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**Gendered Risks, Poverty and Vulnerability in India:  
Case Study of the Indian National Rural Employment  
Guarantee Act (Madhya Pradesh)**

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Indian Institute of Dalit Studies



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## Foreword

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has been amongst the first research organizations in India that focuses exclusively on the development concerns of the marginalized and socially excluded communities, who suffered exclusion and discrimination due to their group identity whether of castes, ethnicity, gender, religion, race, physical disability, region or any form of social identity. Over the last eight years, IIDS has undertaken several studies on different aspects of social exclusion, discrimination human poverty and inclusive policies a programmes for the historically marginalized social groups such as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes(ST) and Religious Minorities in India and other parts of the sub-continent. The Working Paper Series of the Institute disseminates empirical findings of the ongoing research and conceptual development on issues pertaining to the forms and nature of social exclusion and discrimination in multiples spheres; their consequences and suggests measures for inclusive development. Some of our papers also critically examine inclusive policies for the marginalized social groups.

This working paper “Gendered Risks, Poverty and Vulnerability in India Case study of the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Madhya Pradesh) is based on a research of IIDS which was carried out in Madhya Pradesh.

The paper attempts to analyse the extent to which National Rural Employment Gurantee Act (NREGA) addresses gender-specific economic and social risks to support the inclusion of women, specifically from marginalised communities, into India’s poverty reduction and growth redistribution processes.

The analysis of NREGA through a gender lens in this study has highlighted specific progressive gender-sensitive design features which support women’s participation in employment through the one-third quota, the provision of equal wages for women and men through the equal wages Act, and the promotion of women’s active engagement in the planning and evaluation of community assets through, for example, the social audit forums.

However, our findings suggest that both the conceptual design of NREGA and its implementation need to be strengthened to further support gender-equitable outcomes of the Act in the following ways: 1) *Greater attention to life-cycle vulnerabilities*, for example by providing options to transition from public works to direct support or less-physically demanding work during pregnancy and nursing. 2) *Recognise unequal division of labour in the household and intra-household bargaining power*, through flexible working

hours and ensuring the provision of bank accounts in women's name. 3) *Pay attention to the differential impacts of the structure and demography of the household* as this influences access to NREGA and the benefits gained from employment. An approach which entitles appropriate works for single women is needed and ensures that single women within households can access NREGA days. Similarly, when more than one family is living in an extending household, the benefits of NREGA are diluted. These reports suggest that reconceptualising the "household unit" by providing job cards to families or individuals within a household would be beneficial to the rural poor. 4) *Creation of community assets to reduce gender-specific vulnerabilities*, for example, public works activities aimed at reducing women's time poverty, such as improving fuel wood and water collection sources, or more broadly addressing discriminatory access to common property resources and sources of drinking water for SC/ST women. Broadening the narrow scope of types of works appropriate to rural productivity could also include a focus on healthcare, nutrition and literacy, skills programmes as well as improving market access and infrastructure for women and supporting investments and training in other agricultural activities. 5) *Promote the participation of women in community planning and monitoring of NREGA works*, through putting in place quotas for women's representation, flexible meeting times, awareness-raising about the importance of women's participation and mechanisms to strengthen their confidence in raising their voice and opinions in community decision-making processes. 6) In terms of implementation, *technical capacity building for staff at all levels of government*, including in the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), is needed to effectively articulate the importance of gender equality for rural development and poverty reduction. 7) *Institutionalising inter-sectoral coordination* is also vital to promote understanding of and attention to both gendered economic and social risks and vulnerabilities and the way they intersect. 8) *Strengthening the existing monitoring and evaluation of data collection and analysis* on gender-related dimensions of the programme would be beneficial to support changes in programme design and implementation. Improvements in data collection could include a focus on the gender-related benefits of the types of assets created; participation in decision-making structures; and budget allocations for capacity building on gender-related programme dimensions.

We hope this paper will be useful to those interested in the issues of gender and development in the context of poverty ridden rural societies.

**Rajendra P. Mamgain**  
**Director, IIDS**

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**Gendered Risks, Poverty and Vulnerability in India**  
**Case study of the Indian National Rural Employment**  
**Guarantee Act (Madhya Pradesh)**

**Rebecca Holmes** \*  
**Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal** \*\*  
**Saswatee Rath** \*\*\*

## **1. Introduction**

The importance of social protection mechanisms in low and middle income countries has received considerable attention in recent years, even more so in the wake of the recent food price and global economic crisis. While the gender dimensions of poverty and vulnerability are relatively well understood across countries, it is often assumed that gender inequality is already being addressed in social protection initiatives because many transfer programmes and public works programmes target women. This particular focus has largely been a result of evidence that women are more likely to invest additional income in family well-being as well as from a concern to promote greater representation of women in employment programmes. However, the role that gender relations play in social protection effectiveness is likely to be much more complex, affecting not only the type of risk that is tackled but also the programme impacts, as a result of pre-existing intra-household and community gender dynamics. Moreover, gender norms and roles may shape the choice of social protection modality, awareness-raising approaches and public buy-in to social safety net programmes.

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A vast range of social protection interventions – often referred to as social security, social safety net, poverty alleviation or social welfare programmes – are implemented in India with the objectives to reduce poverty, vulnerability and social inequalities. As the only country in South Asia where 100 per cent of the poor have access to either national or state-led social assistance programmes<sup>1</sup> (Baulch et al., 2008), India has a long history of implementing social safety net interventions dating back to its independence. Over the years the array of programmes has expanded to include health and nutrition programmes for women and children, social safety nets for vulnerable groups and disabled persons, labour market interventions, pensions and social funds, and public distribution system (of food) (Vaidyanathan, 2006).

In 2005 the Government of India launched its flagship safety net programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Despite India's history of safety net programming, NREGA is a pioneering public works initiative for a number of reasons: its legal enactment; equal wages for men and women; national coverage, and decentralised implementation structure through local government institutions. The scheme has dual objectives: providing a safety net for poor rural households through the provision of wages while simultaneously transforming rural livelihoods through the creation of productivity-enhancing infrastructure. NREGA guarantees 100 days of employment (unskilled, manual work) to all rural households on a self-selection basis and is cognisant of existing social inequalities which lead to the exclusion of women and marginalised castes and ethnic groups from economic growth opportunities, as has been identified in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (Planning Commission, 2008). Nationally, over 40 million households have taken up NREGA employment; almost 50 per cent of workers are women, 30 per cent of households belong to Scheduled Castes and over 20 per cent belong to Scheduled Tribe households. Assets created through NREGA employment are based on local demand on both community and individually-owned land: an important priority of the Act is the opportunity to improve the productivity of land owned by households belonging to the SC/ST, to land of the beneficiaries of land reforms, or to land of the beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana/BPL (below poverty line) families (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the extent to which NREGA addresses gender-specific economic and social risks to support the inclusion of women, specifically from marginalised communities, into India's poverty reduction and growth processes, to inform continued efforts to strengthen the programme's effectiveness.

### **1.1 Research Methodology**

The research methodology involved a mixed-methods approach of qualitative and quantitative work . It is structured around the following four areas (see Table 1):

1. Understanding the diversity of gendered economic and social risks;
2. Gender analysis of social protection policy and design;
3. Effects of social protection programme on gender equality, food security and poverty/vulnerability reduction at the household, intra-household and community level;
4. Implications for future policy and programme design to improve social protection effectiveness.

Research was conducted in four research sites (villages) in two districts of Madhya Pradesh: Khargone and Betul districts. Sites were selected drawing on a purposive matched sampling technique, which involved selecting two communities from each region with a similar poverty ranking, neither transient nor extreme poverty (approximately 'middling poor' and as being covered in the first phase of implementation of NREGS in 2006. Within the districts, two blocks were selected for having representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes households. In Bhagwanpura Block, two villages were selected (referenced Village 1 and Village 2) and in Betul Block two villages were selected (referenced Village 3 and Village 4).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Overview of Research Methodology**

| <b>Methodology</b>       | <b>Details</b>  |
|--------------------------|---|
| Desk Review              | Secondary data and programme document analysis  |
| Key Informant Interviews | National (policymakers, donors, international agencies, civil society, researchers); sub-national (government and non-government implementers)                        |
| Household Questionnaire  | Total of 100 households   |
| Focus Group Discussions  | Eight FGDs with beneficiaries (two male and two female groups per block)  |
| Life Histories           | 16 life histories (eight men and eight women) at different life/social stages: adolescence; married; single household heads (divorced, abandoned or widowed); elderly |

The main objectives of the desk review were to: map out key gender-specific vulnerabilities in the country; to identify how gender is (or is not) already discussed and integrated within the context of social protection policies and programmes at country level; to carry out a gender audit/mapping of the main social protection programmes and the extent to which they integrate gender considerations; and to contextualise the NREGS within the country's broader national social protection framework and related policy debates.

Using semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interviews were carried out at the national level in April 2009 during a scoping visit, and again in September 2009 to provide a broader understanding of social protection design decision-making processes and to explore the political economy dimensions of the integration of gender into social protection policies and programmes. At the sub-national level, key informant interviews with implementing agencies aimed to provide a better understanding of the key challenges of implementing social protection at the local level, and the implications/impacts of implementation challenges on households and individuals.

The household survey asked programme beneficiaries to identify two main quantifiable trends: 1) the dominant vulnerabilities and risks among households below the poverty line and the extent to which these risks are gendered and generational; and 2) both household and individual coping strategies in the face of the above risks, including both informal and formal social protection mechanisms. FGDs were then used to tease out the details of the social protection impacts, both direct and indirect impacts, at the individual household and community level.

Finally, the use of life histories (with beneficiaries representing different life/social stages from adolescence to old age) allowed for a more in-depth exploration of individuals' gendered experiences of risk and vulnerability, and the individual, household, community and policy factors that shape available coping/resilience strategies. They also provide insights into the relative importance of the NREGS in diverse individuals' lives.

### **2. Conceptual Framework: Gendered Economic and Social Risks and Social Protection Responses<sup>3</sup>**

Social protection, commonly defined as encompassing a subset of interventions for the poor – carried out formally by the State (often with donor or international non-governmental organisation (INGO) financing and support) or the private sector, or informally through community or inter- and intra-household support networks – is an increasingly important approach to reduce vulnerability and chronic poverty, especially in contexts of crisis (see Box 1). To date, however, the focus has been mainly on economic risks and vulnerability – such as income and consumption shocks and stresses – with only limited attention to social risks. Social risks, however – such as gender inequality, social discrimination, unequal distributions of resources and power at the intra-household level and limited citizenship – are often just as important, if not more important, in pushing households into poverty and keeping them there. Indeed, of the five poverty traps identified by the 2008-2009 Chronic Poverty Report, four are non-income measures: insecurity (ranging from insecure environments to conflict and violence); limited citizenship (a lack of a meaningful political voice); spatial disadvantage (exclusion from politics, markets, resources, etc, owing to geographical remoteness); and social discrimination (which traps people in exploitative relationships of power and patronage) (CPRC, 2008).

### **Box 1: Conceptualising Social Protection**

Drawing on Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's (2004) framework of social protection, the objectives of the full range of social protection interventions are fourfold:

- *Protective*: Providing relief from deprivation (e.g. disability benefits or non-contributory pensions);
- *Preventive*: Averting deprivation (e.g. through savings clubs, insurance or risk diversification);
- *Promotive*: Enhancing real incomes and capabilities (e.g. through inputs transfers); and
- *Transformative*: Addressing concerns of social equity and exclusion by expanding social protection to arenas such as equity, empowerment and economic, social and cultural rights, rather than confining the scope of social protection to respond to economic risks alone through targeted income and consumption transfers.

Social protection refers to a set of instruments (formal and informal) that provide:

- Social assistance (e.g. regular and predictable cash or in-kind transfers, including fee waivers, public works schemes, food aid);
- Social services targeted to marginalised groups (e.g. family counselling, juvenile justice services, family violence prevention and protection);
- Social insurance to protect people against risks of shocks (typically health, employment and environmental);
- Social equity measures (e.g. rights awareness campaigns, skills training) to protect against social risks such as discrimination and abuse.

## **2.1 The Gender Dimensions of Economic and Social Risks**

Poor households typically face a range of risks, ranging from the economic to the social. Vulnerability to risk, and its opposite, resilience, are both strongly linked to the capacity of individuals or households to prevent, mitigate or cope with such risks. Both economic risks (including the economic impact of environmental and natural risks) and social risks are influenced by gender dynamics and may have important differential impacts on men and women. Because they are socially constructed, gender roles and responsibilities are highly varied, and infused with power relations (WHO, 2007). Figure 1 maps out the ways in which economic and social risks can be reinforced or mediated from the macro to the micro level through, for example, policy interventions,

discriminatory practices embedded in institutions (e.g. social exclusion and discrimination in the labour market) and community, household and individual capacities and agency. Opportunities to enhance the integration of gender at each of these levels are highly context specific, and depend on the balance between formal and informal social protection mechanisms within a country as well as on the profile of the government agencies responsible for the design and implementation of formal mechanisms.

### **2.1.1 Gendered Economic Risks**

Economic risks can include declines in national financial resources and/or aid flows, terms of trade shocks or environmental disasters. Stresses might include long-term national budget deficits and debt, lack of a regulatory framework and/or enforcement of health and safety standards at work and lack of an economically enabling environment. Given men's and women's differential engagement in the economy, (i.e. the labour market), the impacts of macroeconomic shocks are highly gendered. For example, in times of economic crisis, women are often the first to lose jobs in the formal sector, such as in Korea during the financial crisis of 1997/98 (World Bank, 2009). In other parts of East Asia, including Indonesia and the Philippines, women gained in overall employment, because of their lower wages and lower levels of union organisation (ibid). Cuts in public expenditure are also likely to affect women more (in many contexts) because they tend to have greater responsibility for household health and education access. The effects on men and male identities of economic malaise are also increasingly recognised. Silberschmidt (2001), for instance, highlights the way in which rising unemployment and low incomes are undermining male breadwinner roles, and resulting in negative coping strategies, such as sexually aggressive behaviour and gender-based violence, in a bid to reassert traditional masculine identities.

At the meso or community level, the impacts of economic shocks are mediated by, for example, gender-segmented labour markets and institutional rules and norms (e.g. absence of affirmative action to address historical discrimination of women and marginalised social groups), which lead to poor access and utilisation of productive services by women. Women in general have less access to credit, inputs (such as fertiliser), extension services and, therefore, improved technologies (World Bank, 2009), which undermines their resilience to cope with stress and shocks.

**Figure 1: Impact Pathways of Vulnerability to Economic and Social Risks**



Source: Holmes and Jones (2009a).

How poor households are able to cope with and mitigate the impacts of shocks and ongoing stresses also depends on a number of factors at the micro or intra-household level. Household members' vulnerability is shaped by household composition (e.g. dependency ratios, sex of the household head, number of boys and girls in the household), individual and household ownership and control of assets (land, labour, financial capital, livestock, time and so on), access to labour markets, social networks and social capital and levels of education. Women typically have lower levels of education, less access, ownership and control of productive assets and different social networks to men, leading to lower economic productivity and income generation and weaker bargaining positions in the household. In times of crisis, moreover, underlying gender biases may mean that women's or female-headed households' assets are more vulnerable to stripping than those of men, the impact of which may be lengthy if what has been sold cannot be replaced. Women's bargaining position and entitlements may also be reduced more rapidly than those of male members of households (Byrne and Baden, 1995).



### **2.1.2 Gendered Social Risks**

Social sources of vulnerability are often as or more important barriers to sustainable livelihoods and general well-being than economic shocks and stresses (CPRC, 2008). At a macro level, social exclusion and discrimination often inform and/or are perpetuated by formal policies, legislation and institutions (e.g. low representation of women or minority groups in senior positions). In many countries, however, efforts to ensure that national laws and policies are consistent in terms of providing equal treatment and/or opportunities to citizens irrespective of gender, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality and disability are often weak or uneven, and hampered by a lack of resources to enforce such legislation, especially at the sub-national level.

At the meso or community level, absence of voice in community dialogues is a key source of vulnerability. For instance, women are often excluded from decision-making roles in community-level committees, and this gender-based exclusion may be further exacerbated by caste, class or religion. Some excluded groups are reluctant to access programmes or claim rights and entitlements, fearing violence or abuse from more dominant community members. Another critical and related variable is social capital. Poverty may be compounded by a lack of access to social networks that provide access to employment opportunities but also support in times of crisis. It can also reinforce marginalisation from policy decision-making processes.

At the micro or intra-household level, social risk is related to limited intra-household decision making and bargaining power based on age and/or gender, and time poverty as a result of unpaid productive work responsibilities and/or familial care work. All of these can reduce time and resources available for wider livelihood or coping strategies, and may contribute to women tolerating discriminatory and insecure employment conditions and/or abusive domestic relationships. Life-course status may also exacerbate intra-household social vulnerabilities. Girls are often relatively voiceless within the family, and a source of unpaid domestic/care work labour. The elderly (especially widows) also tend to face particular marginalisation as they come to be seen as non-productive and in some contexts even a threat to scarce resources.

## **2.2 Applying a Gender Lens to Public Works Programmes**

Public works – a subset of social protection programmes, involving public labour-intensive infrastructure development initiatives that provide cash or food-based payments to beneficiaries – have a number of technical and political benefits. They provide income transfers to the poor and are often designed to smooth income during ‘slack’ or ‘hungry’ periods of the year;<sup>4</sup> address shortage of infrastructure (rural roads, irrigation, water harvest facilities, tree plantation, school and health clinic facilities); are typically self-targeting owing to low benefit levels and heavy physical labour requirements (Subbarao, 2003);<sup>5</sup> and as such entail more limited administrative costs than many other social protection interventions. They are also politically popular as they require that programme beneficiaries work and are seen to be helping themselves (Bloom, 2009), whereas it can sometimes be challenging to generate support for cash transfers, for instance, especially those which are unconditional, particularly from middle-class voters (e.g. Behrman, 2007).

There are, however, a number of common challenges, including how to balance the objectives of quality infrastructure development with poverty reduction goals, and the level at which to set benefit levels so as to be adequate to make a difference in people’s lives and not stigmatise participants, but not so high as to necessitate quotas, which are more complex to administer and manage (Subbarao, 2003). Support mechanisms also need to be developed for those unable to work so as to ensure a minimum of equity (Bloom, 2009).

A review of historic and existing public works programmes in developing country contexts and the extent to which issues of gender equality are embedded in programme design indicates that a range of approaches have been developed to facilitate women’s participation, as discussed in Box 2. What is noteworthy, however, is that most programmes include only a limited number of these mechanisms in their design, thus limiting their potential impacts on gender equality at the intra-household and community levels (see Holmes and Jones, 2009b). Key concerns that have been identified relate to inadequate attention to women’s care work responsibilities (Kabeer, 2008), tokenistic representation of women in programme-related decision-making structures (Dejardin, 1996), gender-biased payment modalities (Antonopoulos, 2007), targeting of household heads, which tends to marginalise women living in male-headed households (ibid) and reinforcement of gendered norms of work (Quisumbing and Yohannes, 2004).

**Box 2: Mechanisms to Enhance Gender Equality in Public Works Programmes**

Early public works initiatives suffered from low levels of female participation, but over time a range of approaches have been adopted in an attempt to address this gender imbalance, including the following:

- Institutionalisation of explicit quotas for female programme participants (Ethiopia's PSNP, India's historic Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yohana programme and current National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP)).
- Provisions for gender-specific lifecycle needs, including allowing women time off for pregnancy and breastfeeding (Botswana's Labour-Intensive Rural Public Works Programme, Ethiopia's PSNP, India's NREGS), provision of work close to participants' homes (India's Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra) and of crèche facilities (Ethiopia's PSNP, India's NREGS) and flexibility in terms of women's working hours so they can balance their domestic and care work responsibilities (Ethiopia's PSNP, permanent part-time employment in South Africa's EPWP in KwaZuluNatal).
- Consideration of the particular circumstances of female-headed households, including household-level contracts for female-headed households (South Africa's EPWP) so that work can be shared more flexibly, and quotas for female-headed household participants (Ethiopia's PSNP).
- Guarantee of equal wages for men and women (Ethiopia's PSNP, India's Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra, NREGS)
- Provisions for women to take on programme supervisory roles (Bangladesh's Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP), Botswana's Labour-Intensive Rural Public Works Programme).
- Support so that women participants are better able to save through the establishment of savings groups (Nepal's Dhalugiri Irrigation Project) and have access to credit (Bangladesh's RMP, Ethiopia's PSNP) in order to be able to graduate from public works programmes.
- Linkages to complementary services that will empower women more generally, including provision of adult literacy classes for women (e.g. Senegal's Agence d'Exécution des Travaux d'Intérêt Public).
- Mechanisms which ensure that the type of work undertaken benefits women, either because of the nature of the community asset created (e.g. improvements in transport and roads which ease women's time burden in collecting water or fuel-wood, as in Zimbabwe's Rural Transport Study or Zambia's Micro-Project Unity (MPU)) or through provisions for women's involvement in decision-making processes about what types of community assets should be built using public works labour (e.g. Ethiopia's PSNP, India's NREGS, Zambia's MPU).

Indeed, Antonopolous (2007) argues that, because the design of public works programmes has focused largely on the productive sphere of work, there has been little attempt to redistribute the costs of social reproduction, thereby limiting the transformative potential of such programmes. Part of the problem is that the dominant type of community assets built through public employment guarantee programmes has been infrastructure projects, with little attention paid to projects that provide social services or those that target the efficiency and enhancement of public service delivery, and that could lighten women's unpaid care work burden (Antonopolous and Fontana, 2006). Antonopolous (2007) expands this line of argument and maintains that poor women could be remunerated for their care work by expanding public works programmes to include social sector activities. Given that social services are by their nature highly labour intensive, such activities would be well suited to workfare schemes. 'It is reasonable to make the assumption that in comparison to infrastructural projects, [social service activities] use more labor and fewer machines or other intermediate inputs' and are also well suited to 'unskilled' women workers. After all, many poor unskilled women are already carrying out such work, but unpaid and within the household.

### **3. Gendered Risks, Poverty and Vulnerability in India**

In this section we look at the key gendered economic and social risks in rural India at a national level and then focus on the key risks and vulnerabilities faced by men and women – and the main coping strategies used in response to these– in rural Madhya Pradesh, particularly in our research site locations.

#### **3.1 Economic Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Rural Sector**

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Second only to China in the Asian region, India's GDP grew by 9.5 per cent in 2007 (IMF, 2009), averaging at 8.7 per cent between 2003 and 2007 (Planning Commission of India, 2008). The government has set high growth targets for the country in the coming years: the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) has a target to achieve an average growth rate of 9 percent per annum (Planning Commission of India, 2008). Unlike other countries in the region, India has escaped a severe recession in the recent global economic crisis, although growth rates have slowed: India is set to grow at 5.4 percent in 2009, increasing

to 6.4 per cent in 2010, largely boosted by large policy stimulus that is increasing demand from domestic sources (IMF, 2009).

India's economy is not only growing rapidly, it is also transforming. Agriculture remains the largest economic sector in the country in terms of employment and livelihood, with more than half of India's workforce engaged in it as the principal occupation (Planning Commission of India, 2008). However, its contribution to GDP is currently declining while at the same time growth in the industrial and service sectors has been increasing over the last five years. The share of these sectors in GDP has grown to 26.4 percent and 55.1 percent, respectively, and the growth in service sector contributed more than two-thirds of the overall growth in GDP between 2002-03 and 2006-07 (Ministry of Finance, 2007 cited in IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

The agricultural sector has faced a number of challenges over the last decade or so. Growth of agricultural GDP decelerated from over 3.5 per cent per year during 1981–82 and 1996–97 to only around 2 per cent during 1997–98 and 2004–05 (Planning Commission of India, 2008). While there has been a slight upturn in agricultural performance since 2005, the sector as a whole, across most states, faces significant challenges, including widening economic disparities between irrigated and rain-fed areas; increased vulnerability to world commodity price volatility following trade liberalization which has had a particularly adverse effect on agricultural economies of regions growing crops such as cotton and oilseeds; inefficient use of available technology and inputs; lack of adequate incentives and appropriate institutions; degradation of natural resource base; and rapid and widespread decline in groundwater table, with particularly adverse impact on small and marginal farmers (Planning Commission of India, 2008).

The decline in the agricultural sector is of particular concern given the sheer number of people – more than half the population - dependent on this sector for their livelihoods. Despite recent economic growth poverty rates continue to be high, particularly in rural areas and among agricultural labourers. While international poverty lines using the US\$ 2 and US\$1.25 a day line estimates that 75.6 per cent and 41.6 per cent respectively of India's population of over one billion are living in poverty (UNDP, 2009), the national poverty line puts

the number at a lower 28.6 per cent of the population (over 300 million people). Poverty is highly concentrated in rural areas: 75 per cent of the poor live in rural areas and are mostly daily wagers, self-employed householders and landless labourers. Poverty is also highly correlated with social and ethnic discrimination. Due to the hierarchical and unequal nature of the caste system, groups at the lower end of the hierarchy – the scheduled castes - are denied access and entitlements to economic, civil, cultural and political rights and poverty is highly represented among them. Ethnic exclusion is another form of discrimination which groups like the adiwasis experience with similar outcomes as dalits in term of exclusion and deprivation. Data from the NSSO, 61<sup>st</sup> Round, 2004-05 shows that in 2000, poverty headcount in rural areas was highest among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (36.8 percent and 47.6 percent respectively) compared to 21 percent among the non-SC/STs.

With the decline in the agricultural sector, opportunities in the non-agricultural sectors which account for increased economic growth hold most promise for poverty reduction in India– rapid growth in rural services has been estimated to contribute at least as much as growth in agriculture toward reducing poverty in recent years (World Bank, 2007). The effects on poverty reduction from rural non-farm employment however have been mainly indirect (a result of upward pressure on agricultural wages benefiting the poor) because relatively few of the poor gain access to non-farm jobs (World Bank, 2007). Indeed, as the Planning Commission of India notes, “while slower growth of GDP in agriculture than non-agriculture is expected, the main failure has been the inability to reduce the dependence of the workforce on agriculture significantly by creating enough non-farm opportunities to absorb the labour surplus in rural areas and equipping those in agriculture to access such opportunities” (Planning Commission of India, 2008: iv). Similarly, the World Bank (2007) highlights the trend that in transforming economies like India, the transition of people out of agriculture and rural areas is not keeping pace with the restructuring of economies away from this sector. The low level and quality of education of most rural workers is mainly responsible for their inability to find jobs in the booming services economy (World Bank, 2007), but in India this is also compounded by existing social norms and discrimination which prevents certain social groups from entering new types of employment.

India's Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) aims to address these challenges by focusing on measures of "inclusive growth" through a three-pronged strategy: economic growth, income-poverty reduction through targeted programmes, and human capital formation. One of the government's flagship programmes is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which is seen to have an important role to play in transforming rural livelihoods and agricultural productivity in India.

The Five Year Plan recognises that economic and social inequalities prevent the poor from taking up opportunities in productive sectors, and by extension, this negatively impacts the growth potential of the economy. In the renewed policy focus in agriculture, the impact of growth on poverty in the agricultural sector will depend on the poor being able to take up opportunities in new growth processes (such as high value crops), either as smallholders or as labourers (World Bank, 2007). Importantly the Government recognises that the barriers to these opportunities are strongly affected by social group and gender. The Government of India states that "a major weakness in the economy is that the growth is not perceived as being sufficiently inclusive for many groups, especially Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and minorities. Gender inequality also remains a pervasive problem and some of the structural changes taking place have an adverse effect on women" (Planning Commission of India, 2008: 1). The Eleventh Five Year Plan demonstrates a significant step for gender equality in Indian policy and planning processes – for the first time in the history of Indian planning there is "an attempt to move beyond empowerment and recognize women as agents of sustained socio-economic growth and change" (Planning Commission of India, 2008: 4).

Women and marginalised social groups however continue to be vulnerable to a number of economic risks which prevent their take up of economic growth opportunities. First, women face a distinct disadvantage in the labour market compared to men. At a national level, women are less than half as likely as men to be employed: data from the fifth Economic Census 2005 shows that nationally, women only represent 19.3 per cent of the total workforce (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). Even within this, social discrimination plays a compounding role influencing women's unemployment and underemployment rates: in non-farm employment, a 2005 study across

three states showed that women from higher caste groups were more likely to be employed compared to females from SC, ST and OBC groups (Sukhadeo et al., 2005). The study found that the yearly employment for this group varied from a minimum of 73 days for ST female to maximum of 148 days for SC as compared to a high level of 290 days for high caste women (Sukhadeo et al., 2005).

Moreover, when women are employed, they are adversely incorporated into the labour market in a number of ways. They are less likely than men to receive cash wages or receive any earning at all (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). When they do receive wages they are unequal: the wage differentials between men and women for casual labour is 30 percent lower for women than for men - and 20 percent lower for the same task (World Bank, 2009). The type of work that women are employed in explains this discrepancy to some extent: the majority of employed women (56 per cent) are self employed and a quarter are casual labourers (25 per cent) (ISST, 2007). Women are over represented in casual wage labour in the agricultural sector but there is still inadequate recognition of the role that women play in agricultural decision-making – an increasing concern given the slow growth in agriculture (ISST, 2007). As ISST (2007) state “women’s mobility out of agriculture is far lower than male mobility and agriculture is increasingly dependent on women farmers. This feminisation of agriculture is reflected in the fact that 85 percent of rural women workers are in agriculture. The growing female face of agriculture is captured in the fact that close to 40 percent of agricultural workers are women” (ISST, 2007: 5). Moreover, Dalit and tribal women are predominantly agricultural labourers: in 2001 approximately 57 per cent Dalit and 37 per cent of ST women worked as agricultural labourer in rural areas as compared to 29 per cent for non SC/ST (NSSO, 55th Round, 1999-2000). The textile and clothing industry is the second largest source of employment in India after agriculture, providing direct employment to almost 35 million people including a substantial number of women (ISST, 2007).

Younger women (less than 25 years old) are further disadvantaged in the labour market in a number of ways. Younger women are less likely to be employed, and even when they are employed, they are less likely to earn cash and more likely not to be remunerated (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). For younger



men however, there is very little variation in employment and employment for cash in comparison to older men.

Secondly, women face particular discrimination in the ownership of and access to productive resources. While women constitute two-thirds of the agricultural workforce, they own less than one-tenth of the agricultural lands (NAWO, 2008). This is identified as a key challenge in India's Eleventh Five Year Plan, where it is recognised that with the share of the female workforce in agriculture increasing, and increased incidence of female-headed households, there is an urgent need to ensure women's rights to land and infrastructure (Planning Commission of India, 2008). In other words, as Agarwal (2006) explains, "while 11 percent of rural households are landless, a likely 85 percent of women from landed households are landless" (cited in ISST, 2007). The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 is an important step towards addressing this inequality by removing the gender discriminatory clause on agricultural land in India, but it is as yet unclear how far the legal change has been supported by other measures, such as awareness raising and government implementation in order to be effective (ISST, 2007).

Third, gender bias in rural institutions is also a key source of economic vulnerability. A major challenge which small and marginal farmers face is the lack of access to major agricultural services, such as credit, inputs, extension, insurance, and markets and again, this is even more problematic for female farmers because of a pervasive male bias in provision of such services. While the proportion of women having banks accounts, savings and loans is marginally higher for women who are employed for cash earnings, on average, only 10.7 per cent of rural women have a bank or savings account that they themselves use, and while 35.8 per cent know of a microcredit programme, only 4.4 per cent have ever taken a loan from one (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). Women belonging to scheduled tribes are much less likely to have access to these financial resources compared with women belonging to the other caste/tribe categories (IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

### **3.2 Social Risks and Vulnerabilities**

Economic risks and vulnerabilities are highly affected by and interact with social risks and vulnerabilities. While social empowerment is a central theme

in India's Eleventh Five Year Plan and investing in social development – particularly health and education – is recognised as central to achieving the overall economic growth and poverty reduction objectives (Planning Commission of India, 2008; IIPS and Macro International, 2007<sup>6</sup>), investment in the social sector has lagged behind progress in economic growth (Ibid).

India ranks relatively poorly in gender-related indicators. India is the lowest ranking country in the South Asian region in the Gender Equality Index which measures progress in women's economic activity, empowerment and education (ISST, 2007). In the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) India is placed at 114 out of 155 countries (2007 data) (UNDP, 2009). The GDI is a composite index measuring average achievement in the three basic dimensions captured in the human development index – a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living. India's low ranks on both measurements demonstrate the continued inequalities between men and women with regards to basic human development indicators, economic activity and status. Indeed, while India's literacy rate has been increasing, there is a substantial gender gap: in 2007, 54.5 per cent of females were literate compared to 76.9 per cent males (UNDP, 2009). There are also large disparities across social and ethnic groups: 79 per cent of Scheduled Tribe women, 73 per cent of Scheduled Caste women and 61 per cent of women from Other Backward Castes are illiterate (Planning Commission of India, 2008). In terms of school attendance, data from 2005-06 show that 43 percent of boys age 11-17 did not attend middle, secondary, or higher secondary school, and among girls, this proportion is even higher at 54 percent (IIPS and Macro International, 2009).

While health-related indicators have also been improving, the rate of improvement has been slow, and a number of indicators demonstrate key areas for concern. The maternal mortality rate has decreased from 400 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1997-98 to 300 in 2001-3, yet women's access to health care during child birth continues to be limited. Less than 40 percent of births in India take place in health facilities and more than half take place in the woman's own home – poor women are even less likely to be attended by a medically trained person during delivery (ISST, 2007). While infant and child mortality rates have been declining<sup>7</sup>, mortality rates amongst children are highest among SC and ST households and in rural areas girl children have higher mortality rates than boys, increasing with age up to five. Part of the

reason behind girls' higher mortality rates is the continued sex discrimination against girls. Women's low status and a preference for sons is a driving force for the unequal sex ratio in India and fuels female infanticide and girl-child mortality rates. While rates declined from 972 females per 1,000 males in 1901 to 930 in 1971, they now remain stagnant (IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

Low human capital development together with socio-cultural discriminatory norms leads to other multiple sources of risk and vulnerability for women and girls.

Early marriage continues to be prevalent in India leading to teenage pregnancy and motherhood – young women who become pregnant at an early age are likely to experience a number of health, social, economic, and emotional problems. Nationally, more than one-quarter of Indian women age 20-49 married before age 15 and over half married before the legal minimum marriage age of 18. In comparison, only 4 percent of rural men married between 15 and 19. The proportion of young mothers is higher amongst the rural poor and also higher among women from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Over the last few years data has shown a declining trend of early first marriages, but these are changing only at a very slow pace and a considerable proportion of women still marry below the legal minimum age at marriage.

A women's status and perceived status in the household has important implications for her ability to access and control resources. Status is often dependent on a number of factors – including position in the household (e.g. age, marriage status) as well as household structure and demography, assets owned at the time of marriage, and income. Simply earning a cash income therefore is not likely to be a sufficient condition for empowerment on its own, but also requires control over the use of earnings as well as the perceived relative importance of these earnings to the household. The potential for women's empowerment therefore is interlinked with women's ability to make decisions about their own earnings (alone or jointly with their husbands). IIPS and Macro International (2007) data shows that while a relatively small proportion (21 per cent) of women in rural areas decide how their own income is used, over half (57 per cent) jointly decide with their husbands. Variations

exist between religion and caste/tribe groups with husbands being more likely to be the main decision maker in the case of Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist and Hindu women and those belonging to the scheduled tribes.

While joint-decision making in the household is relatively common, women tend to have limited say in decisions other than small household expenditures but employment of women increases the likelihood of their participating in decision making (only if they are employed for cash). Non-nuclear household residence is associated with much lower participation in household decisions than nuclear residence (28 percent of women in non-nuclear households compared to 14 percent in nuclear households do not participate in any of the four decisions).

Freedom of movement outside the home is also linked to women's decision-making participation, their autonomy and empowerment. In many parts of India, *pardah*<sup>8</sup> is practiced which limits women's mobility, their ability to access health services and their ability to engage in market activities. Only just under half of married women are allowed to go the market on their own and forty percent are allowed to go with someone else. 15 per cent are not allowed to go at all.

Again, age, employment and household structure are important influencing factors. Employment (for cash) is associated with greater freedom of movement and nuclear residence is associated with greater freedom of movement than non-nuclear residence. Muslim women (26 percent) followed by Hindu women (34 percent) have less freedom of movement than women of other religions but there is little variation by caste/tribe status.

Cultural norms and accepted attitudes towards violence is also an important source of vulnerability and a key factor in women's empowerment – but one which is often invisible in policy debates. Violence, including domestic violence, has a detrimental impact on the economy of a country through increased disability, medical costs, and loss of labour hours; however, because women bear the brunt of domestic violence, they disproportionately bear the health and psychological burdens as well. In India while domestic violence was recognized as a criminal offence in 1983 only recently (in 2006) has a comprehensive civil law been put in place – the Protection of Women from

Domestic Violence Act (2005) - which recognises the specific complexities associated with domestic violence, including the embedded nature of violence within familial networks, the need for protection and maintenance of abused women, and the fact that punishment and imprisonment for the husband may not be the best resolution in every case (IIPS and Macro International, 2007: 493).

The main sources of gender-based violence tend to be a result of “disrespect for in-laws” and neglect of the house or children. Surveys show that violence remains relatively common among rural women: a third of women living in rural areas have experienced violence, and 21 per cent had experienced violence “often” or “sometimes” in the last 12 months before the survey. Reports of violence are slightly higher among employed women. The prevalence of violence is also much higher among women belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes and amongst the poorest: 45 per cent of women in the poorest quintile have experienced violence compared to 19 per cent of women in the highest wealth quintile.

Women are not just subject to violence within the household but violence is also shaped by social status. Evidence from 500 villages across India indicate that across all states Dalit women are subjected to constant harassment and violence from non-Dalits (Shah et al. 2006). Harassment takes numerous forms including verbal and sexual assault in the community, workplace and/or market by non-Dalits (Ibid).

In terms of participation and decision-making at community, state and national levels, the representation of women in government offices at the state level and the national parliament is low - between 4 and 10 per cent for all offices - even though women’s groups have been engaged in creating public opinion and mobilising women and supportive men to campaign for reservations for women in Parliament and State Assemblies (SST, 2007). The notable exception is in the Panchayat Raj Institutions where a quota for women was introduced in 1993, and representation is approximately 31 per cent (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007: 17). ISST (2007) highlights two major challenges however. One is that while decisive women leaders have emerged, in many places decisions are taken by men in the family with the ‘sarpanch pati’<sup>9</sup> being accepted as the authority, albeit informally. In addition, there are

significant limitations to the extent of “actual devolution of resources and authority which limits the ability of elected men or women to influence decisions at the local level” (ISST, 2007: 51).

### **3.3 Overview of Risks and Vulnerability in Madhya Pradesh Research Sites<sup>10</sup>**

The above sections discussed key gendered economic and social risks at the national level in India. Here, we focus in on the context-specific economic and social vulnerabilities experienced by men and women in Madhya Pradesh. Drawing on our survey data as well as the life history interviews, we provide an overview of the key risks that are faced by households in our two districts – Khargone and Betul (see Table 2) - which provide the context for our analysis on the gendered impacts of NREGA in section 4 below.

Madhya Pradesh is one of India’s poorest states due to a number of contributing factors, including governance challenges, environmental challenges and low agricultural productivity – Madhya Pradesh is largely a rain-fed semi-arid agro-ecological region. A high concentration of ST/SC households live in Madhya Pradesh, the majority of whom are agricultural labourers receiving low wages and are highly dependent on migration as a livelihood strategy.

As in other states in India, poor rural households are highly vulnerable to both covariate and idiosyncratic risks mainly relating to production-related, health and social shocks and stresses (see e.g. Narayan et al., (2009)). Indeed, domestic and social shocks and stresses impact seriously on people’s productive capacity as they cope with shocks such as ill health or more predicable stresses, such as marriage (DFID India, 2006). Drought, floods, pests, diseases, and the market provide the main sources of production risk (Ibid.).

Gender and social group inequalities prevail at household and community levels in the state. In terms of human capital development, literacy rates are low in the state, particularly for women: 74 percent of men age 15-49 are literate and only 44 percent of women are literate. 69 per cent of children attend school in rural areas, and significant gender disparities are apparent the higher the education level: while 80 percent of boys and 78 percent of girls age 6-10 years attend school, by age 15-17 years, however, 49 percent of boys only 24 percent

of girls are attending school. Although infant mortality rates have been declining in Madhya Pradesh and there has been significant improvement in full vaccination coverage for children in recent years, among all the 29 states, Madhya Pradesh has the 9<sup>th</sup> lowest level of full immunization coverage for children age 12-23 months. The infant mortality rate in Madhya Pradesh is the third highest among the states of India, although it is declining (infant mortality in NFHS-3 is estimated at 70 deaths before the age of one year per 1,000 live births, down from the NFHS-2 estimate of 88) and the under-five mortality rate, at 94 deaths per 1,000 live births, is the second highest in the country and is higher for girls (113) than for boys (104). Children from Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes are also at greater risk of dying than children not belonging to any of these groups. Furthermore, malnutrition is a serious concern in the state. Half of children (50 per cent) under age five are stunted, or too short for their age, which indicates that they have been undernourished for some time. 35 percent are wasted, or too thin for their height, which may result from inadequate recent food intake or a recent illness. 60 percent are underweight, which takes into account both chronic and acute undernutrition.

Early marriage continues to be a challenge in Madhya Pradesh. More than half (57 per cent) of women age 20-24 years were married before the legal minimum age of 18. Among young women aged 15-19 in Madhya Pradesh, 14 percent have already begun childbearing – a little lower than the national average (16 per cent).

Madhya Pradesh has one of the highest rates of physical violence against women. While the national average in India is 26.9 per cent in Madhya Pradesh the rate is 37 per cent, second only to Bihar (38.9 per cent).

In terms of mobility at the community level, a little less than half of women are allowed to go by themselves to the market and to a health facility and only about one-quarter of women have freedom to travel alone outside their own village or community.

In terms of economic participation, in 2004-5, 56 per cent (of currently married women age 15-49) were employed (compared to 99 per cent of men in the same age group) but women are less likely to be paid in cash for their work

and women working as agricultural labourers in our research sites received approximately Rs 20-30 less than men per day.

Intra-household relations and women's decision-making power indicators show that the majority of women who earn cash decide how their earnings will be spent alone or with their husbands, but in general, almost one third of women have little decision-making power in the household (e.g. for decisions over household expenses, mobility, making household purchases). Only 9 per cent of women have a bank or savings account that they themselves use and only 1 percent of women have ever used one a microcredit programme.

Just over half of our respondents are agricultural labourers with 57 per cent owning their own land; 8 per cent renting their land and 2 per cent practicing share-cropping (where 75 per cent is retained by the cultivator and 25 per cent is given to the owner of the land). The main crops cultivated are soybean, cotton and corn which are cultivated once a year, offering approximately 3-4 months of employment. The majority of our respondents (78 per cent) identified that a lack of regular employment is the most significant economic risk they face. Out of these households, 66 per cent ranked this vulnerability with medium or high importance. Almost half of our respondents further stated that lack of adequate pay was a problem. This was reported as slightly more important among female-headed households than male-headed households. Approximately one third of survey respondents also reported lack of credit as another key economic vulnerability, and in Khargone especially, limited access to land was identified as another source of economic vulnerability. In Khargone land ownership among the poor is much more limited than in Betul where many households have access to small plots of land.



**Table 2: Overview of Research Site Characteristics**

| Site Characteristics          | Districts  |                                     |  |                                     |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
|                               | Khargone   |                                     | Betul  |                                     |
|                               | Blocks   |                                     |  |                                     |
|                               | Bhagwanpura  |                                     | Betul  |                                     |
| Population                    | 1,529,562  |                                     | 1,395,175  |                                     |
| per cent of SC population     | 11   |                                     | 11   |                                     |
| per cent of ST population     | 39   |                                     | 35   |                                     |
| Main livelihoods sources      | Agriculture, agricultural wage employment, migration |                                     | Agriculture, agricultural wage employment, migration |                                     |
| Poverty rank                  | 12   |                                     | 26   |                                     |
| Main language                 | Nimadi   |                                     | Nimadi   |                                     |
| Main religion                 | Hindi  |                                     | Hindi  |                                     |
| Start date of NREGA           | 1 <sup>st</sup> phase, 2006                          |                                     | 1 <sup>st</sup> Phase, 2006                          |                                     |
| Number of households employed | 166,873  |                                     | 144,700  |                                     |
| per cent of women employed    | 33.27  |                                     | 48   |                                     |
| per cent of SC employed       | 21.28  |                                     | 14.94  |                                     |
| per cent of ST employed       | 47.51  |                                     | 54.99  |                                     |
| Panchayat / research site     | Village 1  | Village 2                           | Village 3  | Village 4                           |
| Number of households          | 650  | 254                                 | 119  | 121                                 |
| Main sources of livelihoods   | Own cultivation and wage employment                  | Own cultivation and wage employment | Own cultivation and wage employment                  | Own cultivation and wage employment |

The second largest economic risk reported by just under half of the respondents was lack of access to health services, and among female-headed households acute illness of a family member was reported more prominently as a key vulnerability than among male headed households. Indeed, the cost of health expenses for family members was reiterated strongly across the life histories in both districts, across age and gender. Many households take on loans or take on extra work to pay for health treatment in comparison to fewer households who are have assets to sell (livestock and land).

Among lifecycle vulnerabilities wedding expenses were reported to be the most important followed by the birth of another child. Again, the significance of marriage expenses was reinforced in the life history interviews when asked about the key challenges that households have faced, wedding expenses were commonly reported. While traditionally in ST communities it is the groom's family who pay "dowry" for the bride, we found that this is changing and that both sides of the family provide for the wedding expenses. As the following excerpt demonstrates, wedding expenses for any poor household is significant:

*"Generally how much money is spent during marriage of daughters? Rs.10,000-150,000 apart from the food items which are cultivated in the lands"* (Elderly female (ST), Betul Village 4, 2009).

In terms of environmental vulnerabilities, it was not surprising that a quarter of our respondents reported that drought was a key risk. This was reported more in Betul where more households cultivate their own land. Moreover, our research was carried out in September 2009 immediately after a poor monsoon in India and the life history interviews in Betul specifically remarked on the dependence of rainfall on their livelihoods and the negative impact that inadequate rains – reinforced by inadequate irrigation infrastructure - have created by reducing soyabean and corn production.

In terms of social risks and vulnerabilities, many of our respondents identified that tensions within the household, most notably between husband and wife, were the most significant social risk. About 63 per cent of households reported that the source of tension and conflict in the household was due to decision-making on expenditure, 53 per cent on the distribution of domestic responsibilities and 46 per cent on the care of dependents (children, elderly,

sick). Fewer tensions were reported with regards to decision-making over mobility and control over resources. There was little difference between the sources of social risks faced by female and male headed households but some variation according to age of the respondents – younger respondents (15-19) said that the major social risk was related to the distribution of domestic responsibilities (see Box 3 below).

**Box 3: Risks and Vulnerabilities Faced by Young People**

Interviews with both the younger and older generations highlighted important changes in the opportunities that young people – particularly girls - have today in rural India. Two significant changes were identified for girls: the reduction in early marriages and the provision of bicycles which enabled girls to go to secondary school.

The average age for girls' marriage has increased and early marriage is reportedly less prevalent – as one respondent told us “*child marriage is not prevalent. Only one case in village was found of that of child marriage and police came and matched the record of age in the school and took them to the police station. Also when a family was planning to get married their two daughters, the second one having age below 18 years, then the villagers asked not get the latter married*” (Adolescent boy (GC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

Two girls specifically commented on the recent scheme which provides bicycles to girls to continue on to secondary education: “*I went to Bistan [approximately 5km away from village] to join standard 9th but could not continue. That time girls were not provided with cycle*” (Adolescent girl (SC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009); “*very few girls studied further before the provision of cycles*” (Adolescent girl (OBC), Betul Village 4, 2009).

However, not everyone can take advantage of these changes and opportunities and interviews with both boys and girls highlighted the deep concerns that they have, specifically with regards to continuing their education. Boys and girls are often pulled out of school early to support family income, girls drop out of school if they are needed for domestic responsibilities, and many girls do not remain in school past the 8<sup>th</sup> standard because of the distance to travel to secondary school.

Interestingly, there were very few reports of caste-based discrimination from our survey (4 per cent of respondents reported facing discrimination because of social group status). While one reason for this may be because the selected

research sites were predominantly SC or ST, the qualitative research through life histories also shed some important light on the changing nature of caste and ethnic-based discrimination in the selected villages:

*“We do not discriminate between ourselves as we are Bhilayas (ST) and the Harijans living in the community. We eat together and work together”* (Married woman (ST), Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).

*[Is there any discrimination between SC, ST, OBC?] “They work together and eat together. If somebody does not have got curry, then others share. In this respect our village is better than others. Whenever I go to other village, I feel like coming back to my village. [Is there discrimination in other villages?] Yes, people eat separately. [Do general category people belonging to higher position in caste category discriminate between people belonging to other castes?] Yes they do not allow entering their kitchen. They give food and water in different utensils. We do not discriminate between our community members. Generally people doing wage employment do not discriminate among themselves”* (Elderly female (ST), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

*[Previously was there discrimination in the village when you were young?] “Yes. People did not eat together. But now-a-days people work together, participate in religious and marriage functions. Previously there were discrimination at public drinking water places and temples. But now this is not the case”* (Married man (SC), Betul Village 4, 2009).

However, other life histories do demonstrate that caste based discrimination – although perhaps not as visible – continues to exist:

*“There is discrimination between women of the village while filling drinking water. General category people having high economic status like possessing land discriminate against the caste groups falling below them”* (Adolescent girl (SC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

*[Is there discrimination between women belonging to SC, ST and OBC category?] In lands, general [category] and ST are preferred. [Do you eat together?] Yes but sit in different sides so that they do not touch each other. All of them do same type of work like sowing, weeding and harvesting”* (Single female (GC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

With regards to social capital, the majority of respondent households (81 per cent) do not belong to any kind of formal or informal groups. Only 12 per cent belong to a self-help group and 5 per cent to a savings/credit group. Limited access to formal or informal groups is reflected in the number of other varied strategies which households employ to cope with the above economic and social vulnerabilities. Almost 40 per cent of our respondent households receive no form of government support (36 per cent held BPL cards and a small number held Antodhaya Yojana or received a pension) and the majority of households do not have savings (only 8 per cent saved some money in every month). The main coping strategy reported by households is indebtedness. 57 per cent of the respondents said that they took loans to meet their basic needs. The maximum loan amount taken was Rs. 1 lakh and the lowest was Rs.3000. Apart from this, the other major coping mechanisms are migration by men, reducing the quality of food consumption for women closely followed by men (girls are also slightly more likely to have their quality of food consumption reduced than boys) and relying on social networks. The main sources of support come from immediate family members or neighbours, and to a lesser extent, work colleagues or extended family members.

There are some differences in the main coping strategies used between male headed households and female headed households. For male headed households their major coping strategies are indebtedness and migration (of male); for female headed households the major coping strategies are also indebtedness but secondly, reduction of food consumption quality of adult women. Differences between social groups were also identified, whereas most respondents belonging to Scheduled Caste said that the major coping strategy adopted by them was migration, for those belonging to Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class and general category reported that it was indebtedness. Differences between the two districts are also reported, where the respondents in Khargone district said that the major coping strategies used are indebtedness and relying on social networks, while those in Betul also use loans as a coping strategy, migration is more commonly used as is reduction in quantity and quality of food. This is perhaps because Betul is located in a mountainous area, relatively more dependent on own production for food, and cultivation only takes place during the rainy season. For the rest of the year people migrate in search of employment.

#### **4. NREGA Policy and Programme Design**

India's investment in public works programmes (PWP), has a long history, and coverage significantly increased during the late 1980s. The implementation of these public works programmes had been at the state level with assistance from the centre (national level). The programmes were mainly self-targeting with the objective to provide enhanced livelihood security, especially for those dependent on casual manual labour in rural areas, as well as creating assets which had the potential to generate second-round employment benefits (Planning Commission, 2008).

While the concept and objectives of NREGA are based on the historical legacy of public works programmes in India, its actual design departs from its predecessors in a number of important ways. Overall, the new features in the design of NREGA demonstrate a transformative approach to poverty reduction in its rights based approach. First, and most importantly, NREGA is an Act enshrined in India's constitution which entitles any poor rural household to 100 days of employment. In this way the legislation goes beyond providing a social safety net, and guarantees employment as a right.

Secondly, this is the first public works programme which is national in coverage, organised and mainly funded from the Central Budget but implemented at the State level by the gram panchayat – rather than private contractors. NREGA began in 2006 in 200 districts, and from 2008 was implemented in all the rural districts in all states in India. Recent data shows that almost 45 million households have accessed NREGA employment to date (Dev, 2009). In 2009-10 the budget allocated Rs. 300 billion (USD 6 billion) to NREGA. This is around 0.5 per cent of GDP, 3.3 per cent of budget expenditure and 10 per cent of planned expenditure (Dev, 2009).

At least 50 per cent of the works are implemented by the gram panchayats with no private contractors<sup>12</sup> (See Box 4 for details of the types of works created). An indirect goal of NREGA is to strengthen grass roots processes of democracy by transparent and accountable mechanisms such as the social audit and monitoring and evaluation systems.

**Box 4: Types of Assets Created by NREGA Work**

There are eight categories of works in which assets can be created through NREGS employment days:

1. water conservation and water harvesting
2. drought proofing
3. irrigation canals
4. provision of irrigation facility on the lands of disadvantaged sections: SCs and STs and others
5. renovation of traditional water bodies (e.g. tanks)
6. land development
7. flood control and protection works
8. rural connectivity to provide all-weather access

The ninth category states “any other work which may be notified by central government in consultation with state governments”.

Over the last three years, the majority of works has been on water conservation (30.5 per cent in 2006-7 and 21.3 per cent in 2008-9) and rural connectivity (21.2 per cent in 2006-7 and 18 per cent in 2008-9), and increasingly on provision of irrigation on other people’s land and land development (Dev, 2009).

Third, NREGA marks a shift from allocated work to demand based work. Employment from NREGA is dependent upon the worker applying for registration, obtaining a job card, and then seeking employment through a written application for the time and duration chosen by the worker.

Under the law, there is also a legal guarantee that the requested work has to be given within 15 days by the panchayat. If not, the State has to provide an unemployment allowance at a quarter of the wage for each day employment is not given, thereby providing the panchayat an incentive for effective implementation.

**4.1 Integration of Gender Dimensions in Programme Design**

The design of NREGA is aimed at transforming rural livelihoods through its rights-based approach to employment. An important indirect impact of the

Act is to “empower rural women” (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.). As recognised in the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, the barriers of exclusion which women face in the rural economy are barriers to achieving the full potential of agricultural growth (Planning Commission, 2008). The extent to which gender inequalities are therefore addressed through NREGS is important for effectively achieving both the direct and indirect goals of the programme.

The design of NREGA incorporates a number of features which explicitly tackle some of the challenges women face in the rural economy and women’s differential experiences of poverty and vulnerability. First and foremost, the Act aims to promote women’s participation in the workforce through a quota to ensure that at least one-third of all workers who have registered and requested work under the scheme in each state are women. To support women’s participation, crèche facilities are to be provided by the implementing agency when five or more children below the age of 6 are brought to the worksite, and women, especially single women, are given preference to work on worksites close to their residence if the worksite is 5km or more away (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008).

Secondly, the Act states that equal wages are to be paid to both men and women workers under the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. This is an important measure given the prevailing wage disparities in the rural sector between men and women. The Guidelines also suggest that when opening bank accounts for the labourers, the bank or the Panchayat needs to give a considered choice between individual accounts for each NREGA labourer and joint accounts (one for each Job Card holder – normally the male head of household). It suggests that if joint accounts are used, the different household members (e.g. husband and wife) should be co-signatories and that special care should be taken to avoid crediting household earnings to individual accounts held by the male household head which would leave women with no control over their earnings. Separate individual accounts for women members of the household may be opened in the case of male headed households.

Third, for the supervision of work and recording attendance of worksite, “Mates<sup>13</sup>” can be designated for each work. The Guidelines suggest that adequate representation of women among mates should be ensured. Mates must have been educated up to Class 5 or Class 8 (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008).



Fourth, women should be represented in local level committees, the social audit process as well state and central level councils. Local Vigilance and Monitoring Committees which monitor the progress and quality of work while it is in progress comprises nine members (at least 50 per cent of whom are NREGA workers). The Gram Sabha is responsible for electing the members of the Committee and to ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it. The Social Audit Forum<sup>14</sup> also requires representation of women, although the Guidelines also clearly state that lack of representation by any of the required categories should not be taken as a reason for not recording queries and complaints through the Social Audit Forum process. It does however suggest that the timing of the Forum must be such that it is convenient for people to attend - that it is convenient in particular for NREGS workers, women and marginalized communities.

At the state level, for purposes of monitoring and evaluation, every state government has a State Council in which women should have one-third representation (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005). The headquarters of the Central Council in Delhi consisting of up to fifteen non-official members representing Panchayati Raj institutions, organisations of workers and disadvantaged groups includes the provision that “not less than one-third of the non-official members nominated under this clause shall be women’ (Ibid).

## **5. Effects of NREGA**

The above section outlined the main areas where considerations of gender equality have been effectively integrated into the design of NREGA. In this section, we look at how the implementation of NREGA in practice impacts on individuals, households and communities through a gender lens. We draw on the quantitative and qualitative results of our fieldwork in Madhya Pradesh to examine both the direct and indirect impacts of the employment scheme.

The Ministry of Rural Development states four main direct objectives of NREGA and a number of indirect objectives. At an individual/household level, the two main objectives are to provide:

- a strong social safety net for the vulnerable groups by providing a fall-back employment source, when other employment alternatives are scarce or inadequate; and

- empowerment of rural poor through the processes of a rights-based Law (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008)

The indirect objectives include reducing rural-urban migration and empowering rural women (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.).

At the community level, the two main direct objectives are:

- to be a growth engine for sustainable development of an agricultural economy. Through the process of providing employment on works that address causes of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation and soil erosion, the Act seeks to strengthen the natural resource base of rural livelihood and create durable assets in rural areas; and
- to support new ways of doing business, as a model of governance reform anchored on the principles of transparency and grass root democracy (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008)

Indirectly, one of the key objectives is to foster social equity (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.).

We discuss these objectives and effects in turn below.

## **5.1 Impacts at the Individual and Household Level**

### **5.1.1 Direct Effects: Providing a Social Safety Net**

#### ***Economic Security: Access to Employment and Wages***

Women's employment in the labour force in Madhya Pradesh is slightly above the national average, however, women's rate of employment (wages paid for in cash) in the private agricultural sector relative to men is much lower. Women's representation in NREGA in Madhya Pradesh however is almost equal to men's. The most recent data (2010) show that 43.5 per cent of women are employed in NREGA, just below the national average (48.25 per cent), demonstrating relatively high access to NREGA employment in the state.

Moreover, given the prevailing inequality in wage payment in Madhya Pradesh between men and women, one of the most important reported positive impacts of NREGA for women is the provision of equal wages. The Act stipulates that the wage rate is set at the minimum unskilled agricultural wage in each state for both men and women. In private agricultural employment women receive

approximately Rs. 30 a day and men receive up to Rs. 45 a day, whereas under NREGA they both receive approximately Rs. 90. The higher wages from NREGA is therefore a significant improvement in terms of women's earning opportunities and increased contribution to household income.

Access to employment days from NREGA and higher wages have important benefits for immediate household economic security. Women in Madhya Pradesh are mainly responsible for day-to-day expenditure on household items and consumption and respondents reported that money from NREGA is mainly spent on meeting these small household needs and food items<sup>15</sup>. Apart from this, NREGA income is also spent, to a lesser extent, on improving economic security in the medium to longer term: wages are also spent on health and education as well as agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilisers.

NREGA provides "some source of income during the seasonal slack periods" (Female FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009) which is especially important given that farming in Madhya Pradesh, as in other states in India, is vulnerable to precarious weather conditions and is highly seasonal. Crop production in the research sites take place during the monsoon period and employment on farms is available only for approximately 3-4 months a year.

Another household level effect of NREGA is that it has enabled some households (9 per cent) better access credit. Our research found that while NREGA income is not seen as sufficient to make a large financial impact on a household because of the limited number of employment days, some households suggest that NREGA has helped them get access to loans as well as helping loan repayment. In all four research sites, focus group discussions with participants showed that for most households, income from NREGA days is simply not sufficient to have any further impacts other than meeting immediate consumption needs. Moreover, taking collateral against future income requires predictability, and in our research sites, the demand side of NREGA was not yet functioning effectively. Instead, households receiving employment days from NREGA was still largely at the discretion of the panchayat rather than through the demand driven application process (discussed in more detail below) reducing the reliability of regular income.

A small number of survey respondents (12 per cent) reported that one of the problems with NREGA is that it only benefits one family member in the

household. Our qualitative research highlighted that household structure (especially extended families) plays a large role in determining the potential benefits of NREGA employment (see Box 5). Another important insight which NREGA participants lamented was the few days in which NREGA work was provided. Many households reported that 100 days employment - or less in practice – is not sufficient to meet their needs throughout the year.

**Box 5: Household Structure Affects NREGA Opportunities**

Household demography has important implications for the benefits of NREGA. The conceptualisation of “household” as the targeting mechanism for NREGA has been discussed as problematic on a number of levels (see Bhatta, 2008). On the one hand, larger households (e.g. joint families with a higher number of adults) are better able to demand employment in NREGA because of labour availability in the household, but on the other hand the benefits are diluted because of the large size – only 100 days are given per household. In our research sites, men in particular suggested that in extended families, each brother’s family should receive a job card. Women however, suggested that each individual adult should receive a job card (see also Gupta, 2009). Indeed, many single women in particular in extended families are unable to claim their entitlements to NREGA independently. Female headed households with limited labour availability (either due to permanent female headship or transitory because of seasonal migration) are often not able to take full advantage of employment opportunities especially when the type of work requires men and women to work together in teams, or the provision of work depends on contact with the Panchayat within the community – of which poor women tend to have very little (Author’s interview, 2009).

**5.1.2 Direct Effects: Empowerment through the Process of a Rights-Based Law**

The rights-based approach of NREGA is not yet fully functioning in a number of ways. In all our research sites, the focus group discussions highlighted that the sarpanch and/or secretary decide on the work to be done and allocate days, rather than members of the household applying for work on a demand-driven basis when employment is needed (this is also discussed further in the community section on governance below).

While the Act stipulates that households are entitled to 100 days employment and equal wages, taking a closer look at the number of days work is provided

and the actual provision of wages this translates into suggests a rather more unequal picture of the gender dimensions of NREGA.

While participation rates for women in NREGA generally exceed the one-third quota, women continue to face more limited employment opportunities. In some states cultural norms prevent women from working outside the home or working with men which are reflected in household decisions to only send men for NREGA work, thereby denying women's rights within the household to access employment days (Samarthan Centre for Development Support, 2007). While this has not been the case in our research sites in MP, entrenched ideas about the gender division of labour also affects the type of work which is seen as acceptable for women to do. Studies have also shown even when women want to work, they have been excluded by the panchayat because of social norms around the "appropriate" type of work women should do (Khera and Nayak, 2009). In Madhya Pradesh for example, our research showed that while women's representation overall is above 40 per cent, in practice women receive fewer days on NREGS because they are not involved in all the types of work available. Women are often given "soft" work such as throwing the soil from digging wells which requires fewer days work<sup>16</sup>.

Single women are particularly affected when earthwork depends on family-based couples to work together (Gupta, 2009; Palriwala and Neetha, 2009). As one focus group discussion highlighted: "*Men are always preferred than women. Single women are excluded as some works demanded the participation of both men and women as a pair*" (Female FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009). Moreover, in Bhagwanpura Village 1, more women than men were requesting to work on NREGA. This turned out to be particularly problematic for single women, as one worker, a young widow explains: "*[women] were sidelined and men were given preference - there were more women than men preferring to work in NREGA. As women fought among themselves, it was decided that women has to accompany men*" (Widow, (GC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

It is not just cultural and institutional barriers which restrict women's demand for and participation in NREGA, but life-cycle vulnerabilities are also an influencing factor. While there is provision for different types of work to be

allocated to the physically challenged, there is no official provision for different types of work to be allocated to pregnant women or women who have recently given birth. While this reportedly happens on an ad hoc basis (Authors' interview, 2009), it is at the discretion of the implementing agency, usually the panchayat. In one life history interview in our research site, a young woman who had recently given birth was working on NREGA while she was 8 months pregnant, and explained that she experienced problems carrying out the hard manual labour (Married woman (GC), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

Women's roles and responsibilities in domestic and care work also influences their demand for and participation in NREGA employment. While there is a provision for crèche facilities in the design and programme manuals of NREGA, in reality the lack of actual provision of such facilities reflects a serious implementation challenge for women's equal participation. A recent study of four states found that the provision of childcare facilities at NREGA worksites varied from 17 per cent to 1 per cent (Jandu, 2008). Our research found no provision of child care facilities in NREGA worksites in the four villages we visited. The result of this is that many breastfeeding mothers do not go to work on NREGA sites, some women are forced to leave their younger children (above 1 year) with their in-laws or with older daughters (Female FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009).

### **5.1.3 Indirect Effects: Migration**

NREGA has not displaced existing employment for most respondents, rather, it has "added to their diverse portfolio of livelihood strategies".<sup>17</sup> Only 32 per cent reported that they did give up other work to work in NREGA – most households stating that this was work agricultural farms and to a lesser extent other wage employment.

Our qualitative research found some reports in the reduction of migration (see similar findings e.g. Samarthan Centre for Development Support, 2007; Jandu, 2008). While migration is still an important source of income for households in our research sites, if not the main source of income for many, the availability of NREGA employment in the local area has enabled some families to reduce the number of days they migrate for and the number of household members who migrate. Whereas before whole households migrated, often only the men

migrate now for seasonal work within the state, such as to Betul, Malwa and Hosingabad, for farming and cultivation in soybean and cotton or brick-making, or in neighbouring states, such as Maharashtra and Gujarat for farming and brick-making. In a recent study in six villages in Madhya Pradesh, Deshingkar et al. (forthcoming) also find that there are indications that those undertaking distress migration have taken up NREGA employment, and that NREGA has provided an important safety net especially for widows who may not have the confidence and the ability to migrate in search of better work. Overall, however, the authors find that NREGA has had little impact in reducing migration. One of the key reasons for this is because of implementation problems as well as few work days provided – poor households therefore cannot rely on NREGA to provide enough work for them to forgo migration which is much more certain and also more remunerative in a majority of cases (Deshingkar et al., forthcoming).

#### **5.1.4 Indirect Effects: Women’s Status and Empowerment**

Another important indirect objective of NREGA is women’s empowerment. The links between women’s status, bargaining power and decision making in the household and improvements in both family welfare and economic productivity are well researched, and there is an assumption that women’s greater earning power leads to increased empowerment. Women’s status and decision making in the household in India varies due to local customs, social group and religion, but overall women face similar inequalities and discrimination at the household level. Low social status, low levels of human capital, limited ownership of assets and control over resources are key factors which constrain women’s bargaining power and participation in decision-making.

Our research suggests that women’s employment in NREGA has improved some women’s economic status and decision making power slightly in some households, mostly in terms of their own decision making on what food items they preferred to be bought for household consumption. For other women, their contribution to household income from NREGA employment has had no impact on relations within the household. In line with the NFHS-3 data above women stated that decision-making rests with the men in the household, and that at times, women and men make decisions together. Men in our FGDs

however were more likely to state that women had more decision-making power in the household, suggesting that both the husband and wife take the majority of decisions together.

Our research found no explicit correlation between the recent emergence of bank accounts for NREGA employment and women's empowerment. The roll out of bank accounts in the name of women however has been uneven and is entirely dependent on the local Panchayat. In one research site no bank accounts had been opened in women's names, in another, joint accounts had been opened, and in another, individual bank accounts had been opened in both men and women's names.

Spousal domestic violence is relatively widespread in Madhya Pradesh (compared to other states) and is especially prevalent along wealth and religious lines, with the poorest households most likely to experience violence. The data above shows that wives who work are more likely to experience domestic violence. The consumption of alcohol is also fairly prevalent in MP (2.1 per cent of women drink alcohol compared to 30.8 per cent of men (IIPS and Macro International, 2007: 433)) and also in our research sites: "*mostly men used to spend money on drinking alcohol*" (Female FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009). Violence in the home is often associated with drinking alcohol and women from our focus group discussions and life histories suggested that in a number of instances women's income from NREGA had no effect on the regular domestic violence and abuse they face, often fuelled by husband's alcohol consumption. As one woman stated, "*most of the men spend money on drinking. They beat their wives and snatch money away from them*" (Female FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).

In some cases, women's employment in NREGA has exacerbated household tensions where women's work has put pressure on her time allocated to household duties (Female FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009). As highlighted in NFHS-3 data above, neglect of the house or children is one of the main causes of domestic disputes. Even though women work more hours than men combining domestic and productive work (women work 457 minutes per day compared to men who work 391 - NAWO, 2008), NREGA has no provision for possible flexible working hours for women to support women's time pressures in their dual responsibilities between market and non-market activities.



## **5.2 Impacts at the Community Level**

### **5.2.1 Direct Effects: NREGA as a Growth Engine: Creation of Community Assets**

In our four research sites, the most common types of works created through NREGA were road construction, digging of wells (and other related water management such as water conservation and water harvesting) and tree plantations.

These NREGA-created community assets have had varying degrees of impact. There are some reports that community assets have improved, for example, community buildings, plantations, watershed development and irrigation and roads. In our research sites some households report that the watershed development created through assets has supported a greater production of crops, and infrastructure (e.g. roads) has helped marketing of products. However, there was some criticism by both men and women in the village that not only did not all households in the community benefit from the infrastructure (especially the landless) but that wells in particular were not always appropriate. For example, NREGA guidelines state that wells must be dug to a maximum depth – in one of our research sites in Betul district however, this was not deep enough to allow water through, so wells have not been utilised.

This criticism reflects a larger challenge, that, more broadly, assets created are not benefiting the rural poor to the extent they could be and therefore not harnessing the potential for rural change and poverty reduction originally conceptualised under NREGA. There is a general sense that NREGA has been focusing on employment at the expense of development (Mahaptra et al. 2008). Proponents of women's empowerment and gender equality have also called for a re-focus on the types of works that are offered under NREGS and suggest that healthcare, literacy and skills programmes, nutrition and sanitation are some possible alternatives types of work.

### **5.2.2 Direct Effects: Local Governance and Democracy**

A main aim of NREGA is to improve local governance and democracy. As the Ministry of Rural Development (2008) states NREGA's fourth goal is: "new ways of doing business, as a model of governance reform anchored on the

principles of transparency and grass root democracy” (Ministry of Rural Development, 2008: 1).

An innovative mechanism putting into practice improved local governance and democracy is through the ‘social audits’ – a means of continuous public vigilance (NREGA, Section 17, Ministry of Rural Development, 2008). Social audits aim to ensure public accountability in the implementation of projects, laws and policies and refer to the periodic assemblies convened by the Gram Sabha. A social audit is seen as an ongoing process through which the potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders are involved at various stages of the planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of NREGA. This is to ensure that the activity or project is designed and implemented in such a way as to reflect local needs and priorities.

Our study found that the participation of men and women in community meetings to discuss the planning of NREGA works varies. In Bhagwanpura Village 2 a focus group discussion with men showed that *though the villagers vote... they rarely participate in Gram Sabha meetings* (Male FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009). In Betul Village 4, however, men reported *the villagers attend Gram Sabha meetings and participate in taking decision about type of work to be done in village through NREGA* (Male FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009). Women were less likely to participate in Gram Sabha meetings, and play a relatively negligible role in deciding about types of work to be carried out in the village through NREGA: *women do not attend Gram Sabha meetings and it is generally men who go for the meetings* (Female FGD, Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).

While there has been limited involvement of men and women in the planning process of NREGA, our research found that the villagers are well aware of their rights on NREGA (in terms of the application process for 100 days employment, participation in decision-making around the assets created, and the provision of childcare facilities). However, we found that there is a limited ability to claim these rights:

Though people know about the NREGA provisions they do not have major say in deciding about the type of work to be done in village and nor about the provision of crèche facilities (Male FGD, Betul Village 4, 2009).

*[Do you know that everybody has the right to demand 100 days of work?] “If they fight with the sarpanch there will be no work. They know that they should have it” (Married woman (ST), Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).*

*[Is there any child care facility in NREGA work?] No. [Do you know that if there are 5 children or more in work site, there will be crèche facility?] Yes know that government has provision but this is not provided. [Do you try to demand before sarpanch?] No one listens to poor people. After election no one hears be it sarpanch or ministers. (Married woman (ST), Bhagwanpura Village 2, 2009).*

### **5.2.3 Indirect Effects: Social Equity and Community Relations**

In all four of our research sites, community members tend to agree that explicit social discrimination across caste and/or ethnic groups is low (see section 3.3 above).

It is in this context that the majority of respondents reported that there is no discrimination during the participation in NREGA works. 94 per cent of respondents reported that they are not discriminated against in terms of receiving fewer days in NREGA employment and 89 per cent of respondents reported that they did not face discrimination at the (NREGA) workplace. For those that did report discrimination, the survey showed that this mainly related to dalit/advansi workers eating separately at the workplace. Our qualitative research however highlighted other factors too, including some reports of community tensions in terms of the allocation of employment. As one respondent noted “*as STs are in majority, privileges are given to them in terms of employment in NREGA*” (Married woman (SC), Betul Village 4, 2009).

However, the overwhelming majority report that the villagers “work together and eat together” (Male and female FGDs, 2009). Indeed, while it is not the presence of NREGA itself per se that has contributed to reduced social marginalisation and discrimination over time but rather other existing factors, there is a positive perception of NREGA in the community because of high participation rates of SC and ST households in NREGS employment. This is no exception in Madhya Pradesh in our research sites where SC and ST households are over represented in NREGA works (see Table 2 in section 3.3).

An important indirect effect of NREGA has been its contribution to increased social capital. Our research suggests that there is a general perception that social networks have strengthened as a result of NREGA, leading to improved relationships where men and women work together as well as supporting/strengthening informal safety nets by borrowing small amounts of money from each other. One of the reasons cited for this is that after the implementation of NREGA, people were able to access credit from either their neighbours or relatives as there was increased security of repayment.

Importantly, however, we note that while certain aspects of social capital have increased, it continues to be along existing caste lines. NREGA has not challenged existing caste/social group divisions where they do exist. Indeed, other respondents from outside the majority caste in our community sites suggest that social discrimination is still prevalent (see section 3.3 above). In one case from our life history interview, a woman belonging to the Scheduled Caste in Betul Village 4, told us that she had been employed to cook the mid-day meal in the local school. However, after seven months she was thrown out of the job without receiving any remuneration and suspects that this is because she is SC. She further elaborated that discrimination exists particularly between SCs and STs. Social discrimination takes its form in the segregation of SC category during cooking and eating food, especially during cultural and religious ceremonies where SC households “eat last though they contribute funds for those ceremonies” (Married woman (SC), Betul Village 4, 2009).

## **6. Drivers of Programme Impacts**

NREGA is the key flagship safety net programme in India. The Act, which culminated in 2005, was the result of political party commitment and civil society campaigns to create a rights based approach to the public works programme. While India has a history of public works programmes, NREGA marks a significant shift away from its predecessors. The legislation goes beyond providing a social safety net towards guaranteeing the right to employment, and NREGA remains one of the main planks of rapid poverty reduction in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (Planning Commission, 2008). The legislation has received wide support from political parties, civil society and the public at large.

Madhya Pradesh was one of the first districts to implement NREGA in 2006 and since its inception has been one of the higher performing states in terms of delivering NREGA employment and works. As Drèze and Oldiges (2007) suggest, the implementation of NREGA is political: they find that three of the best performing states in terms of employment generation under NREGA all had Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments in 2006-7 (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh). Indeed, the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh has also shown broader commitment to implementing pro-poor programmes as well as to addressing gender inequality – for example, the government started the Ladli Laxmi Yojana in 2006 which aims to reduce the significant gender disparities between boys and girls through providing financial support to families with daughters to send their girls to school and prevent early marriage.

In terms of gender, the design of NREGA at the national level has a number of gender-sensitive features: ensuring a minimum level of participation in the employment scheme among women (30 per cent); ensuring equal wages for men and women; and supporting women's participation in village level democratic processes (the Gram Sabha). The implementation of these gender-sensitive components has been variable across the state. The level of women's participation in NREGA has been relatively successful – partly due to the fact that many women in Madhya Pradesh were already engaged in wage labour and NREGA provides women higher wages than in private agricultural employment. In Madhya Pradesh the Department of Rural Development at the state level has also actively promoted the use of women as “mates” at NREGA worksites partly to encourage women workers and to provide a more gender-sensitive workplace (Authors' interview, 2009) The extent to which this mechanism has been taken up varies due to the level of education women have (“mates” must be educated to class 5 or 8) as well as panchayat preferences (Authors' interview, 2009). Evidence from our research sites suggests that implementation challenges at the local level mean that in practice women receive fewer work days than men because of prevailing norms associated with the type of work deemed appropriate to give women, their opportunities for work are limited as a result of failures to provide proper child care facilities, and women are rarely involved in community committees or meetings in the planning and monitoring processes of NREGA works. There are a number of factors which explain these implementation challenges. NREGA funds have

given the panchayati raj institutions more financial responsibilities and power than previously experienced and while this is a positive step towards strengthening decentralised powers in India, the capacity at the local panchayat level has been identified as a key weakness in the implementation of NREGA in general (Authors' interview, 2009) and the implementation of gender-sensitive design features in particular. In the context of local level governance structures, India potentially offers significant opportunities for gender-sensitive implementation as result of affirmative action through the reservation of seats for women at local levels. This been a significant and transformative approach in India but the translation of this into improved awareness of gender inequality or action has been varied. Low levels of literacy among women, physical and verbal intimidation and violence, and women standing as "proxies" for their husbands are all factors which have been identified as limiting the effectiveness of the reservations (Jayal, 2006). Despite these limitations, evidence does suggest that reservations may lead to women's empowerment and better representation, eventually (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004), providing scope for improved gender-sensitive implementation of NREGA in future. Importantly, this suggests that in order for the implementation of NREGA to go beyond individual motivation to ensure a more gender-sensitive approach, capacity building of gender issues at the panchayat level is necessary.

To date, however, there has been limited attention to and resources for supporting gender-awareness capacity building at all levels. Where training is given it is largely focused on NREGA implementation processes as well as rural development issues such as watershed management, irrigation etc, however the importance of strengthening linkages to support gender equality for improved effectiveness of rural development have not yet been adequately made.

The overall data collection process in NREGA is impressive as a result of improved accountability and transparency mechanisms, and the M&E system goes some way to include relevant sex-disaggregated data. Gender-specific monitoring and evaluation includes questions on i) whether registration is refused to female headed households or single women, ii) the average proportion of women working on NREGA in a village; and iii) whether there are different task rates for men and women. Improvements in collecting, analysing and

using sex-disaggregated data to inform policy however, could be made, and could include monitoring of the use of community assets and assessment of the appropriateness and benefits of these from a gender lens, and the extent to which women are participating in the various social audit processes at the community level.

Currently inter-ministerial coordination between the Ministry and Departments of Rural Development and Ministry and Departments of Women and Child Development at the state level is limited. While the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) has a gender policy aimed at mainstreaming gender issues throughout the state's different Departments, including rural development, there is no explicit attention to NREGA. Furthermore, our interviews with DWCD suggested that other mechanisms aimed at strengthening gender within other departments, such as gender budgeting and gender cells, suffer from weak capacity and coordination. The most important avenue for DWCD's contribution to NREGA policy and programming in Madhya Pradesh currently appears to be based on individual motivation rather than institutional structures (Authors' interview, 2009). However, improved coordination between the two Ministries could support a broader conceptualisation of the linkages between gender and NREGA, including integrating the creation of gender-sensitive assets, minimising women's time burdens (e.g. through the provision of flexible hours), supporting women's life-cycle vulnerabilities (e.g. offering alternative less labour intensive works during pregnancy and nursing) and expanding the types of works under NREGA to directly and indirectly support rural growth (e.g. linked to skills training, health and nutrition etc.).

Finally, the transformative approach of NREGA has wider implications for the notion of the state-citizen relation and offers potential gains in political, social and economic empowerment of the poor through the Act. While the weaknesses in implementation have been identified above, it is also important to recognise the challenges on the demand side: that is of the poor to exercise their right to employment. An overwhelming challenge is the rate of illiteracy among the poor and especially among women, yet gaining NREGA employment requires a multi-layered written application process. Our research has also highlighted that entrenched power relations between the community and the government

are prohibitive of a more transformative change which would enable villagers to channel suggestions and recommendations to the panchayat for improved implementation of the scheme. In this regard, civil society and local NGOs are playing an important role in raising awareness, mobilising the community to demand employment from the panchayat, strengthening vigilance committees and setting up public hearings for grievances.

## **7. Conclusions and Policy Implications**

Public works programmes have been a popular safety net intervention in India since Independence. The development and implementation of NREGA is partly a result of decades of learning from previous public works interventions but importantly also marks a significant shift away from similarities with its predecessors in a number of ways. NREGA is a rights-based approach, providing legal entitlements to all poor rural households in India: currently, over 40 million households have claimed employment days from the local panchayats. The objectives of NREGA are two-fold; the first goal is to provide an effective safety net for the poor who are mainly dependent on agricultural wage labour through supporting access to income, especially to ease the problem of seasonal unemployment and migration; the second goal has a longer-term objective and aims to “transform” rural livelihoods through investment in agricultural and rural infrastructure to improve production. Evidence from our research sites in Madhya Pradesh suggests that employment in NREGA has contributed to achieving the first goal to some extent – most notably, respondents reported that income from NREGA mainly supports household income for food expenses, other basic household expenses and children’s education. In some cases households have slightly better access to credit and NREGA has changed the pattern of migration in terms of reducing the number of household members who migrate and reducing the number of days of migration. Overall, however, our research showed that the biggest vulnerability that households continue to face is “a lack of regular employment”, indicating that although income from NREGA employment supports small household expenditure, the livelihood opportunities for poor households remain limited.

Our analysis of NREGA through a gender lens has highlighted specific progressive gender-sensitive design features which support women’s participation in employment through the one-third quota, the provision of equal wages for women and men through the equal wages Act, and the



promotion of women's active engagement in the planning and evaluation of community assets through, for example, the social audit forums. The findings from our research sites in Madhya Pradesh demonstrated a number of important effects of NREGA in terms of addressing women's practical needs by supporting household income for small household expenditure, including food and education expenses. Our findings also point to a number of areas for improving both the conceptual design of NREGA and its implementation to further support gender-equitable outcomes of the Act and support the achievement of NREGA's goal to promote rural women's empowerment.

### **7.1 Policy and Programme Design**

At the household level the provision of equal wages to women is an important design feature of NREGA which recognises – and attempts to address - the prevailing gender disparities in the agricultural labour market in rural India. Similarly the provision of childcare facilities at NREGA sites potentially addresses an important gender-specific vulnerability where responsibility for children can prevent women from participating in economic activities. Indeed, while women in Madhya Pradesh do enjoy relatively high participation rates in NREGA, they do however face a number of other challenges which prevent their full participation in NREGA employment which could be addressed through strengthening the gender-sensitive design of the programme as discussed below.

Greater attention to life-cycle vulnerabilities is needed. Currently pregnant or nursing women engage in hard manual labour during pregnancy or immediately after, or, lose opportunity for income by not working during these months. Experience from public works programmes in other countries suggest that options to transition from public works to direct support or less-physically demanding work during pregnancy and nursing, such as taking on the role of childminders at worksite crèches or as “mates<sup>18</sup>”, could be successful alternatives.

By recognising existing intra-household inequalities in terms of the gendered division of labour and bargaining power, NREGA could release some of the time constraints faced by women's double workload of productive and domestic responsibilities if flexible working hours were available on NREGA sites. This would be particularly beneficial especially, as our research indicated,

where women's employment in NREGA has exacerbated household tensions by putting pressure on women's time allocated to household duties. Promoting the provision of bank accounts in women's name is also another key feature which could be strengthened to potentially support women's position within the household.

Evidence suggests that more attention should also be given to the structure and demography of the household as this influences access to NREGA and the benefits gained from employment. Where work depends on family-based couples to work together, single female-headed households have been excluded, suggesting that a more sensitive approach to ensuring appropriate works for single women is needed. Other evidence also suggests that single women within households are often unable to exercise their right to employment and independently access NREGA days. Similarly, men suggested that when more than one family is living in an extending household, the benefits of NREGA are diluted. These reports suggest that reconceptualising the "household unit" by providing job cards to families or individuals within a household would be beneficial to the rural poor.

At the community level, the option for public works activities to be carried out to improve productivity on private SC and ST lands reflect a commitment to address social caste and ethnic inequalities, however, there has been little consideration of the types of assets that could be created to ease gender-specific vulnerabilities - for example, public works activities aimed at reducing women's time poverty, such as improving fuel wood and water collection sources, or more broadly addressing discriminatory access to common property resources and sources of drinking water for SC/ST women. In particular, the types of employment opportunities created as a result of the focus on rural infrastructure development have to some extent served to reinforce existing stereo-types of the type of work deemed socially acceptable for women to carry out which leads to women being given "soft" work, rather than providing alternative opportunities for women's employment.

Many authors have proposed that the conceptualisation of NREGA's asset creation could be widened to improve the effectiveness of the goal to "transform rural livelihoods". Broadening the narrow scope of types of works appropriate to rural productivity could also include a focus on healthcare, nutrition and

literacy / skills programmes as well as improving market access and infrastructure for women and supporting investments and training in other agricultural activities. Indeed, lack of access to and utilisation of health, education and financial services were identified in our research sites across gender, age and social group as important sources of risk and vulnerability.

In terms of programme governance, the social audit is an important component to promote local community level involvement in the planning and monitoring of NREGA works, and pays explicit attention to women's participation in the process. However, although the guidelines suggest that the timing of the social audit forums must be such that it is convenient for women and marginalized communities to attend, it also states that lack of representation by any of the required categories should not be taken as a reason not to proceed with the forum process. In order for women to be better represented at the local level however there is an urgent need to put in place mechanisms which ensure that women are able to participate, for example, through quotas for women's representation, flexible meeting times, awareness-raising about the importance of women's participation and mechanisms to strengthen their confidence in raising their voice and opinions in community decision-making processes.

In Madhya Pradesh the decision to appoint women "mates" across the state is an important mechanism to support women's opportunities for alternative skills development and taking on more of a supervisory role. While dependent on women having an education level to 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> class, facilitating lesson learning from the villages which have successfully implemented women "mates" would be an important way to share best practices and promote greater attention to the gender dimensions and potential of NREGA works.

Technical capacity building for staff at all levels of government, including in the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), is needed to effectively articulate the importance of gender equality for rural development and poverty reduction. Institutionalising inter-sectoral coordination is also vital to promote understanding of and attention to both gendered economic and social risks and vulnerabilities and the way they intersect. NREGA has an excellent basis for monitoring and evaluating data collection and strengthening the reporting and analysis on gender-related dimensions of the programme would be beneficial to support changes in programme design and

implementation. Improvements in data collection could include a focus on the gender-related benefits of the types of assets created; participation in decision-making structures; and budget allocations for capacity building on gender-related programme dimensions.

## **7.2 Implementation Issues**

The Government of India, with the collaboration of non-governmental organisations, has achieved considerable success in scaling up NREGA to over 40 million households in the space of 3-4 years. All districts across all states are now implementing the programme. As discussed in the section above, NREGA has designed specific features of the Act to address gendered vulnerabilities, yet the implementation of these gender-sensitive features has faced a number of challenges which urgently need to be overcome to realise the full potential of this flagship programme for addressing rural poverty in the country.

First, much more attention to improve awareness on gender equity at the panchayat level is needed to break down cultural norms which perpetuate the socially accepted gender division of labour which allocates “soft work” to women, often resulting in fewer days employment, lower wages based on male productivity norms, and/or preference of employment to men.

Second, investment in providing adequate childcare facilities is urgently required to support women’s participation in NREGA employment. Flexible arrangements such as mobile crèches are currently being explored in Madhya Pradesh.

Third, efforts to support women’s participation and contribution to community meetings and social audit forums are needed to promote women’s voice at the planning and monitoring level as laid out in the “grass roots democracy” vision of NREGA. Low literacy, education and skills rates among women, particularly among the ST and SC population, not only limit their participation in community meetings but also in claiming their entitlements to NREGA employment through the written application procedure. Non-governmental organisations have played an important role in raising awareness and simplifying application procedures, and there is an opportunity to strengthen their role to support women’s access to NREGA in terms of building skills as

well as raising awareness of the gender-specific features among the local panchayat as an implementing body.

Fourth, strengthening linkages between NREGA, skills-training programmes and access to agricultural inputs and credit would help to maximise livelihood opportunities for rural men and women, and furthermore, building on opportunities at the grass-roots level through the local panchayat and NGOs to raise awareness about social vulnerabilities and risks which women and girls face, especially issues such as gender-based violence, early marriage, girls' education, female foeticide/infanticide and women's inheritance rights.

Lastly, raising the overall level of awareness on the importance of gender equality for programme effectiveness is needed from the grassroots level to the state departments. Providing opportunities for lesson learning both within and between states is potentially an important mechanism for generating buy-in and identifying and sharing good practices across villages. Other important mechanisms include monitoring gender sensitive features, providing gender-sensitive training, and promoting institutional incentives for the practical implementation of such components.

## Endnotes

- 1 Currently, the Government of India spends approximately 4 per cent of GDP on social protection programmes: while the majority of this spending is on social insurance, 20 per cent is spent on social assistance (Baulch et al. 2008).
- 2 We have not used the names of the villages in this report.
- 3 This section is based on Holmes and Jones (2009a).
- 4 Note that in middle-income countries, a 2009 World Bank review found that workfare programmes were typically initiated to cope with one-time large macroeconomic shocks. By contrast, in low-income countries they are typically motivated by poverty relief and seasonal unemployment concerns.
- 5 Other targeting methods include self-selection in combination with other methods and geographic targeting (World Bank (2009).
- 6 This section draws heavily on IIPS and Macro International (2007)
- 7 Infant mortality: 57 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001-05; child mortality is 18.4 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001-05 and under-five mortality has declined from 95.4 deaths per live births in 1991-95 to 74.3 in 2001-5 (NFHS-3, 2007).
- 8 The practice of separating women from men
- 9 Husband of the sarpanch
- 10 This section draws heavily on data from 2005-6, IIPS and Macro International (2008)
- 11 Rank (Monthly per capita consumption expenditure 2004-05) among the 45 districts
- 12 Other implementing agencies include the intermediate panchayats, the district panchayats, line departments and NGOs. Private contractors are banned (Dev, 2009).
- 13 “Mates” are responsible for e.g. supervision of employees and works, maintenance records and calculating payments.
- 14 Social audits are conducted by Gram Sabhas of all works taken up within the Gram Panchayat
- 15 Survey results showed that 17 per cent of the respondents reported NREGA helped in improving household consumption especially in terms of expenditure on food items. The second most important positive impact of NREGA was provision of livelihood security in terms of getting employment

for some days in a year. 5 per cent of the respondents said that NREGA along with improving livelihood security and household consumption, NREGA also helped in getting access to credit.

- 16 While some key informant interviews in MP also suggested that women receive lower wages because of piece rate payments where productivity is measured by “male norms” we did not find evidence of this from the participant respondents.
- 17 Priya Deshingkar, Research Fellow, ODI. Personal communication, February 2010.
- 18 “Mates” are responsible for e.g. supervision, maintenance records and calculating payments.

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