the anganwadi did not provide children with “proper food”. In a couple of villages, the survey team was informed that the “teacher” rarely attended the anganwadi. Under these circumstances, the mothers preferred to leave their children under the care of relatives and neighbours.

Further, many families are still deprived of convenient access to an anganwadi. The opening hours of anganwadis are different from those of NREGA worksites, and often shorter. In Tirukoviloor block for instance, women in many villages complained that the anganwadi was open only from 8 am to 12 pm. Once food was distributed, it was “locked up” and children were sent away. What would their children do until the women returned? One mother felt that the anganwadi was too far – in another hamlet, a mile away. She told us, “walking to it is dangerous, so my children have never been there”.

Even when the anganwadi or school seems to work for older children, it is not a satisfying option for the younger ones. Indeed, it is often better for small children to stay close to their mother unless the anganwadis are of exceptional quality, which is rarely the case. Only 5 per cent of the infants were left at the balwadi or anganwadi. Three-fourths of the mothers of infants left their babies at home, while only around a fifth brought them to the worksite. One mother sent the older siblings to the anganwadi but preferred to leave her six-month-old at home with an aged relative. Another reported that she would be very happy to bring her infant to the worksite crèche, should one be available. She explained that she breast-fed her child 10-12 times a day but because she had been forbidden to bring her infant to the worksite she was able to feed the child only five-six times.

### Need for Crèches

Under these difficult circumstances, an overwhelming proportion (almost 85 per cent) of mothers who left their children at home said that if a crèche was provided at the worksite, they would certainly bring their children, particularly the young ones. Most felt that a crèche at the worksite would enable them to keep an eye on

their children without being distracted from work. Clearly, the survey provides ample evidence of the urgent need for crèche facilities at the worksite.

Further, some women mentioned that because of the problem of childcare, they were often unable to join the NREGA worksites at all, critical as this was for the economic well-being of the family, especially for those who are landless and illiterate. Lack of childcare facilities prevented many of these women from claiming their entitlement under the act. As one mother put it, “If there were someone to take care of my child, why would I not go to work? Is it (the NREGA) not important for my very survival?”

Simple childcare facilities at NREGA worksites could go a long way in addressing these concerns. In any case, these facilities are mandatory under the law. What is lacking in the law, as well as in the operational guidelines of the NREGA is a blueprint for effective childcare facilities at the worksite. The act states that a woman worker should be deputed to look after young children, in the event where at least five children below the age of six years are present at the worksite. This is a step forward but guidelines are also needed to ensure that shade, food and other basic amenities are available for these young children at the worksite. Cost norms are also required, along with specific instructions as to how the costs are to be incorporated in the financial estimates (for example, under the “materials” component of the programme).

Another important issue needs to be addressed in this context. As things stand, women workers are not entitled to childcare facilities at the worksite unless at least five children are present. However, as this survey makes clear, many women are unlikely to bring their children to the worksite unless childcare is available there in the first place. Thus, the real extent of the demand for childcare facilities at the worksite is “hidden” because women leave their children at home, even though they would bring them to the worksite if childcare facilities were available. One way of addressing this problem would be to prescribe that a crèche has to be provided if at least five children are present at the worksite or if at

least five workers (male or female) demand childcare facilities.

To conclude, the provision of effective childcare facilities at NREGA worksites is an important issue that calls for creative thinking and action. Tamil Nadu is well placed to take the lead in this field, given its earlier achievements in the domain of childcare. This would not only be a step forward for Tamil Nadu but also an example for the country as a whole.

#### NOTES

- 1 For a general introduction to the NREGA, see Dey et al (2006), [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in), [www.righttofoodindia.org](http://www.righttofoodindia.org).
- 2 Details of the social audit are available in NREGA Watch Tamil Nadu (2007).
- 3 For earlier work on these issues, see for instance, Bhatti (2006).
- 4 The villages surveyed include Eravalam, Konakkalavadi, Katchikuppam, Kolaparai, Nedumudaiyan, Panapadi, Poyyarasur,

Sholavandipuram, T Edapalayan, Thathanur and Vengur.

- 5 Wherever possible, the respondents were selected from the muster rolls and the interviews were conducted at the worksite.
- 6 In Tamil Nadu, backward classes (BCs) and most backward classes (MBCs) are together equivalent to the other backward classes used commonly elsewhere in India (see [www.tn.gov.in/department/bcmbc.htm](http://www.tn.gov.in/department/bcmbc.htm))
- 7 The other major problem relates to morbidity levels. Three-fourths of the women reported having some health problem, such as body ache, dizziness, fatigue or ulcers.
- 8 "In case the number of children below the age of six years accompanying the women at any site are five or more, provisions shall be made to depute one of such women to look after such children" (NREGA 2005, schedule II, section 28).
- 9 In a village in Tirukoviloor, women claimed that they had not eaten vegetables for months, save for potato that was purchased occasionally from Tirukoviloor town, 45 minutes away.
- 10 A public statement to this effect was made by M K Stalin (local administration minister, government of Tamil Nadu) at the time of the social audit of NREGA in Viluppuram, "Admitting there was room for improvement, he said some of the negative findings could not be acted upon...since

Tamil Nadu had multiple anganwadis or balwadis in each village, the suggestion that a crèche was needed would not be acted upon" [quoted in Radhakrishnan 2007].

- 11 See Citizens Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six (2006) and Swaminathan (1991).

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