

Factors determining women participation in MGNREGA in Tamilnadu: A ViewV.Ramesh¹A.Abdul Raheem²**Abstract**

MGNREGA itself contains a number of specific provisions aimed at safeguarding gender parity in the program. These stipulations specifically seek to address some of the obstacles that have traditionally prevented women from engaging in work outside the home. In response to the challenge of finding childcare services, MGNREGA specifies that, in cases where there are at least five children accompanying women to a worksite, one of the female workers must be designated to provide childcare on site. In order to challenge the general preference for male workers in manual labor employment, MGNREGA stipulates, as mentioned above, that at least one-third of workers must be women. This paper attempts to examine factors determining women participation in MGNREGA in Tamilnadu.

1.1 Introduction

In Tamil Nadu's implementation of MGNREGA has garnered fewer accolades than efforts in Rajasthan or Andhra Pradesh, the state's success in terms of female participation deserves considerable attention. Across India, an average of 42 per cent of MGNREGA workers are women; in Tamil Nadu, that number soars to 82 per cent. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh has yet to meet the one-third female participation requirement, as stipulated under Article (29) of the Act, although several high-level government officials predict that UP will approach, if not fully meet this requirement, by 2012.

MGNREGA has the potential to make a substantial, positive impact on both the economic and social wellbeing of poor, rural women. Not only does MGNREGA present an unprecedented opportunity for women to earn wages equal to men, but it could also provide women with greater latitude in making autonomous decisions, particularly regarding household finances. Gender wage disparity across India currently stands at roughly 30 per cent and MGNREGA could play a key role in narrowing that gap.

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Tamil Nadu has the nation's highest female participation rate in MGNREGA at 82 per cent. In addition, there is a high level of women's leadership in local government, particularly at the block and panchayat levels. One of our initial hypotheses for such a high participation of women in Tamil Nadu was the state's comparatively higher gender development index. The female literacy rate stands at 73.8 per cent female life expectancy rate is 67.4 years, and there is a 48.3 per cent primary school enrollment of girls.

The state has a total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.7 per cent compared to India's 2.6 per cent, and a maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 97 (per 100,000 live births) compared to India's. This association between literacy and MGNREGA success was confirmed by our previous quantitative analysis. This may partially explain the difference between southern and northern states - that is, southern states are on the whole performing better when it comes to MGNREGA. However, even among southern states, Tamil Nadu remains an outlier in its performance on when gender is taken into account.

1.2 Factors determining MGNREGA

Tamil Nadu can be attributed to social, economic, cultural and institutional factors.

Social factors: As it does across the world, culture in India plays a dominant role in defining women's place in society. The more egalitarian kinship structure in the south of the country stands in stark contrast to that of the north, where communities maintain a highly matrilineal social structure. In northern states such as UP, women marry into families distant from their own, since men are forbidden to inter-marry with their own kin.

Conversely, in Tamil Nadu and other southern states, it is customary for women to marry their cross-cousins; therefore they are much more likely to stay close to their own families. These practices have significant implications for a woman's wellbeing and autonomy. Women in the south often inherit property and enjoy the social support of their own kin. As a result, "women in Tamil Nadu have significantly more decision-making authority, mobility, and access to and control over resources than women from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab and somewhat more balanced power relations with their husbands."

Economic factors: Tamil Nadu's labor market may play the greatest role in the high participation of women in MGNREGA. Specifically, the wage differential between private sector and MGNREGA work has made it more lucrative for women to work on MGNREGA projects. Currently, the private sector pays women Rs 40 to Rs 100 for a day's work in agriculture, while men earn Rs 250 to Rs 500 a day in the agricultural and construction sectors, and as much as Rs 1,000 in fishing. In contrast, MGNREGA wages range from Rs 60 to Rs 80 a day, for both men and women. Consequently, most men select private sector employment. Certainly, most female examinees established that their husbands were involved in private sector activities.

The president of one gram panchayat noted that men often spend the work week in Chennai and return to their home villages for the weekend. While women could technically earn as much as Rs 100 in private sector agriculture, they preferred MGNREGA for the flexibility in work hours. They also reported finding the work less arduous and enjoying the more social environment; one interviewee noted, “Even though we earn less under MGNREGA, we like it better because the work is not as hard.”

Institutional factors: MGNREGA Act requires that childcare services be provided at worksites when more than five children under the age of six are present. Crèches can significantly impact the degree to which women participate in MGNREGA. Khera and Nayak note that, the lack of these facilities can be crippling to women, especially for those with breastfeeding infants who cannot be left behind for long hours.

Almost none of the gram panchayats surveyed provided childcare services for beneficiaries, although one gram panchayat president reported paying an elderly or a disabled person to take care of children. It is important to note that the state has a longstanding tradition of free childcare facilities (anganwadis and balwadis), which are government-run preschools for children between the ages of two and six, present in almost every village in rural Tamil Nadu. The balwadi we visited at one of the gram panchayats provided a nutritious midday meal (rice, daal, and one egg per child).

However, the presence of these centers should not diminish the importance of crèches at worksites. Even though anganwadis and balwadis offer considerable support to the program, there have been complaints that they fail to fully accommodate the needs of MGNREGA women workers. For example, it is not uncommon to find semi functional centers with caretakers rarely showing up for work. In addition, even when these centers are operating optimally, they are not viable options for infants.

Another favorable factor towards women’s participation in Tamil Nadu was that contractors were completely absent from the MGNREGA projects. The Act mandates a breakdown of 60 per cent of costs going toward laborers wages and 40 per cent allocated for material components, but Tamil Nadu has gone even further recognizing that the obtaining of materials needs contractors and that contractors are a major source of corruption, the state issued orders to instrument only kaccha works, that is, works with no material constituent.

Although this might have serious implications for the creation of durable assets, the absence of contractors seems to play a positive role in creating a safe working environment for women. Contractors are a major issue of concern in other states, including UP, where their “continued illegal presence is a significant negative factor affecting the availability of work and its benefits for women.”

Tamil Nadu’s form of wage payment turns out to have both advantages and disadvantages for women participants. Despite claims in existing literature that MGNREGA in Tamil Nadu provides women with daily wages, our experience was that all wages were piecemeal. This method of work assessment tends to underpay the worker, since it requires an engineer to gauge individual progress imperfectly. As a

result, MGNREGA wages in Tamil Nadu often do not exceed Rs 90, even though the minimum wage in the state is Rs 119.136. In spite of this, piecemeal payment does not seem to have a strong discriminatory effect against women because the entire group is paid the same rate based upon works accomplished.

In addition, the piecemeal system incorporates an inherent time flexibility that a daily wage does not allow. In terms of daily working hours, schedules have shifted from the 9am to 5pm workday during the early years of MGNREGA, to the current schedule of 9am to 1pm, giving women the opportunity to work double shifts or return to their household chores.

Civil societal factors: The women's Self Help Group (SHG) movement in Tamil Nadu began in 1989. Initially, it had more to do with inculcating credit and thrift practices amongst women, but it eventually evolved into an empowerment movement. SHGs bring together women in groups of 10-20 to pool their funds for emergency and credit purposes. They deposit small amounts of cash every month and when the funds have accumulated, members are able to borrow without guarantee restrictions.

SHGs have become increasingly linked to banks, so that groups can now take out bank loans using the savings as collateral. Our research confirmed the importance of SHGs in helping women access credit. These institutions also serve a critical role by providing a means for women to make demands for MGNREGA in a single, unified voice. In addition, SHGs play an important role in program monitoring: to ensure fair compensation, the leader of an SHG from each panchayat is always present when payments are made to workers.

1.3 Conclusion

The overwhelming impression from Tamil Nadu is that the great strength of the state's institutions is responsible for its success in providing MGNREGA work to women. Tamil Nadu has certain practices in place that, if replicated elsewhere, could contribute towards higher female participation on MGNREGA projects in other states.

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