

A Mirage or a Rural Life Line? Analysing the impact of Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act on Women Beneficiaries of Assam

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Abstract

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), launched in February 2006 was renamed in October 02, 2009 as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (henceforth, MGNREGA). It is an anti-poverty flagship programme of the Government of India. The key purpose of MGNREGA is to enhance wage employment in the rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed employment to every household in a financial year. The MGNREGA implementation status report for the financial year 2012-2013 unfolds that the programme has already provided employment to 44.9 million households across 28 districts and five union territories. Hence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries. A plethora of research argues that MGNREGA, which promotes inclusive growth, is a vehicle of change, a lifeline for rural women. So far, however, there has been very little discussion about the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries of Assam. This research is an attempt to examine the participation of women in MGNREGA, Assam. It critically looks at the issues, problems and challenges confronted by the women while working at MGNREGA. Written from a feminist perspective on gender, poverty and women's empowerment, the research seeks to address the problems of the women beneficiaries through their lived experiences. For this, we conducted in-depth interviews with the women beneficiaries in the months of August and September, 2009 in four remote areas namely, Burka, Chandrapur, Barbhang and Muguriya, the first two situated in Kamrup, while the third and the fourth in Barpeta districts of Assam, where the programme of MGNREGA is on-going. The findings of the research suggest measures so that the programme can be made more effective in the long run.

Key Words: Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act, women, empowerment, gender, poverty, in-depth interviews

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Introduction

India's shift in macroeconomic strategy has resulted in a significant increase in the growth rate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) until the first quarter of 2012³ and hence, large-scale transformation of the economy. Against this macroeconomic backdrop, India has launched a number of flagship programmes including the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (henceforth MGNREGA). MGNREGA is a pro-poor anti-poverty employment generation programme of the Government of India (GOI), which acted as a road to electoral fortune for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government headed by the Indian National Congress Party in 2009. Formerly known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), it has been renamed as MGNREGA in October 02, 2009. The MGNREGA implementation status report for the financial year 2012-2013 unfolds that the programme has already provided employment to 44.9 million households across 28 districts and five union territories. Hence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries. While a large and growing body of literature argues that MGNREGA, which promotes inclusive growth, has been a vehicle of change, a lifeline for rural women (Drèze and Khera, 2009; Holmes et al., 2011; Narayanan, 2008; Khera and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011), however, so far too little attention has been paid to examine the impact of MGNREGA on women's participation in Assam. The research therefore, is an attempt to take a critical look at the issues, problems and challenges confronted by the women beneficiaries at MGNREGA. Written from a feminist perspective on gender, poverty

and women's empowerment, the research seeks to address the problems faced by the women through their lived experiences at MGNREGA. In short, the exercise probes some of the evidence of local realities informed by the lived experiences of a sample of women beneficiaries from the MGNREGA sites of Assam that helps to synergise women's empowerment and poverty alleviation.

The exercise begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research, and looks at how feminist writings on poverty and women's empowerment connect to MGNREGA. It will then go on to discuss the methodological issues underpinning the project. This will be followed by a critical account of the narratives of our informants including the irregularities these women face due to lack of transparency at MGNREGA. Finally, in the conclusion, the key findings and outstanding challenges are reviewed. This review is expected to lead to a deeper understanding of the myriad problems of women and increase effective levels of public awareness, which in turn might make this policy more effective and women friendly.

Examining the connections between poverty, women's empowerment and MGNREGA

Reduction of poverty and hunger of the marginalised sections of the society is one of the key goals of India's development policies. Thus, though, poverty at \$1.25 a day in 2005 prices increased from 420 million people in 1981 to 455 million in 2005, but the number of people living on less than \$ 1.25 a day dropped from 60% (in 1981) to 42% (2005),⁴ and further to 37% in 2010.⁵ Over the same period, the number of persons living below a dollar a day also declined from 42% to 24% during the same reference period (Tharoor, 2007). Importantly, the United Nations Millennium Development

³ The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country as determined by the World Bank (2011) is \$1.848 trillion. From the year 2000 until the first quarter of 2012, India has maintained an average growth rate of 7.37%. However, the economy has slowed down since then largely due to global economic down turn and the current GDP growth of the country is pegged at 6.1-6.7%. *Union Budget and Economic Survey*, <http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2003-04/general.htm> (accessed March 06 2013)

⁴ New data show 1.4 billion live on less than \$1.25 a day, but progress against poverty remains strong, <http://go.worldbank.org/DQKD6WV4T0> (accessed July 06 2012)

⁵ India at a glance, http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/ind_aag.pdf (accessed July 06 2012)

Goals too projects reduction of all forms of poverty by halves by 2015.⁶

Inevitably, over the past two decades, India has moved more people out of poverty than the entire U.S. population⁷; however, there are still large numbers of Indians that live marginally above the line of poverty. The concept of poverty is multi-dimensional and gendered, referred to as an ontological force and equated with deprivation and lack of social power, and connected mostly with social and spatial inequalities (Golding, 1986; Granzow, 2000; Shaffer, 2008). Scholars confirm that in many developing regions, poverty is chronic, persistent and often unshakeable (Golding, 1986; Granzow, 2000). Feminist critiques alongside the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and Human Development Report (1995) postulated that poverty is experienced more severely by poor women (and children) when compared with poor men (Chant, 2006a; 2006b). Earlier, in similar context, David Harvey (1973) connected urban poverty with the enduring issues of social and economic (in) justice and highlighted its stratification by class, race and gender. Notwithstanding, the women's burden of poverty (coupled with women's responsibility for household well-being) continues, and even the latest statistics produced by the United Nations Development Programme confirms that out of every ten poorest persons of the world, six are women.⁸As a result, critiques encapsulates that

feminisation of poverty⁹ has become a global phenomenon reflecting upon unequal sexual division of economic resources (such as unequal access to labour market, less access to food, education and health care) together with unequal inheritance rights, unfair treatment under social welfare systems and low status within the family (see, Chant, 2006a; 2006b). Poverty alleviation, however, remains a complex and a difficult challenge (Granzow, 2000). Shaffer (2008) has developed a new concept of poverty and augmented the causal structure of poverty into five variables such as social, political, cultural, coercive and environmental capital, (re)phrasing it together as the 'forms of capital' (194). He goes on to strengthen this structure by highlighting the extent to which individuals either flows into or empowers themselves to reduce chronic poverty. In the World Bank volumes on *Moving out of Poverty* (Volume 2), Narayan et al. (2009a) draws on a grunt's eye view of people who live below the poverty line. The research on moving out of poverty was conducted in different communities across 15 countries of Latin America, Africa, East and South Asia. Here, Narayan et al. (2009a) addresses the strategies of rural poverty alleviation through the prism of poor people's lives. Focusing squarely on 60,000 rural people through qualitative methodology (individual life stories, focus groups, household interviews) alongside quantitative research, Narayan et al. (2009a) examines the subtle realities of local communities and explains how some people are successful in pulling themselves out of poverty, albeit local institutions like local level finance, markets, decent healthcare, roads, electricity, water, telephones, democracies together with social capital¹⁰(including

⁶The Millennium Development Goals report, 2009, United Nations (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_Report_2009_ENG.pdf, November 11, 2009). Although, India has made significant in-roads to poverty alleviation, however challenges remain. Perhaps in the post-2015 MDGs, India needs to concentrate on tackling multi-dimensional poverty (Alkire and Sumner, 2013).

⁷ The current population of the USA stands over 313.8 million, Central Intelligence Agency-The World Fact Book, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (accessed March 07, 2013)

⁸Gender and Poverty (http://www.undp.org/poverty/focus_gender_and_poverty.shtml, October, 1, 2009)

⁹ Diane Pearce (1978) was apparently the first to use the phrase feminisation of poverty to refer to the increasing gendered patterns (especially of women and children) of poverty in America between the beginning of the 1950s and the mid-1970s. However, the phrase became popularised in the 1990s as a result of the growing research of the United Nations agencies.

¹⁰It is an established socio-geographic insight linked closely to communities. The social resources and

community leadership and most importantly, people's own initiatives), all links to wealth creation and remains key players in alleviating poverty (Shaffer, 2008). At the same time, Narayan et al. (2009a) also unravels why some poor people fail to escape poverty, while others push themselves further into the scourge of poverty (Narayan et al., 2009b). This is because poverty is multi-dimensional and income poverty of a household often coincides with other indicators of poverty such as ill health, malnutrition, access to poor quality education, clean drinking water, sanitation, cooking fuel and electricity besides other problems (Alkire and Sumner, 2013). In this research, however, we try to link the paradigm of poverty alleviation to embrace the increasing capacities and choices (purchasing power) of women involved in MGNREGA, thereby, reducing the vulnerability of the marginalised women to a certain extent.

Key to poverty alleviation inherently manifests the strategy to women's empowerment (Luttrell et al., 2009). This framework is not new, neither it is an imposition of the global north but was adopted in the mid-1980s in the context of contentious development discourse, as a result of the debates generated by feminist movement (Batliwala, 2007). The lexicon of women's empowerment signifies a transformative strategy to poverty alleviation based primarily on the principles of public participation, self-help, micro-credit and reservation of women within local self-governments (Batliwala, 2007). As argued by Batliwala (2007), the language of women's empowerment in India entered the political discourse largely as a result of Indian women's movement challenging patriarchal gender

knowledge held by an individual or community that enable the individuals or community to extend their influence and achieve their accomplishments are termed as social capital (see for instance, Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, it refers to the idea that access to and participation in groups can benefit individuals and communities. It also functions closely with other forms of capital such as human, cultural, economic and environmental (see, Shaffer, 2008).

relations and replacing official terminologies such as 'women's welfare', 'women's development', and 'women's upliftment' (Bhattacharyya, 2009). Gradually, in India, empowerment of women has turned from a politicised jargon into panoply of pro-poorest development-intervention policy agendas. GOI holds that empowerment through large-scale mobilisation of marginalised and poor women remains a key to solving the problem of poverty. It is necessary here to be explicit about what is meant by women's empowerment. Empowerment is a process of developing the individual as well as the collective capacities of women and their spheres of actions (Batliwala, 2007; Luttrell et al., 2009). However, the definition of empowerment resides within the notion of power (Kabeer, 1999; Luttrell et al., 2009). John Allen (2003: 2) links diverse everyday geographies of social action with power and argues that it "is a relational effect of social interaction". Reviewing the contributions of different social scientists, such as Michel Foucault, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Michael Mann and Gilles Deleuze, Allen shows how space determines the role of power to a large extent. He goes on to deepen the notion of power by unsettling that power is a dynamic force which can be held or possessed by individuals as well as by the social and political organisations and disseminated intact across contemporary geographical landscape. Arguably, then, empowerment may be defined as a means of 'enabling power' or 'power to' (act) as opposed to 'power over' (someone) (Rowlands, 1995; Luttrell et al., 2009). Jo Rowlands (1995) divided 'power' into four discrete categories: power over (ability to influence and coerce); power with (power from collective action); power within (self-reliance and self-confidence) and power to (organise and change existing hierarchies). Feminists argue that power is not a game of zero-sum, that is, one form of empowerment does not replace with another, instead different forms of power bear consequential implications for the operationalisation of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1995; Luttrell et al., 2009).

As stated here and elsewhere, central to MGNREGA's objectives is to reduce poverty and empower women through increased self-reliance and job security (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009; Khera and Nayak, 2009). Jean Drèze, the key architect of this unique neo-liberal public works programme holds that MGNREGA is one of the most radical legislations and perhaps the most progressive program in the world. Framed by the Ministry of Rural Development, GOI, MGNREGA aims at providing social assistance by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment to the rural poor per household in every financial year, especially during the lean agricultural season to those needy people belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST), the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Minorities. Activities of MGNREGA aims at rural infrastructure development and entails unskilled manual labour such as digging of new tanks/ponds, percolation tanks, construction of small check dams, rural road construction and connectivity, cemetery building and land filling. Undoubtedly, MGNREGA is a social welfare policy concerned with labour markets and the rural family, which endeavours to enhance rural employment and stimulate rural economic growth (Drèze, 2007; Jones et al., 2009; Sjoblom and Farrington, 2008). MGNREGA, built upon earlier public works programme, was passed as a law by the Parliament of India in September 2005 and was launched formally in February 2006. It is well documented that MGNREGA is an equal opportunity act: it is gender sensitive in the way that it entails that at least one third of the beneficiaries should be women (Jones et al., 2009; Sudarshan, 2011). As mentioned above, Drèze and Khera (2009) have reported that MGNREGA is a unique lifeline for rural women, who otherwise, seldom get a chance to earn their own cash (as opposed to unpaid housework and childcare activities at home). Striking features of MGNREGA as evidenced from the discussions of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)¹¹ workshop on Women's

Empowerment at MGNREGA suggests that MGNREGA has been significant in achieving gender parity of wages and most importantly, 79% women collect their own wages; 68% keep their own wages. In similar context, a plethora of studies have shown that the percentage of women outnumber their male counterparts in MGNREGA workforce (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009; Khera and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011). Seemingly, MGNREGA *Sameeksha* (2006-2012), an anthology of research reports that MGNREGA has proved to be much more credible than a mere pro-poor survival scheme: strengthens income security, intensifies food intake, plummeted incidence of poverty, and lessens mental depressions and proliferation of positive health outcomes. Scholars however, comments that all India participation of women at MGNREGA has increased marginally from 40% of the total workforce in 2006-07 to 53% in 2012-13 (Figure 1, page 98). Women's participation is highest in Kerela (93%) followed by Pondicherry (84%), Goa (81%) and Tamil Nadu (75%), all these states can be very well labelled as 'WMGNREGA' (W stands for women). It is lowest in Uttar Pradesh (19%), followed by Jammu and Kashmir (20%): there remain large-scale varying levels of inter-state participation (Figure 1, page 98) of women at the MGNREGA sites (Khera and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011). Assam is one such examples (see, Table 2, page 99) where the participation of women beneficiaries in MGNREGA is less than the stipulated percentage of one-third of the total MGNREGA workers (Khera and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011). Moreover, our study reports that in the MGNREGA worksites of Assam nuanced issues of gender equality (including the problem of childcare) remain limited. This observation bears resonance to the study as reported by Jones et al. (2009) and Khera and Nayak (2009). Now we turn to address the methodological issues.

Guaranteed Employment, Institute for Human Development - UNIFEM Workshop,
<http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Engendering%20NREGA%20-%20Workshop%2031%20August%202009.pdf>,
(accessed November 30, 2009).

¹¹Engendering NREGA: Women's Empowerment through

Methodology

In this article we advocate Women in Development (WID)¹² approach because this programme (as well as MGNREGA) highlights the economic contribution of women to development,¹³ thus, augmenting increased bargaining power of the poor women. The seminal work of Esther Boserup (1970) formed the basis for WID framework. Boserup identified women as agents of development by emphasising their roles as workers and producers (Rathgaber, 1989). Importantly, this approach embraces the poverty alleviation paradigm (Chowdhry, 1995). In this research, we adopt the WID framework to make the women workers' voices heard at MGNREGA: that they are not only recipient agents but also social actors of transformation. Alongside, the WID approach also highlights the challenges and economic inequalities (including wages and discrimination), the women face while working at MGNREGA sites.

We began our field work in the months of August and September, 2009 in four remote areas of Assam, namely, Burka, Chandrapur, Barbhang and Muguriya, the first two situated in Kamrup district while the third and the fourth are in Barpeta district, where MGNREGA is on-going. Here, we deployed mainly in-depth interviews from feminist research methodologies and personal observations. In-depth interviews belong to qualitative research

methodology in which, in contrast to large-scale questionnaire surveys, a few cases are examined in depth (Dwyer and Limb, 2001). We conducted 16 in-depth interviews with women working under MGNREGA. In each location, we contacted a local resident/a member of a *Gram Panchayat*¹⁴, who in turn helped us to gain access to these participants. The richness of in-depth interviews lies in gaining the complexity of social relationship of the researched (Dwyer and Limb, 2001); in this case, the lived experiences of poor working Assamese women (Figure 2). Narayan et al. (2009a; 2009b) argues that qualitative interviews, like any other methods are prone to error. In similar context, we argue that for reliability and authenticity of our qualitative interviews, we have crosschecked and cross-referenced our interviewees by asking the same set of questions to all the women interviewed (Narayan et al., 2009a). Our personal observation in the field also helped us gain rapport and thus capture the actual but often squeamish images of the working women. Fictitious names are used for the interviewees and the details that may reveal their identity are not presented (Bhattacharyya, 2009).¹⁵ We conducted all the interviews in Assamese and the translations in English that appear in this article are also ours. Tables 1a and 1b present the biographical/narrative data. This part of the research thus sets the scene and context for the final part of the exercise, which provides a discussion of our findings.

MGNREGA in Assam through women's voices

According to the statistics produced by MGNREGA, in Assam, women constitute 21% (Table 2, page 99) which increased to 25% (2012-13) of the total job cardholders, whilst the all India figure shows that women occupy 53% of the total job cardholders. Table 2 (page 99) provides a detailed report of the percentage of the total number of women

¹² WID, WAD (Women and Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) are the three discursive theoretical approaches to gender and parallels broadly to liberal, radical and Marxist feminist perspectives. While the WID approach seeks to assimilate women into the process of development, the WAD theorists views that the capitalist development process exploits the poorest women of the world, especially the Third World Women and urges that changing international structures would improve women's position. While WID embraces women's empowerment and their independence, however, fails to take into account the structural inequalities between men and women, which are now replaced by GAD (Rathgaber, 1989).

¹³ "Women in Development" Women 2000
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/women%20in%20development%201992.pdf> (accessed July 20 2008)

¹⁴ An institute of local self-government.

¹⁵ We used a consent form either duly signed or thumb printed by the participants. All the participants were made clear that their biographical information would only be used for academic purpose.

employed at the MGNREGA sites of Assam for the financial year (FY) 2009-2010. This table highlights the kind of manual activities engaged in by the workers of Assam at the MGNREGA sites. Importantly, the monitoring report produced by the Department for International Development (2007) suggests that Assam remained one of the best MGNREGA performers in 2006-07 in terms of employment generation but fails in the year 2008-09 to retain its name in the same (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009). Apparently, Liu and Barrett (2013: 52)

reports that MGNREGA in Assam suffers not only from low participation rate, but is also “accompanied with high rationing among the poor”. However, this article reports on the subtle issues of struggles the women workers suffer from at the MGNREGA sites of Assam. In the following sections, we discuss a novel set of empirical findings, unravelling the hidden predicaments of women beneficiaries. First, though, we discuss MGNREGA as ‘a ray of hope’ for these women.



Figure 2: Working Women at MGNREGA, sharing their experiences [photo: courtesy of the authors]

Table 1 (a): Brief biographical information on each of the interviewees

No.	Names	Locality	Age	Marital Status/Years	Education Level	Caste	Religion	Language
1	Bina Das	Burka/Kamrup	40	M/20	Under Metric	OBC	H	A
2	Saru Kalita	Burka/Kamrup	28	M/4	Metric Pass	General	H	A
3	Gita Deka	Chandrapur/Kamrup	35	W/19	Illiterate	OBC	H	A
4	Rinti Deka	Chandrapur/Kamrup	35	M/9	Under Metric	OBC	H	A
5	Bharati Rajbonshi	Chandrapur/Kamrup	32	M/12	Illiterate	General	H	A
6	Dipa Ingti	Chandrapur/Kamrup	28	M/13	Illiterate	ST	H	A
7	Dina Deka	Chandrapur/Kamrup	40	M/20	Illiterate	OBC	H	A
8	Mun Kalita [†]	Chandrapur/Kamrup	40	M/19	Illiterate	General	H	A
9	Ala Kalita	Borbhang/Barpeta	45	M/23	Illiterate	General	H	A
10	Jonali Roy	Borbhang/Barpeta	40	M/20	Illiterate	SC	H	A
11	Moni Barman	Borbhang/Barpeta	36	M/4	Under Metric	General	H	A
12	Nita Choudhury*	Borbhang/Barpeta	45	M/Separated	Under Metric	General	H	A
13	Jina Talukder	Borbhang/Barpeta	33	M/16	Under Metric	General	H	A

14	Rupali Talukder♣	Borbhang/Barpeta	35	M/7	Under Metric	General	H	A
15	Sabita Das	Muguriya/Barpeta	28	M/9	Under Metric	General	H	A
16	Konika Roy	Muguriya/Barpeta	40	M/24	Under Metric	OBC	H	A

Table 1 (b): Table 1b: Brief biographical information on each of the interviewees

No.	Names	Monthly Income (in₹)	Nature of Family	No. of children /Ages	Nature of MGREGS jobs	MGNREGA jobs approval	Other waged work
1	Bina Das	8,500	Nuclear	2/18, 16	Supervisor (Voluntary)	Approved	SS
2	Saru Kalita	6,000-8,000	Joint	3/12, 10, 2	Supervisor (Voluntary)	Approved	SS
3	Gita Deka	2000	Nuclear	3/14, 15, 18	JCH	D	WW
4	Rinti Deka	1500-2000	Nuclear	3/8, 6, 4	JCH	D	Weaver
5	Bharati Rajbonshi	1500-2000	Nuclear	6/11,10,7,6,4,1	JCH	D	WW
6	Dipa Ingti	1000-2000	Nuclear	3/12, 8, 7	JCH	D	Weaver
7	Dina Deka	1000-3000	Joint	3/18,17,16	JCH	D	WW
8	Mun Kalita†	2000	Joint	4/18,17,10,3	JCH	D	Agri.Labour
9	Ala Kalita	2500	Nuclear	3/21,18,15	JCH	Approved	Weaver, Agri.labour
10	Jonali Roy	1800	Nuclear	3/17,16,15	JCH	D	Weaver, SHG
11	Moni Barman	3000	Nuclear	----	JCH	D	Weaver, Agri.labour
12	Nita Choudhury*	2800	Nuclear	-----	JCH	D	Domestic Worker, Weaver
13	Jina Talukder	2800	Nuclear	2/15, 12	JCH	D	Weaver, SHG, Agri.Labour
14	Rupali Talukder♣	2500	Joint	-----	JCH	D	Domestic Worker, Agri. labour
15	Sabita Das	2000-2500	Joint	2/8, 5	JCH	D	Weaver
16	Konika Roy	1500-2000	Nuclear	6/23,18,16,14	JCH	D	Weaver. SHG

† deserted by her husband but lives with her in-laws; * lives with own parents; ♣ first wife but lives together with the in-laws, husband and second wife; M=Married; OBC=Other Backward Communities; SC=Scheduled Caste; ST=Scheduled Tribe; H=Hindu; A=Assamese; JCH=Job Card Holder; D= Disapproved; SS=Social Service; WW=Wage Worker; SHG=Self-Help Group

MGNREGA- A ray of hope

This study produced results which corroborate the findings of a number of previous work in this field (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009; Khara and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011), however, it remains unique in the sense that it includes women's voices. It is well established that

MGNREGA serves as an institution through which poor people including women are empowered (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009; Khara and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan, 2011).

All the women interviewed are Hindus. Out of 16, nine (56%) belong to general or upper

caste, five (31%) belong to OBCs, while one each belong to SC and ST (13%). Majority of the interviewed women are either illiterate (44%) or have studied till high school (50%), while only one Saru Kalita has passed her matriculation exam (please see, Table 1a).

Evidence from the findings suggest that abject poverty have driven majority of these women (except the first two women interviewed, please see Table 1b) to work under MGNREGA: the total average monthly household income of the first two (12%) women interviewed is in between ₹6000-8000, while that of other 14 (88%) women is in between ₹1400-2300. The first two women worked as voluntary supervisors in MGNREGA while the other 14 women worked in MGNREGA as manual workers. All the 16 women interviewed are married and aged between 28-45. Interestingly, all the women interviewed earn cash from sources other than MGNREGA, especially when MGNREGA is not on (see, Table 1b): the narratives suggest that these women being the primary family caretakers and producers of food bear the brunt of tilling agricultural land, grinding grain, fetching water from a distant place, weaving for self-help groups and cooking.

Notwithstanding, MGNREGA is a well-proven venture having a positive impact on the increased level of household income (Drèze, 2004; 2007). Majority of the women beneficiaries interviewed have reaped the advantage of the scheme by increasing the family income (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009; Drèze and Khera, 2009; Khera and Nayak, 2009). Rupali Talukder, who otherwise is a domestic/agricultural labour, deserted by her husband (for not having children) but still lives with her in-laws, husband and second wife, narrates her story of joining MGNREGA and increasing her income.

“When three years ago MGNREGA was first implemented in our village, he (my husband) did not let me join the scheme. He used to tell me that jobs of MGNREGA are for ‘males’ and he feels ashamed if I go and

work over there. However, after his second marriage, he does not say anything. Last year, after joining MGNREGA, I bought a radio. Altogether, I got ₹10,000 from the scheme. With this, I have bought a bicycle and a bed for the family. I have also bought 15 kilogram of subsidised rate rice (at ₹7 per kg). Moreover, I have also helped my husband clear his debt (for the loan he had taken to celebrate his son’s birth ceremony). Most importantly, if I have to go somewhere, I do not need to beg him for money. Since, I have my own money; I can go anywhere I want to.”

(Rupali Talukder: 14)

In the West, feminist critics have suggested that social construction of women as dependents on men “both economically and morally, or as lesser beings- as fragile or in need of protection” (McDowell, 1999: 111), affects the everyday lives and the condition of women. With respect to similar perception, the key monitor of the Burka site, who is responsible for employing workers at his site told us that although the jobs at MGNREGA are government sponsored but, as mentioned earlier, demands hard manual labour inputs, and therefore is commonly perceived as ‘male’s work’. As a result, he is unable to employ women as manual workers at his sites. Instead, he has employed five women (including Bina Das and Saru Kalita alongside five men) as voluntary supervisors to monitor the worksites. Similarly, Rinti Deka, who is a weaver and mainly works from home because of her three young children (aged 8, 6 and 4 years) with no family support, reveals that her husband values women’s seclusion and therefore, does not approve of her working at MGNREGA but poverty, has driven her to participate at MGNREGA. She narrates her *clandestine* tale of joining MGNREGA.

“My husband did not let me join MGNREGA because he does not want me to go out and do manual work at MGNREGA sites with other male counterparts. Although, my husband is a job cardholder but he too does

not work at MGNREGA, instead he works in the agricultural fields where the wage is higher than working at MGNREGA. However, poverty alongside growing price rise has made our lives miserable. Therefore, I go and work in my husband's job card. Nevertheless, have to leave the children at home, as there is no place to keep them at worksites. Whenever I return from MGNREGA activities, I always find a tensed/chilly environment at home. My husband keeps on passing sarcastic comments, which is often difficult to digest-making me feel guilty about leaving the children at home".

(Rinti Deka: 4)

This evidence presented here and elsewhere of our study is reinforced by a number of presentations made at the UNIFEM workshop (2009). The workshop stressed that instead of putting women to hard physical labour, provisions should be made at MGNREGA for skilled and semi-skilled amenities like artisanal work, weaving and so on. Further, the extrapolation of our findings suggest that majority of the women (81%) failed to receive any support from the family members to join MGNREGA works (please refer to Table1b), rather it is their self-motivation (Narayan et al., 2009a) and economic constraints that compelled them to work at MGNREGA. This finding of our study, however, fails to bear resonance to the findings as reported by Khera and Nayak (2009: 51), who argues that MGNREGA works are regarded as 'socially acceptable' because women here work in groups, and most importantly, these works are provided by the government.

However, Dipa Ingti and Moni Barman, despite disapproval of their husbands, have joined MGNREGA because the act has ensured them of an additional income per year, thus helping them to build a credible image in their family.

"I have three young children (two daughters aged 12 and 8 and a son aged 7 years). Since, the children are growing, their demands are rising, which otherwise I cannot afford with my job as a weaver.

Although, my husband is a daily wage worker but the income is not sufficient to run the family efficiently. Therefore, I joined the scheme. My husband does not approve of my MGNREGA job but my daughters like it because I am able to pay off their tuition fees."

(Dipa Ingti: 6)

"I am married for last four years and I still don't have children, so we are only two of us. My husband does not want that I should join MGNREGA because he is afraid that my parents might not like it. Moreover, he himself feels embarrassed about women going out and doing unskilled manual work. However, when my husband was selected for 'home guard training', we needed to pay for his training fees. Therefore, instead of borrowing money from my parents, I decided to join MGNREGA. MGNREGA helped me to pay the fees for his training."

(Moni Barman: 11)

Arguably, the activities of MGNREGA have emerged to a great extent in response to the needs of these women: the women are self-empowered agents, developing their consciousness and taking own decisions (power within) to bring about transformation in their own family (Drèze and Khera, 2009; Khera and Nayak, 2009).

In this way, these women have been successful in challenging certain patriarchal norms associated with Assamese social and cultural institutions: here, the women have deployed their enduring capacity of 'power over' (Allen, 2003; Rowlands, 1995) to tackle the "power dynamics at the household level" (Luttrell et al., 2009: 6). In short, the narratives suggest that these women have found their own ways not just to cope with poverty, but often transcended the limitations under which they are placed (Narayan et al., 2009a; 2009b). Therefore, MGNREGA can be stamped as a ladder for social change- an organisation of collective action (power with) to promote individual capacities through job and social security, which in turn might help to challenge

and transform power relations (see, Rowlands, 1995; Luttrell et al., 2009).

Childcare provisions at MGNREGA

Childcare remains a prime responsibility of women and in most cases the child's mother. However, in India, there is very little research on childcare strategies as well as the use of complementary or formal childcare facilities by the working parents. Notwithstanding such disjuncture, MGNREGA legislation provides childcare facilities by deputing a woman worker at the worksites where "the numbers of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site are five or more" (paragraph 28, schedule II of MGNREGA). Further, the person, who is appointed to childcare, is entitled to the same minimum wage as other beneficiaries (paragraph, 29, schedule II, MGNREGA). However, our study provides strong evidence to suggest that there is no provision of childcare or proper shade for children near the worksites. This finding of our study supports previous research (Narayanan, 2008; Khera and Nayak, 2009; see also Holmes and Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2009). Moreover, there were no functional '*balwadi*' or '*anganwadi*' in the villages where our study was conducted. Among the 16 women interviewed, 13 have children and six women have minor children ranging from the age of one to 12 years (Table 1b). Thus, there are about 24-27 children needing childcare. This is however, the case with infants aged one to five. Bharati Rajbonshi, a lactating mother for instance, takes her one year old child to the worksite along with her eldest daughter (who is 11 years old and misses school during those days) to look after the child:

"Economic constraints have compelled me to join MGNREGA. During the days of my work as a job cardholder, I take my eldest daughter to look after my one-year-old child. I feed my child in between the work. My daughter looks after him under the shade of a tree. But it becomes very difficult when it rains or when the baby is sick"

(Bharati Rajbonshi: 5)

Appalling evidences suggest that trees remain the key source of shelter during the rainy and the sunny days (Figure 3). There are also evidences to support complete absence of basic facilities such as safe drinking water, toilets, first-aid box and rest room at those worksites where the study was conducted. Sabita Das, who hails from an extended family and a mother of two young children (aged 8 and 5 years), illustrates her problems at the worksite:

"I live in a joint family and my husband is a mason. Both my sister-in-law and me are job cardholders and my mother-in-law is not in a position to look after four children. My elder son goes to school but younger one does not. However, when MGNREGA works are on my elder child misses school and I take both of them to the worksite. As there are no big trees nearby for shelter, I make them sit under the sun. There is also no tube well around, so have to fetch water from home. I wake up at 5 am in the morning, do my household task and pack food, water and snacks for three of us. Moreover, there is no urinal. We have to go far away behind the bush where nobody can see us to release the tension"

(Sabita Das: 15)

Further evidence suggest that as a result of the lack of these amenities, women with minor children like Rinti Deka and Dipa Ingti are hesitant to take their children to the worksites, instead leave the children alone at home and themselves remain worried at the worksites. Strikingly, evidence suggests that it can be often hazardous to put a minor child at the worksite with no guardians to look after. Mun Kalita, whose husband has left her and has not turned up for more than a year, lives with her mother-in-law, four children and four sisters-in-law, illustrates her experience of taking her three year old daughter to the worksite:

"I have the responsibility to look after my mother-in-law, sisters-in-law and my four daughters. My monthly income is

approximately ₹2000. I cook the breakfast the previous night as it lessens my morning work. I wake up at 4:30 am in the morning: clean the utensils that were left over after dinner and fetch water from the public tube well. Then I prepare my daughters for school. I reach the worksite at 7:30 am. My mother-in-law cooks the afternoon meal while my sisters-in-law helps in other household tasks such as washing clothes, sweeping, dusting, weaving etc. It is extremely difficult and often dangerous to take little children to the worksite. As you see, I have complementary childcare at home to look after my three-year-old daughter but on three occasions I had to take her with me to the worksite. I used to make her sit at the spot under the shade of a tree where I worked but she used to follow me wherever I go. I could not concentrate on the work as at the back of my mind I kept thinking of her safety”.

(Mun Kalita: 8)

Superficially, these extracts here and elsewhere, suggest how families and geography of social capital interact: Rupali Talukdar’s relational connections, the compromise to live with her husband and the second wife within the same household and her attitude to help the family financially; the interesting alliance between Mun Kalita, her mother-in-law and sister(s)-in-law. It stimulates the role of everyday practices, poverty and the utilisation and maintenance of social capital within the family. Together, these extracts illustrate how the role of everyday lives of these poor women and their hidden power are maintained within the family through the socially negotiated ties, norms, values, interactions and relationships (see for instance, Bourdieu, 1977).

Holmes and Jones (2009) suggest that limited or no childcare facilities at MGNREGA worksites is a key lacuna especially for women with minor and infants. Arguably, MGNREGA, as of now, only caters “to able-bodied workers” (Holmes

and Jones, 2009: 7). Holmes and Jones (2009) go on to argue that even where there exists limited childcare facilities, such facilities are dubious, often a shade to protect children from the sun, with little or no access to food, drink and learning facilities. Prior studies have also suggested that improved childcare facilities at MGNREGA worksites would encourage mothers of young children to join the programme (Khera and Nayak, 2009; Narayanan, 2008; Sjoblom and Farrington, 2008). According to Jean Drèze, provision of childcare should be made imperative in those areas where there are demands from at least five women; this would further arbitrate in as a vehicle of fabricating wider social acceptance of childcare facilities as central to women’s right to work (Drèze and Oldiges, 2009). Childcare provision at MGNREGA worksites can have a direct impact on gender, empowerment and poverty alleviation through enabling employment of mothers with children; there may also be longer-term benefits in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. Scholars argue that improved childcare facilities could act as a road to increasing the potentiality of MGNREGA (Khera and Nayak, 2009; Narayanan, 2008; Sjoblom and Farrington, 2008). “Providing proper crèches with facilities either on work sites or in villages, or through mobile crèches, would not only enhance women’s equal participation in public works programmes, but would also support children’s wellbeing at an early age” (Holmes and Jones, 2009: 10; Jones et al., 2009). Further, better childcare provision, apart from leveraging full potentiality for women to work at MGNREGA could allow the elder child/children to attend schools. In this way, MGNREGA can prove to be a unique tool in mobilising women on a large scale for varied labour intensive public works in rural areas (Drèze, 2004; 2007). Notwithstanding, where the planners fail to provide childcare; there should be flexible working hours for women with minor children and infants, which in turn would enable more mothers to participate in MGNREGA.



Figure 3: Daughter and one-year old child of Bharati Rajbonshi and the tree where they take shelter when their mother works for MGNREGA [photo: courtesy of the authors]

Lack of Transparency

The national budget for the financial year (FY) 2006-2007 was ₹11.3 billion, which increased to ₹39.1 billion in the FY 2009-2010 through to ₹33 billion in the FY 2013-14. MGNREGA is financed through a contribution of the central government (90%) and through expenditure by the states (10%). Most of the money is directly mobilised and monitored by grampanchayats. It is apparent from our study that MGNREGA in Assam fails to ensure 100 days of employment. This is largely because of entry of unscrupulous contractors becoming a threat to MGNREGA, as opposed to Schedule I, section 11, stealing away a lion's share of the benefit, and reducing the employed days of the job cardholders. In addition, majority of the participants have complained that they earn less than the stipulated minimum wage meant for Assam, which stands at ₹136. Alongside, interesting evidence show that the worksites are plagued by corruption (Drèze and Khera, 2009; Sjoblom and Farrington, 2008) where implementing agencies fail to provide the job cardholders the minimum materials (such as the cart, spade) required of the job. Instead, the beneficiaries themselves have to make arrangement or hire these materials; this further reduces their daily wages. Ala Kalita, who works as an agricultural labourer, when MGNREGA is not on, portrays her difficulties of job experience at MGNREGA.

“My children have grown up but my husband, who is also a daily wage worker, cannot afford to meet the needs of the children. That is why; I have joined

MGNREGA for some extra income. Last year, I worked at MGNREGA for 60 days, this year I only worked for 26 days so far. Previously, we were waged daily but now contractors have poured in into the system and we have to work under them. I work as an agricultural labourer where I plant the seeds, but working at MGNREGA is even harder. At MGNREGA, we have to push the loaded cart (*thela*) from one place to another. At first, I used to feel shy to push the cart but economic hardships have swept away my shyness. Sometimes when the cart becomes too heavy, I fail to push it. However, we women do not receive any help from the fellow male labourers because they think that ‘since we are all equally paid, why should we help these women’. However, after all that hard work, the money we receive is very less when compared to the daily wage of ₹100 at the agricultural field. Although, the daily wage at MGNREGA is ₹100¹⁶, out of this total, I need to pay ₹30 for the cart(s), I hire for the work. So, in reality I receive only ₹70 in a day at MGNREGA”

(Ala Kalita: 9)

These painful evidences entail the existence of enormous exploitation of the beneficiaries (Drèze and Khera, 2009). Arguably, the failure of the act at our study area is attributable to poor administrative management. Ironically yet

¹⁶ In the FY 2009-2010, MGNREGA wage was ₹100, which increased to ₹136 from April, 2012, MGNREGA *Sameeksha* (2006-2012)

unsurprisingly, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), GOI (2013), while reporting the performance of the MGNREGA between April 2007 and March 2012 unfolds that Assam ranks first in misappropriation of funds and second in employing 2,016 false workers (termed as 'ghost workers') in muster rolls and paid an amount of ₹ 2.6million in 2011-12.¹⁷ For Assam, this act has been a corruption and a fraud generating Act. The Government of Assam therefore, should take an initiative to implement biometric smart card system for disbursement of MGNREGA wages to the beneficiaries, which would not only increase transparency and speed up the payment method but also decline gross irregularities and malpractices.

Conclusion

The research largely advocates a WID approach and seeks to mediate intersections between women's empowerment, gender and poverty. Application of this approach sheds new light on the lived experiences of women working at MGNREGA: and their relative access to guaranteed paid employment. MGNREGA is leverage to women's empowerment (power within). Even though propelled by economic necessity, these women have been able to spend their earnings for household goods and other consumption (MGNREGA *Sameeksha*, 2006-2012). Arguably, for this sample of women, MGNREGA is a rural lifeline, albeit multi-dimensional poverty remains endemic to their lives. Notwithstanding, the in-depth interviews unpack, some of the struggles the women confront (including childcare) at the worksites and also at home. While MGNREGA remains a good legislation in theory but it is not so in practice, at least in Assam, where it is often full of contradictions. The findings suggest that although MGNREGA recognises connections between gender equality and

poverty alleviation but persistence of gender inequality results a chain of exploitation and vulnerability of women; absence of childcare facilities, even if not a complete barrier, it remains a great hindrance to women's full participation at the worksites. In addition, the absence of other worksite facilities such as toilets, first aid, and work-site-equipments reflects a handicap of poor institutional capabilities. These entire lacuna marginalises all the beneficiaries rather than improving their lives. Further, presence of contractors and discontinuity of work are saddled by the yoke of massive corruption, ensuring lack of transparency and inefficiencies within the system. Therefore, the question remains as to whether MGNREGA in rural Assam serve its ambition of fabricating durable infrastructure, which could contribute to long-term welfare and employment or will it ever remain a mirage of development?

In this research, we deployed 16 participants through in-depth interviews. Although, this sample is small to arrive at a general conclusion of women's persistent constraints at MGNREGA, we suggest that this research serves as a starting point from which critical reflections on gender and MGNREGA can be developed: critical reflections that may be key to (re)construct the already existing provisions and related debates of MGNREGA policy so that it can be transformed into a women friendly policy. Following are the key insights, which emerged as a subject for further investigation:

First, Harvey (1973) suggests that social justice should be an important issue for urban planners. In similar context, we argue that gender discrimination that persists at MGNREGA should remain a central issue for the policy makers as failure to do proper gender analysis might lead to ineffective policies, not only in terms of women's participation in manual works but also the extent in the quality of their work, participation in decisions regarding selection of works, conducting of social audits and so on.

¹⁷ CAG exposes gaping holes in Assam MGNREGS (2013, April 24). *The Times of India, Guwahati*, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-24/guwahati/38789115_1_cag-ghost-workers-rural-employment-guarantee-scheme (accessed April 24, 2013).

Second, in order to understand the evidence of persistent inequality we need to probe the male workers' attitudes at MGNREGA. We need to better understand the extent to which the male workers' perceptions differ from their female counterparts, perhaps by advocating Gender and Development (GAD) approach. As such, this research produces a direction for future research, where it is suggested to include the male participants' more fully in in-depth interviews.

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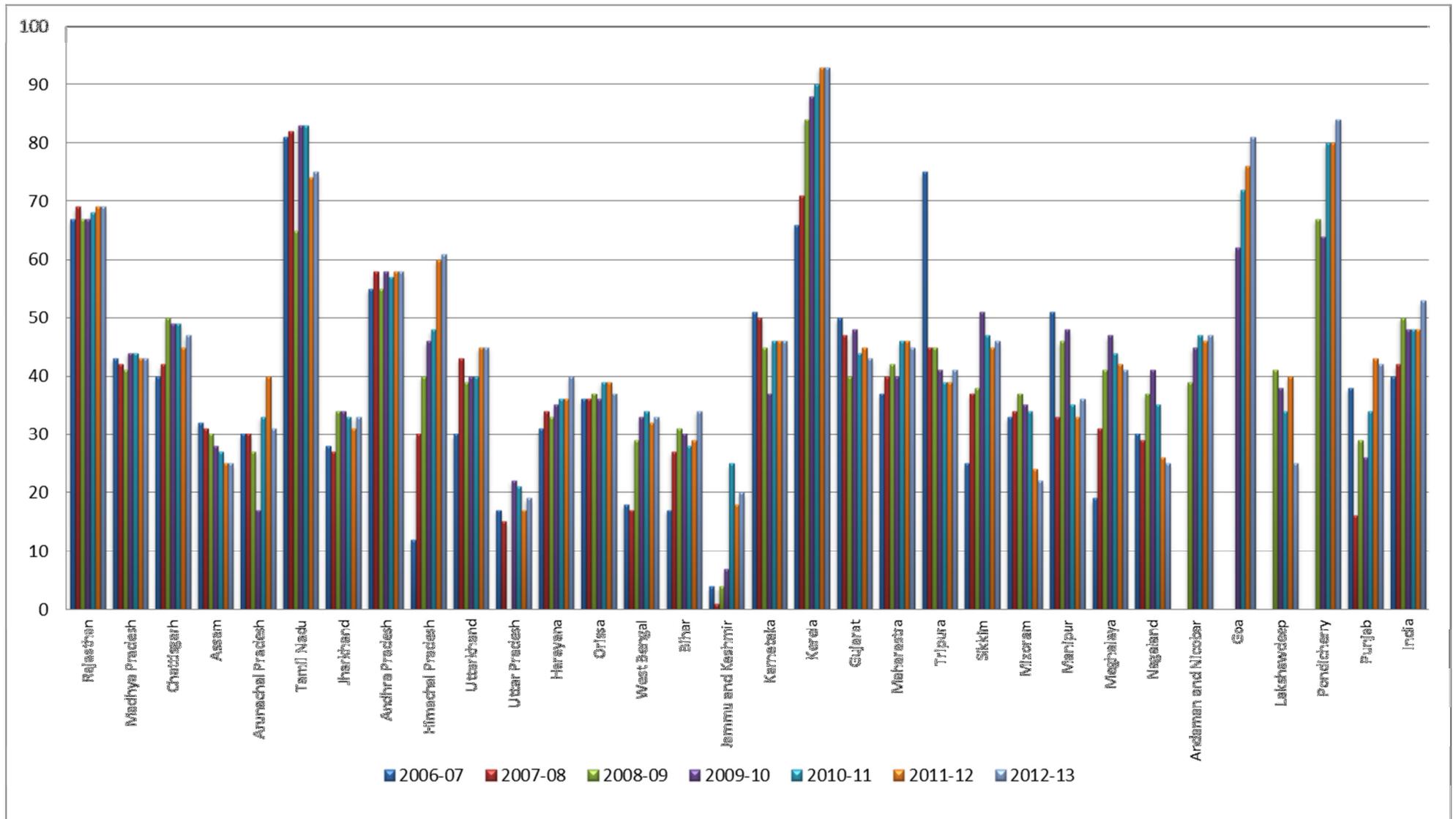


Figure 1: Share of women's participation, Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2006, (in percentages)

Source: Official data as posted on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 website (<http://nrega.nic.in/>)

Table 2: Work category wise women employment (in percentage) at MGNREGA sites of Assam, 2009-2010

Work category	Worker Employed		Total number of workers employed	Percentage of workers	
	Women	Men		Women	Men
Rural connectivity	54600	200627	255227	21	79
Water conservation and water harvesting	4583	20279	24862	18	82
Renovation of traditional water bodies	3290	15635	18925	17	83
Flood control	10650	34500	45150	24	76
Draught proofing	1743	6971	8714	20	80
Irrigation canals	3168	13143	16311	19	81
Irrigation facilities	165	319	484	34	66
Land development	7212	29874	37086	19	81
Other works	2408	9564	11972	20	80
Grand Total	87819	330912	418731	21	79

Source: National Employment Guarantee Act
http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/state_html/wrk_cat_men_women_dtl.aspx?lflag=local&state_code=04&state_name=ASSAM&page=S&fin_year=2009-2010, November, 22, 2009)

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