

EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL INDIA*

Navjyoti Jandu

"Priority" should be given to women in the allocation of work "in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women".

[Schedule II, Para 6, NREGA]

INTRODUCTION

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is one of the most progressive legislations enacted since independence. Its significance is evident from a variety of perspectives. First, it is a bold and unique experiment in the provision of rural employment – in India and indeed in the world at large. Second, it is the first expression of the right to work as an enforceable legal entitlement. In a country where labour is the only economic asset for millions of people, gainful employment is a prerequisite for the fulfilment of other basic rights – the right to life, the right to food, and the right to education.

There is much that the NREGA promises from the perspective of women's empowerment as well. Most boldly, in a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women – in the opportunities for gainful employment afforded as well as wage rates – NREGA represents action on both these counts. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensuring that at least 33% of the workers shall be women. By generating employment for women at fair wages in the village, NREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem.

Government figures indicate an impressive participation of women in the NREGA (see Table 1). It is above 33 per cent in 15 states. Tamil Nadu, with 82 per cent, shows the highest participation with Kerala and Rajasthan also showing impressive figures

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a National Seminar on NREGA at Vigyan Bhavan on 16th May, 2008. I would like to thank Jean Drèze for his guidance and suggestions. I am also thankful to Anish Vanaik and Reetika Khera for their help. For a more detailed presentation of the findings, see National Federation of Indian Women (2008), "Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women under NREGA", report prepared for the Ministry of Rural Development.

(71 and 69 per cent respectively). At an all-India level, women's employment as a percentage of total employment in NREGA works was 40 per cent in 2007-08. The first four months of 2008-09 have already seen this figure go up to 50 per cent.

Table 1: Women's participation in NREGA
(women workers as a percentage of all NREGA workers)

States	2008 - 09 (%)
Tamil Nadu	82.01
Kerala	71.39
Rajasthan	69.00
Andhra Pradesh	57.75
Karnataka	49.77
Gujarat	46.54
Tripura	44.51
Uttaranchal	42.77
Chattisgarh	42.05
Madhya Pradesh	41.67
Maharashtra	39.99
Sikkim	36.73
Orissa	36.39
Haryana	34.44
Mizoram	33.62
Manipur	32.80
Meghalaya	30.87
Assam	30.85
Himachal Pradesh	30.11
Arunachal Pradesh	29.58
Nagaland	29.36
Jharkhand	27.17
Bihar	26.62
West Bengal	16.99
Punjab	16.29
Uttar Pradesh	14.53
Jammu & Kashmir	1.08
All India	49.33

Source: Official data (for the first four months of the financial year 2008-09) available at www.nrega.nic.in as on 17th July 2008.

With this in mind, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) carried out a survey to assess the impact of NREGA on women. The basic objective is to measure the tangible benefits that women have received from the implementation of the NREGA over a period of two years. A second aim of the study is to shed light on possible improvements that can be introduced to make NREGA more effective and responsive to the needs of women, particularly given its extension to all of rural India from April 2008.

The survey was carried out in one district each of four states where the NREGA had been in force since February 2006: Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh), Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh), Mayurbhanj (Orissa) and Cuddalore (Tamil Nadu). In each of the districts, two blocks and five Gram Panchayats per block were randomly selected. A random sampling was also done to select women workers from completed worksites' muster rolls of 2007-2008. Two sets of questionnaires were used for the data collection. One was addressed to members of the Gram Panchayat and the second was addressed to women workers. The target number of sample workers was 800 (200 in each district). A total of 776 women workers and 40 Gram Panchayat members were actually interviewed.

Close to half (49%) of the interviewed women were Scheduled Tribes; the rest were SCs (20 per cent) and OBCs (27 per cent). Out of the total sample of women workers 68 per cent were illiterate. Half of the respondent households had less than 5 acres land, and 35 per cent had no land at all. Most respondents reported agriculture or manual labour as the households' main occupation.

Table II: Sample Areas of the NFIW Study

State	District	Blocks
Chhattisgarh	Rajnandgaon	Rajnandgaon Dungargarh
Orissa	Mayurbhanj	Shamakhunta Bangriposi
Madhya Pradesh	Jhabua	Pethlawad Rama
Tamil Nadu	Cuddalore	Mel Bhuvanagiri Kurinjipadi

NUMBER OF DAYS WORKED AND WAGES

Employment at NREGA worksites seems to have raised both enthusiasm and expectations among women workers. Women workers unanimously affirmed that the benefits from NREGA employment were high and that they would like to get more days of work in a year. The challenge of the situation becomes clearer when we look at the small proportion of women surveyed (only 7 per cent) who got more than 75 days of work in the last year. Almost half of the respondents (43 per cent) reported that they had worked for fewer than 25 days in the previous year.

Regarding wage payments, we found, in Cuddalore district, that most women workers were receiving the stipulated minimum wage, i.e. Rs. 80 per day. In the

other three districts, however, the average wage was generally around Rs. 60 per day (as compared to a minimum wage of Rs. 69 in Madhya Pradesh, Rs. 70 in Orissa and Rs. 66.70 in Chhattisgarh) in the financial year 2007 - 08 (see table III). Nevertheless, even where the full minimum wage was not being received, it is clear that NREGA wages are far higher than the wages otherwise locally available. For example, Bhagwati w/o Ram from Gram Panchayat Khaira of Dongargarh block in Rajnandgaon district said:

“Before NREGA, we were forced to work as agricultural labourers or casual labourers in brick kilns for Rs. 25/- to 30/- per day. But under NREGA, we are getting Rs. 62 to 64 per day, more than double, which is almost an unexpected amount for us.”

It is also clear that, by and large, men and women are paid equal wages at NREGA worksites as has been mandated by the Act. Given that wage gaps between the male and female casual workers have been the norm in rural India, this is an extremely significant development.

Table III: Women workers' access to minimum wage and days of work

Districts	Statutory minimum wage* (Rs/day)	Per cent women aware about min. wage	Average wage paid to women under NREGA (Rs/day)	Proportion (%) of sample women workers getting the full mini. Wage
Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh)	66.70**	33	62	18
Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh)	69	25	60	10
Mayurbhanj (Orissa)	70	51	60	40
Cuddalore (Tamil Nadu)	80	84	80	93

* Minimum wage during the financial year 2007 - 08.

**From 1.4.07- 30.9.07.

CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE

Sumathi w/o Samantham aged 38 lives in Maruwai Panchayat of Kurinjipadi Block in Cuddalore District in Tamil Nadu. She has worked 33 days under NREGA in 2007-2008 and has used the money she earned for her regular household expenses. She says that she used to be dependent on her husband for any expense but now she feels empowered and independent, as she is also an earning member of the family.

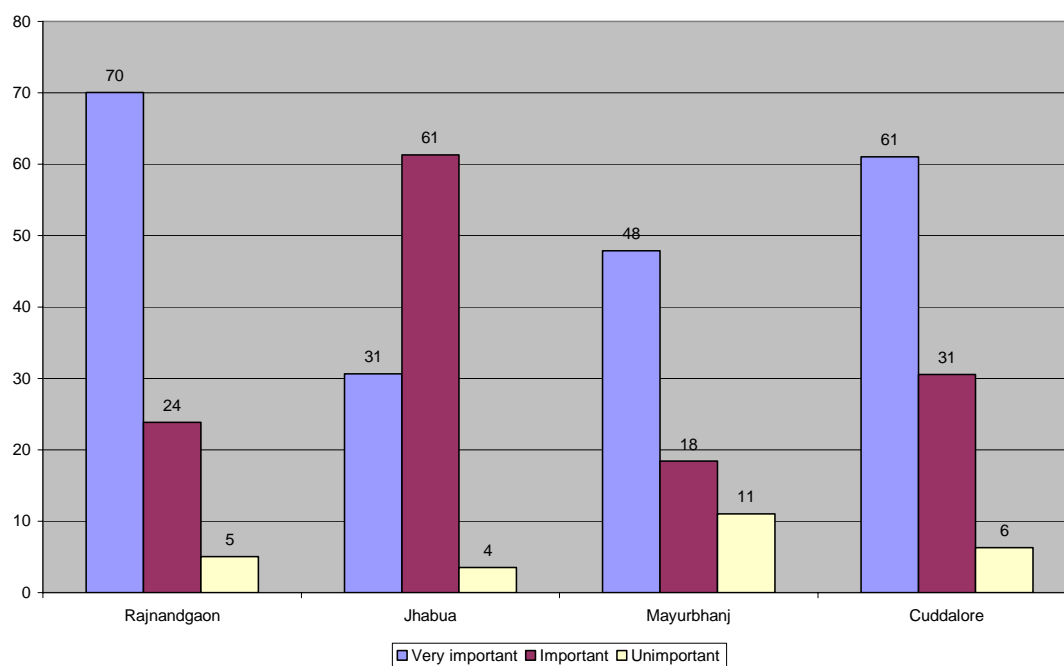
By putting cash incomes into their hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. As mentioned, this was one of NREGA's main aims: with the increased participation of women in household income-generation a positive contribution to gender relations can be made. The

survey data (both qualitative and quantitative) suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere.

Mogra w/o Meghnath, aged 34, lives in Dodiya village of Dhamansara Panchayat, Rajnandgaon Block in District Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh. She has a BPL card and her household owns a little land. They used to live in a kaccha house. She came to know about the NREGA works in her village through a public announcement. She decided to work under NREGA. Last year she and her husband worked under NREGA for 100 days and earned a good amount of money at the rate of Rs. 60/- per day. Their small land holding fulfils their basic food necessities. They decided to spend the money earned on NREGA works to build a *pacca* house.

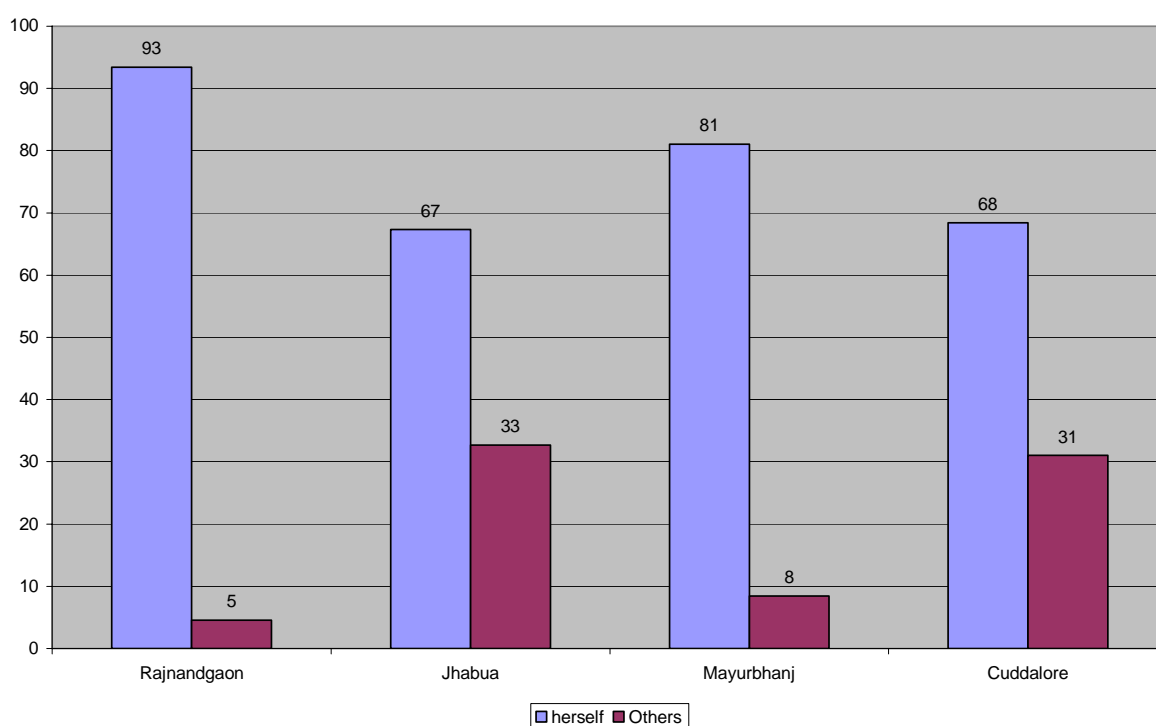
More than half of the respondents felt that the NREGA has brought a significant change in their villages as well as in their own lives. This is because employment is being provided within their village, generating community assets and enhancing their spending capacity. In each of the four survey districts, most of the women felt that the Act is “important” or “very important” for them. In Rajnandgaon and Cuddalore, the proportion who felt that NREGA is “very important” was as high as 70 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Perceived importance of NREGA



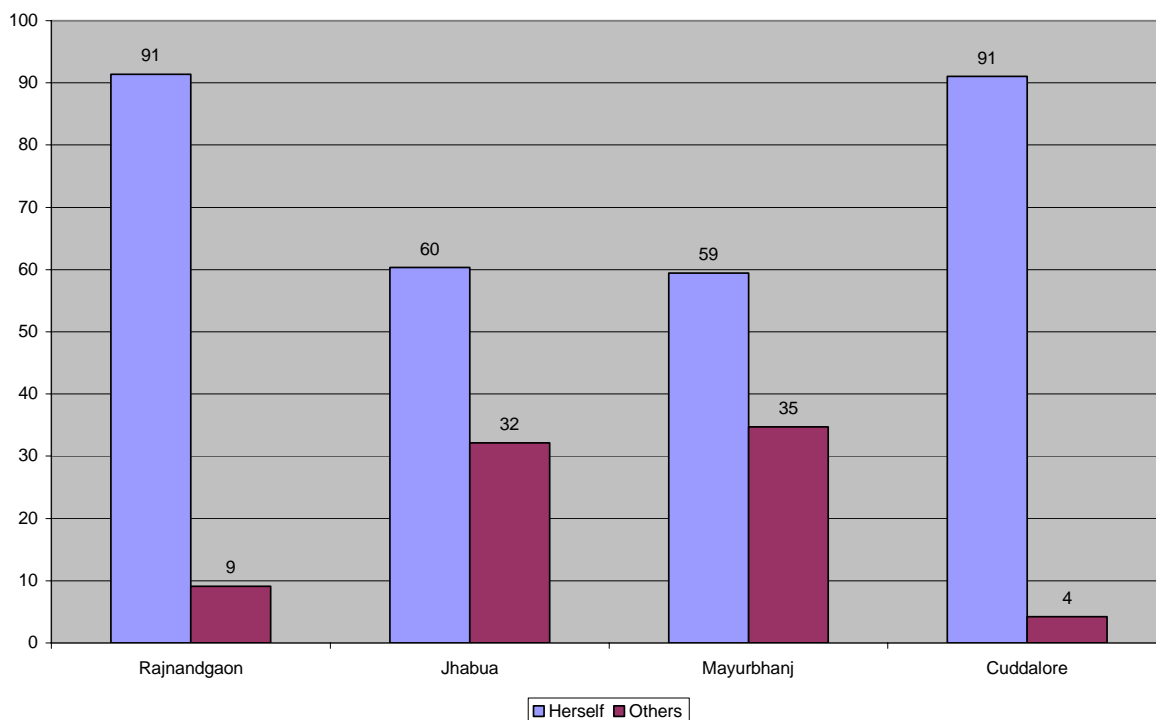
When asked about their decision to work under the NREGA, most respondents said that the decision to work at NREGA worksites was their own. Rajnandgaon was exceptional in this regard: 93 per cent of the women said that they had taken their own work decision. In the other three districts as well, this figure was remarkably high: 81 per cent in Mayurbhanj, 68 per cent in Cuddalore, and 67 per cent in Jhabua. Evidently, NREGA employment has encouraged women to take the decision to enter the sphere of the cash economy (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Percentage of sample women who took their own decision to work under NREGA



Another important point that emerged from the survey is that women workers were, by and large, receiving their wages in person, rather than through husbands or other proxies. In Rajnandgaon and Cuddalore, over 91 per cent of the women collected their own wages. In Jhabua and Mayurbhanj this figure stood at 60 per cent. Despite the substantial proportion of women not receiving their wages in person in these last two, this is also an encouraging finding (Chart 3).

Chart 3: Percentage of sample women who collected their NREGA wages in person



Inevitably, women's NREGA earnings are increasing their contribution to household income. A large majority (72 per cent) of the respondents said that they spent wages earned at NREGA works on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through NREGA work, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day. For the most part, the amounts earned through NREGA are insufficient to repay debts. Nevertheless, 28 per cent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. Further, it helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders. A significant percentage of workers – almost 34 per cent – also spent their NREGA wages on their children's education. The other large expenditure regularly met through NREGA wages is health care, with around 40 per cent of the respondents having spent earnings on this.

All this taken together seems to sketch out the beginnings of a marked shift from the previous role of women. While women's labour (farm and non-farm) has always been an essential component in the functioning of rural households, it has been made invisible due to the absence of any monetary remuneration. By putting cash earnings in women's hands, NREGA has both increased and diversified the contributions that women are making to household incomes as wage earners.

Where there is a will there is a way!

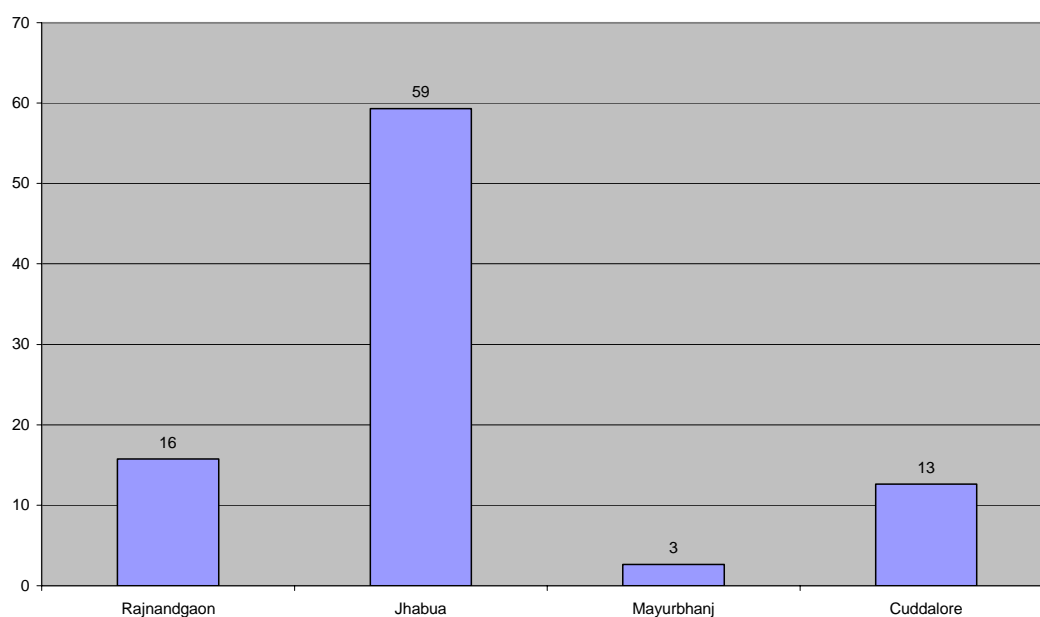
Mangudi w/o Ramesh is a differently abled person residing in Panchayat Ghugri of Petlawad Block in District Jhabua. She has worked for 35 days under NREGA so far and expressed great happiness on getting the opportunity to work and get paid. She said “the program has provided her a ray of hope by ensuring a minimum livelihood”.

MIGRATION - CHANGING TRENDS

One of the most positive trends in all the districts studied has been the impact of NREGA on migration patterns. 73 per cent of the respondents said that neither they nor their family members had migrated in 2007. The sole exception to this pattern was Jhabua, where 59 per cent respondents stated that they had migrated last year (Chart 4). That being said, even in Jhabua there is evidence of a shift in the pattern of migration. Respondents stated that where earlier entire families would migrate, now only one or two persons tend to leave for seasonal work in neighbouring states or elsewhere in Madhya Pradesh.

NREGA seems to have created reasons and opportunities for people to work and remain in their own villages. The strengthening of this perception in rural areas can have significant impacts on questions of security, health and children's education, all of which are often compromised, in one way or another, during migration.

Chart 4: Percentage of sample women who stated that some members of their household had migrated in 2007



AWARENESS

It is perhaps predictable that awareness about the provision of NREGA will be low among disadvantaged communities. Less than half (48 per cent) of all sample workers were aware of the level of minimum wage in their respective States. Cuddalore is the only survey district in which awareness levels were relatively high (84 per cent were aware of the minimum wage).

Most women were aware that under the Act each household is guaranteed 100 days of work in a year. But awareness regarding operational guidelines, household registration, the job card distribution process, work applications and entitlements such as worksite facilities and unemployment allowance was inadequate. Only 43 per cent of women workers reported having made a formal application for a job card. In all four districts, most people just applied orally or gave their names when asked whether they wanted a job card. The situation was even worse with respect to applications for work. Only 18 per cent of the women surveyed were aware of the work application process and had applied for work themselves.

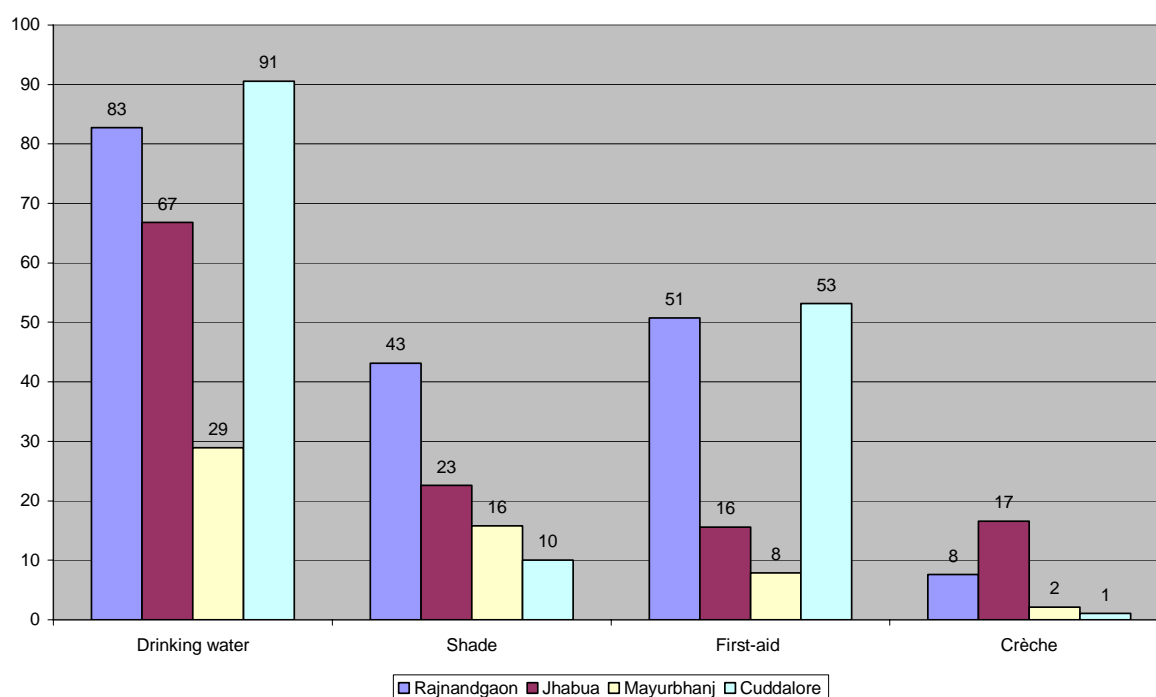
The low level of awareness, even in districts where NREGA has been implemented for over two years, are indeed worrying. Generating much higher awareness about NREGA work clearly constitutes one of the key challenges for authorities, NGOs and popular movements.

POOR WORKSITE FACILITIES

The NREGA is committed to ensuring a workplace conducive to productivity and workers' welfare. With this in mind, NREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, shade for periods of rest, first aid and child care facilities at the worksite. The last of these, in particular, is significant in order to make NREGA work a viable option for women with young children who cannot be left alone at home.

It is disturbing, therefore, to find that most of these facilities are routinely absent from worksites. Only 68 per cent of worksites had drinking water facility. Most striking, however, is the almost complete lack of child care facilities in any of the four districts surveyed (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Percentage of respondents who stated that the following facilities were available at the worksite



PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIs) AND GRAM SABHAS

NREGA is designed to be largely implemented through PRIs – at least 50 per cent of all sanctioned works are to be implemented by the Gram Panchayats. The Gram Sabha too plays a crucial role in the selection of works and the conduct of social audits. Participation of people at large and women in particular in these institutions and assemblies is, then, critical to realising the participatory potential of the Act.

During the survey it was found that women workers did not generally take part in Gram Sabhas. This is partly due to lack of awareness about the significant role to be played by the Gram Sabhas in making a shelf of projects and conducting social audits of NREGA works. Women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) was also very low - not even 1 per cent of the respondents in all the districts said they were involved in PRI’s activities. This is despite the reservation of one third of all seats in local elected bodies for women (under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts). Most elected women tend to be “rubber stamp” leaders, the vast majority of them are illiterate and politically untrained. While women are increasingly visible as part of the NREGA workforce, there is still much scope to

increase their involvement in PRIs to tackle issues like water, sanitation, health, education and of course the implementation of NREGA.

NREGA: A MIXED EXPERIENCE

Jayalakshmi, aged 45, lives in Therkuthittai Panchayat of Melbhuvanagiri Block in Cuddalore. She is a widow and has a son who studies in the XII Standard. She says that agricultural work is available only for about 6 months in a year and that too not continuously. Some of the work like harvesting paddy is done by couples (husband-wife teams) and she is not able to go for such work since her husband has passed away. She, however, is able to work under NREGA and, in fact, says that she is given work under NREGA precisely because she is a widow. She has worked for 30 days in 2007-2008 and has used the income she earned to support her son's education. She is happy that NREGA wages are paid every week and would like to get a job card for her son so that he can work too.

The study reveals that despite numerous problems, NREGA is a programme that has begun to make a difference in the lives of women. Furthermore, it is popular among the workers, who routinely ask if more work could be made available to them under the NREGA. Clearly, there is a massive demand for NREGA work, and the administration should respond to it by increasing the scale of employment.

Other challenges too remain. The timely payment of wages is a problem in most areas. As mentioned earlier, the low levels of awareness and lack of worksite facilities are also troubling. Nevertheless, the overall impact of NREGA on women's lives is quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration, or fostering better awareness (and wider enforcement) of minimum wages. The role of NREGA as a tool of women's empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far.

Viewed in a wider perspective, NREGA signals a possible reshaping of state priorities in India through a democratic determination to provide real livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. Thus, as a progressive legislation for hitherto excluded groups - women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, among others - NREGA can help to reclaim the lost faith in the possibility of pro-people governance.