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An Inter-state Analysis of Women's Participation in MGNREGA

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The inter-state variations in the participation of rural women in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India poses major challenges to the success of the programme. The present article tries to find out how demographic, socioeconomic and gender development indicators impact inter-state variations across the states. The major finding of the article is that in the states where poverty and gender inequality are deeply intertwined and factored into low human development, women's participation in MGNREGA tend to be minimal. It suggests policy reforms to tackle the various nuisances that rural women confront in their daily lives and minimise gender inequalities in public work programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

"Constraints to women's economic participation, productivity, and returns reduce the quality of life of women and their families but also hold back progress toward national goals for poverty reduction and inclusive growth (goals shared by ADB)" (Asian Development Bank, 2013: 6). The weaker position of women when it comes to ownership and control of assets and their vulnerability in the market economy restrict the nation's progress towards inclusive economic growth (Kelkar, 2011). A large proportion of women continue to be engaged in the marginal agriculture sector, which has been marked with shrinking productivity and low wage rates (Dasgupta and Sudarshan, 2011).

Self Attested by Ravuru Narasaiah.

A significant number of rural women work in the informal sector without social protection or reasonable wage guarantee. Drafting policies on better work conditions and opportunities for women in the rural economy is therefore imperative. Several programmes have been implemented by the government for the creation of livelihood opportunities for the marginalised people including women. These programmes comprise Food for Work Programme (FWP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojna (JRY), and Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). Though these programmes were designed to create employment opportunities for both sexes, female participation rate in these programmes has remained dismal; possibly, due to lack of any policy incentives towards attaining gender equity. As per official estimation, women's share as beneficiaries in all the wage employment programmes was cumulatively at 23.76 percent at the national level in the financial year 2006–07 (IAMR, 2010). With the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in the financial year 2006–07, women's participation perceptibly doubled to 40.65 percent in rural public works under the MGNREGA.

Review of Literature

A vast amount of literature is available on the effects of the MGNREGA on rural women's lives. Earlier studies conducted by Pankaj and Tankha (2010); Holmes, Sadana and Rath (2011); Mehtabul (2012), Xavier and Mari (2014); Desai, Vashishtha and Joshi (2015); and Bhattacharyya (2017) have highlighted the positive effects of the programme on women's quality of life in terms of expansion of opportunities, literacy, improved health, nutrition, better access to public institutions like Gram panchayats and banks, and so on. Studies undertaken by Sudarshan (2011); Dheeraja, Madhuri and Daimari (2013); and Desai, Vashishtha and Joshi (2015) have highlighted the factors—statutory minimum wage and equal wages for women, regularity and predictability of working hours, gender sensitivity of the delivery system, local availability of works under the programme, active role of self-help groups and prevailing tradition of wage works—that promote participation of women in the workforce.

Some other studies have focussed on the implementation processes of the programme and identified the constraints that women face in accessing work under the MGNREGA projects. A study by Khera and Nayak (2009) identified several barriers such as social norms, lack of adequate childcare