

Engendering NREGA: Women's Empowerment through Guaranteed Employment

Institute for Human Development - UNIFEM Workshop

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India International Centre, New Delhi

The participants at the **Engendering NREGA: Women's Empowerment through Guaranteed Employment** represented Planning Commission of India, Ministry of Rural Development, several universities and a number of research institutions and civil society organizations.

The inaugural address was given by Dr. **Syeda Hameed**, Member, Planning Commission of India, **Professor Alakh N. Sharma**, Director, Institute for Human Development and **Ms Anne F. Stenhammer**, Regional Programme Director, UNIFEM South Asia office.



The IHD study *Women's Empowerment Through Guaranteed Employment: A Case Study of NREGA Implementation in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh* were presented by Dr. Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tankha.

The study focused on two major questions:

- What is the extent of women’s participation under NREGA and quality of their work, participation in decisions regarding selection of works, conducting of social audits?
- What is the impact of wage parity on decision making capacity of rural women? Is there an increased in their bargaining powers as individuals and within the household and also community?



Additional presentations included studies from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

- **Professor Indira Hirway, *Engendering Public Works Programme by Addressing Unpaid work of women in Developing Countries Case Study in India***
- **Dr. Ratna Sudarshan, *NREGA in Palakkad, Kerala***
- **Dr. Varsha Joshi, *Moving out from Private to Public Space in NREGA in Rajasthan***
- **Dr. E. Revathi & Dr. S.C. Galab, *'NREGS and Women's Economic and Empowerment: A case of AP***
- **Dr. Govind Kelkar “*Gender and Productive assets: Implications of National Rural Employment Guarantee for Women’s Agency and Productivity*”**

The presentations and discussions highlighted the following:

1. Generally speaking, the policy approach does recognize the link between gender equality and economic development. But in its programmes and efforts at overcoming poverty, there seems to be limited attention to address persistent gender discrimination, gendered distribution of productive assets and resulting vulnerability of women.
2. While recognizing the significant achievements of NREGA with regard to (1) Gender parity of wages, (2) Mobilization of women for NREGA employment and (3) increased in control rights of women in earnings from NREGA. Presently there are over 50% women employed under NREGA programmes; 79% women employees collect their own wages; 68% keep their own wages.
3. A couple of presentations stressed that women should not be subjected to hard manual work and efforts should be made to extend NREGA provisions for skilled and semi-skilled work such as weaving, artisanal work and so on.
4. One presentation supported by the discussion strongly suggested inclusion of unpaid work at home largely done by women.
5. In case of Kerala, Kudumbashree and Panchayats have been very vigilant in spreading awareness about NREGA through radio, poster, television, notice board on gram sabhas, etc. However with regard to tribal dominant areas like Attapaddy (with 40% or more tribal population), it is a different story. The scheme has not been popularized, delay in payments, lack of banks and so on. All these have made NREGA unattractive for the tribal people.
6. Another paper followed by discussion critiqued women's absence or token presence in the management of production assets (created under NREGA programme) and women's participation in adequate numbers in social audits as provided in the Act.
7. A general agreement during the workshop emerged that policy analysis need to take account of (1) information on inequality of opportunities as related to freedom and choice to pursue one's aspirations and work related plans; (2) gender specific distributive considerations in capacity development; (3) the place of individuals and communities and their inter-relationship with regard to what Amartya Sen calls justice and freedom in accessing opportunities and achieving capabilities.



The papers were followed by comments and suggestions by discussants to facilitate the process of queries, answers and comments.

The concluding address was by **Professor Abhijit Sen**, Member of the Planning Commission, chaired by Professor Jean Dreze. The panel presentations included **Mr. S.M. Vijayanand**, Principal Secretary, LSG, Government of Kerala and **Dr. Santosh Mehrotra**, Director, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, and Head, Development Policy Division, Planning Commission. In the summing up the following points emerged:

1. NREGA was not envisioned as a women's empowerment programme
2. The opportunity taken by a large number of women indicates a preference for "government work" which provides dignity and higher wages than available in the market.
3. NREGA implementation in the ongoing phase could be strengthened by provisioning of what is already available in the Act, such as worksite facilities, eg. shade and safe drinking water and to some extent child care facilities.
4. Some "gender-neutral measures" such as increase in participation of women in planning and social audits of NREGA implementation, in turn, will create an opportunity for women's role in asset management. These were seen as possible measures with forthcoming provision of 50% reservation of women in Gram Panchayats.

