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Participation and Rationing in the MGNREGA from the National  
Sample Survey**

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## **Abstract**

*The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees employment of every rural household for 100 days, has different progressive provisions which incentivise higher participation of women in the programme. Official data suggest that 47% of all MGNREGA workers are women. This paper uses the National Sample Survey for the 68th employment-unemployment round (2011-12) to examine the performance of states in terms of participation and rationing of women in the programme relative to that of men. In addition, it documents these indicators from various sub-populations of women, including widows, mothers of young children, etc. who typically face serious constraints in the context of labour market participation. The study finds substantial variations both across states and sub populations implying the need for a differentiated policy focus across states to support women's access to and participation in the MGNREGA.*

**Keywords:** MGNREGA, India, women, rationing, labour

**JEL Code:** J08; J16;J21

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# Employment Guarantee for Women in India

## Evidence on Participation and Rationing in the MGNREGA from the National Sample Survey

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### Abstract

*The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees employment of every rural household for 100 days, has different progressive provisions which incentivise higher participation of women in the programme. Official data suggest that 47% of all MGNREGA workers are women. This paper uses the National Sample Survey for the 68<sup>th</sup> employment-unemployment round (2011-12) to examine the performance of states in terms of participation and rationing of women in the programme relative to that of men. In addition, it documents these indicators from various sub-populations of women, including widows, mothers of young children, etc. who typically face serious constraints in the context of labour market participation. The study finds substantial variations both across states and sub populations implying the need for a differentiated policy focus across states to support women's access to and participation in the MGNREGA.*

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### 1. Introduction

Public workfare programmes in India have traditionally offered a unique opportunity for women to earn cash incomes in a context where, too often, the ability of women to work outside the home is severely constrained by social norms. Existing scholarship suggests that women often participated overwhelmingly in these programmes to the extent that some of them were even referred to as “women’s programmes” (Dev, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Public works programmes have therefore been a subject of considerable interest from the perspective of gender (Quisumbing and Yisehac, 2005). Public funds that provide safety nets could (and should) offer women equal access to risk-coping opportunities. This is particularly important if women are more vulnerable to income and other shocks because of the absence of insurance mechanisms (e.g., lack of assets to be used as collateral, ill health, shorter duration of paid employment). Second, public works schemes may provide resources to poor women that would enable human capital investment especially for children’s education and nutrition apart from improving women’s bargaining power within the household (Quisumbing and Yisehac, 2005).

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), implemented in 2006, is no exception. The MGNREGA guarantees at least 100 days of work per year to all rural households whose adults are willing to do unskilled manual labour at the

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statutory minimum wage notified for the programme. Work is to be made available to anyone who demands it within 15 days of receiving an application to work, failing which the state government is liable to pay an unemployment allowance. In its design, the MGNREGA perhaps goes farther than most public works programmes in its overt aspirations for women (Government of India, 2012; Holmes, et al. 2011; Khera and Nayak, 2009; Sudarshan 2011).

Three key features of the MGNREGA set it apart from previous labour market interventions from the perspective of the opportunities it holds for women. First, the Act prescribes that at least a third of all workers be women. Second, the Act also provides for equal wages for men and women. This is especially significant in a context where women often receive a lower wage than men do even for similar tasks. Third, since the entitlement to at least a hundred days of work is at the household level, the allocation of the work within the household is left to the household members allowing space for the participation of women (Khera and Nayak, 2009). In addition to these three features, there are also provisions for facilities such as childcare at the worksites that aim to reduce the barriers to women's participation (Government of India, 2012). Further, there are other aspects of the MGNREGA make work attractive for women, at least in principle, for example, the stipulation that work is within 5 kilometres of an applicant's residence. The operational guidelines too are incorporative of measures sensitive to gender-related issues (Holmes, et al., 2011). In the context of opening bank accounts for wage payments, the recommendation is that the local government should consider individual and joint accounts to avoid crediting earnings solely to the male head of household. Even in the allocation of work, the guidelines recommend that women be given preference on worksites closest to their dwelling (page 22, MGNREGA Operational Guidelines 2013).<sup>2</sup> It suggests too that social audits must be conveniently scheduled for MGNREGA workers so that women and marginalised communities can participate without constraints. The Act itself also provides for women's representation in local committees and state and central councils, in staffing (page 37, Government of India, 2013, Section 4.6.7) and in the selection of mates (worksite supervisor).<sup>3</sup> All these elements of the MGNREGA collectively attempt to address the stated objective of the MGNREGA to empower women (page 3, Government of India, 2013).

In the seven years since its inception, there is evidence from administrative data that the MGNREGA has indeed drawn a large number of women to worksites. Testimonies from field surveys support the idea that the MGNREGA has been inclusive and empowering of women (Dheeraja and Rao, 2010; Pankaj and Tankha, 2009; Sudarshan, 2006). At the same time, however, women continue to face some stiff challenges. Large interstate variations in the extent of women's participation for instance indicate that the MGNREGA has not been uniformly inclusive of women (Drèze and Oldiges, 2007; Dutta, et al., 2012). Anecdotal accounts from the field suggest that in many places, social norms against women working outside the household continue to prevent them from participating in the MGNREGA, not to mention the many constraints that they face in the MGNREGA worksite. There is also some preliminary evidence based on data from household surveys that point to greater rationing of women at worksites suggesting that women who seek MGNREGA work face a greater probability of not obtaining work than do men, given that they have sought work (Dutta, et al., 2012).

The gender dimension of the MGNREGA has rightly attracted significant interest. Most of the studies have relied on field surveys and administrative data to document patterns of women's participation and their constraints. Until now, due to the nature of available data, which was at the household level, it has been virtually impossible to examine, on a large scale, if women are more likely to be rationed out or if specific sub-populations of women are less likely to work on MGNREGA sites. Nor has a detailed analysis of the pattern of women participation

been possible. The recent release of the 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) however offers a fresh opportunity to examine these issues. It is possible now to understand, to some degree, at a national level, patterns of work seeking and participation, for all adult members of rural households and the intra-household distribution of MGNREGA workers.

This paper uses NSS data to examine differences across men and women along a number of aspects: possessing a job card, seeking work under the MGNREGA and MGNREGA participation and rationing rate, defined as the proportion of job seekers who were not allocated work (Das, 2013a; Dutta, et al., 2012; Liu and Barrett, 2012).<sup>4</sup> In particular, it assesses whether women face greater rationing relative to men in accessing their entitlement to work. Among women, we examine whether some groups (for example, widows, young mothers, women-headed households and those households without an adult male member) are likely to fare worse than others across these indicators. These groups are particularly constrained from participating in the labour market and one would expect *prima facie* that the MGNREGA redresses their constraints. Specifically, the paper explores and comments on the inter-state variations, drawing on previous empirical evidence to do so.

Two important caveats limit the scope of this paper. First, the persistent discrepancy between the NSS data and the administrative data (discussed in Section 3a) is as yet unresolved. So the extent to which the NSS data can be relied upon for general observations on MGNREGA participation is open to debate. It is generally accepted that the administrative data and the NSS represent different things and are therefore essentially irreconcilable. This paper therefore focuses on making relative comparisons between men and women within the NSS sample. Second, it is not entirely clear that the NSS does in fact capture demand for MGNREGA work, since it is not clear what “seeking” work implies because it is not explicitly asked (Section 3a). Indicators used in the paper that incorporate the idea of seeking work are therefore coarse measures of individual desire to access the MGNREGA. This is another reason the analysis in the paper should be regarded as one of comparisons across different groups within the sample.

Following this introduction, this paper first presents the official picture on women’s participation. Thereafter, the NSS data is used to assess the extent of rationing between men and women, and whether particular sub-populations among women fare worse than others. We then discuss interstate variations incorporating selectively existing evidence on women’s participation based on small field surveys. The final section concludes the discussion.

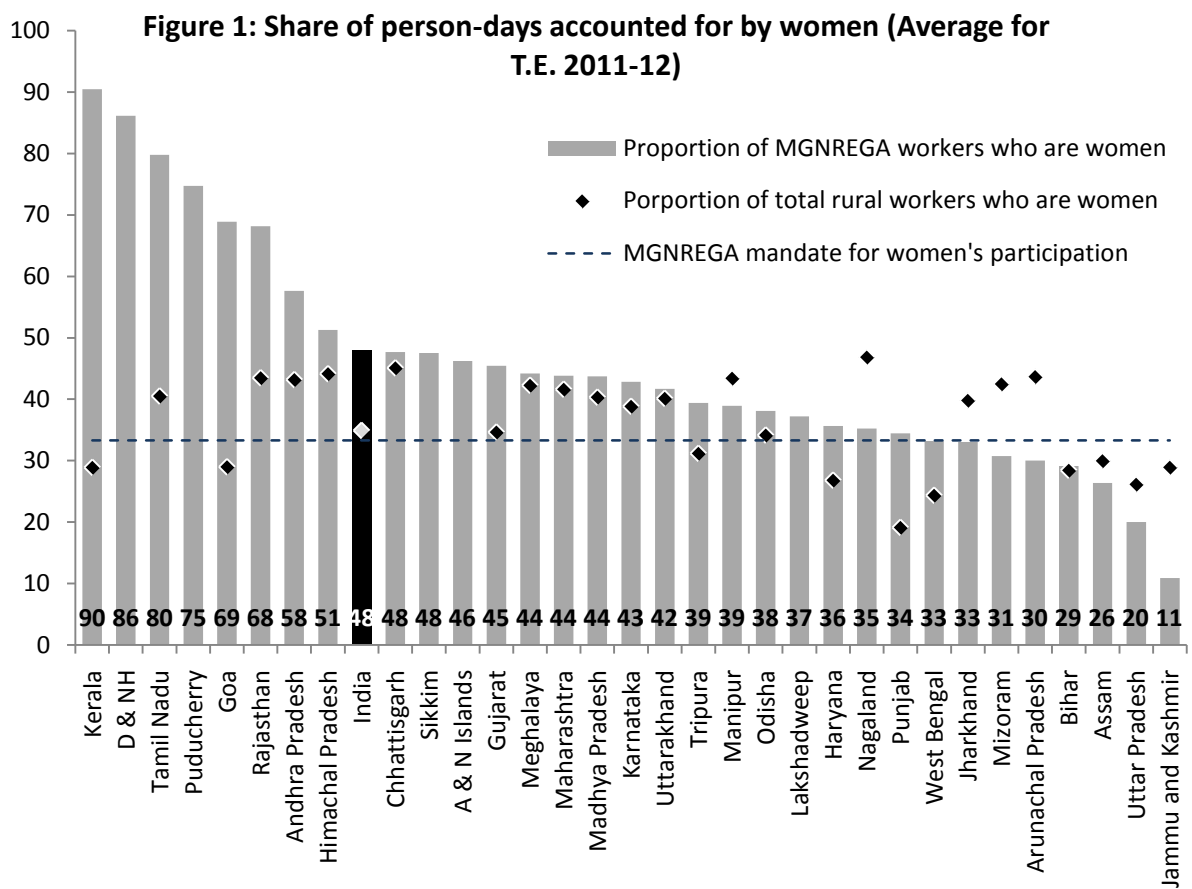
## **2. MGNREGA and Women’s Participation: The Official Picture**

The official data on the participation of women suggests that in 2012-13 as much as 47% of all person days generated was accounted for by women. This is not only higher than the mandated one-third, but is slightly higher than the share at inception and has been somewhat stable ever since all districts came under the purview of the MGNREGA. That the MGNREGA is indeed an important avenue of employment for women is evident from the fact that while the proportion of women in total rural workforce is 34.9% according to the Census 2011, their representation in the MGNREGA workforce is 48% on average for 2010-12.

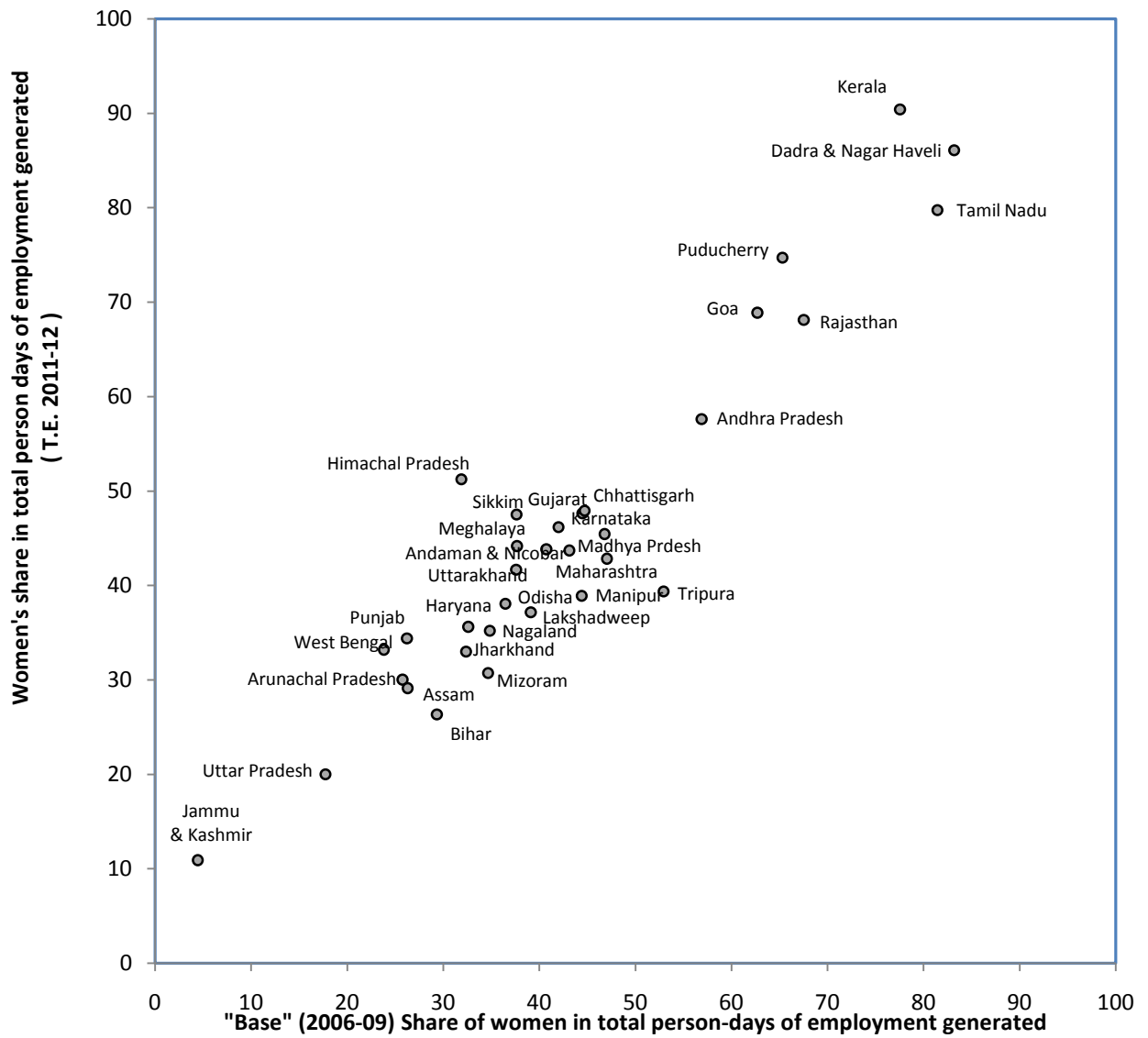
The national figure for women’s share in total person days generated is well above the mandated one-third; yet, there is substantial variation across states. This was noted in the early years and continues to be the case (Drèze and Oldiges, 2007; Ghosh, 2008). Women’s share in total person-days generated during the triennium ending (T.E.) 2011-12 ranges from as low as 11% in Jammu and Kashmir to as high as 90% in Kerala (Figure 1). The southern states of Andhra Pradesh (58%) and Tamil Nadu (80%) show a high proportion of women of MGNREGA

workers along with states such as Himachal Pradesh (51%) and Goa (69%), for instance, that tend to also have better indicators of social development. Rajasthan (68%) continues to have a more than proportionate share of women workers in the MGNREGA, as it had in the early days of the programme. Interestingly, apart from the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram that traditionally have a larger proportion of women in the workforce, states where the share of women MGNREGA workers is lower than their corresponding share in total rural workforce include Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Assam and Uttar Pradesh.

Importantly, the extent of women’s participation has been somewhat stable over the years. In order to get a sense of the trend in women’s participation, we divide the six years of MGNREGA into two periods and compare the change in the triennium averages. The first period saw the MGNREGA roll out; by the end of 2008-09, the MGNREGA was implemented in all districts. Figure 2 maps the change in share for each state to the “base period” share. This approximate indicator suggests that in a lot of states the women’s share in total person days generated is relatively stable. Tripura and Manipur have however registered prominent declines. Barring these two, only a few states have seen a decline in women’s share in total person-days generated and for these states, the decline is relatively small in magnitude. In contrast, states such as Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bihar have seen increases of more than ten percentage points in the women’s share of MGNREGA person days of employment.



**Figure 2: Trend in Women Participation in MGNREGA**



Source: Government of India, administrative data

**Table 1: The share of women in the total person days generated in MGNREGA since inception**

States/UTs	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13*	AVERAGE	AVERAGE
								FOR	FOR
								2010-12	2006-2010
Andhra Pradesh	55	58	58	58	57	58	57	58	57
Arunachal Pradesh	30	30	26	17	33	40	13	30	26
Assam	32	31	27	28	27	25	17	26	29
Bihar	17	28	30	30	28	29	21	29	26
Chhattisgarh	39	42	47	49	49	45	33	48	45
Gujarat	50	47	43	48	44	45	32	45	47
Haryana	31	34	31	35	36	36	27	36	33
Himachal Pradesh	12	30	39	46	48	59	44	51	32
Jammu and Kashmir	4	1	6	7	7	19	11	11	4
Jharkhand	39	27	29	34	33	31	23	33	32
Karnataka	51	50	50	37	46	46	20	43	47
Kerala	66	71	85	88	90	93	70	90	78
Madhya Pradesh	43	42	43	44	44	42	32	44	43
Maharashtra	37	40	46	40	46	46	35	44	41
Manipur	51	33	46	48	35	34	26	39	44
Meghalaya	31	31	41	47	44	41	32	44	38
Mizoram	33	34	37	35	34	23	18	31	35
Nagaland	30	29	37	44	35	27	15	35	35
Odisha	36	36	38	36	39	39	25	38	36
Punjab	38	16	25	26	34	43	35	34	26
Rajasthan	67	69	67	67	68	69	54	68	68
Sikkim	25	37	38	51	47	45	21	48	38
Tamil Nadu	81	82	80	83	83	74	58	80	81
Tripura	75	45	51	41	39	39	33	39	53
Uttar Pradesh	17	15	18	22	21	17	15	20	18
Uttarakhand	30	43	37	40	40	45	29	42	38
West Bengal	18	17	27	33	34	32	23	33	24
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	NA	NA	39	45	47	46	32	46	42
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	NA	NA	79	87	85	NA	NA	86	83
Daman and Diu	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA		
Goa	NA	NA		63	68	76	66	69	63
Lakshadweep	NA	NA	41	38	34	40	19	37	39
Puducherry	NA	NA	67	64	80	80	83	75	65
Chandigarh	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA		
<b>India</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>

Source: Compiled from data available at [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)

Notes: \*The figure for 2012-13 is not for the full year. The data for each year pertains to the districts where the MGNREGA was in implementation.



### **3. Gender and MGNREGA: Evidence from the National Sample Survey**

#### **a. Data and Indicators**

In this section, we map specific indicators from the NSS that represent different dimensions of the extent to which women access the MGNREGA. We do this for different sub-groups to document the variations across these groups, if any. The first indicator is possession of job cards. The second is whether they worked on MGNREGA sites. The other two variables we examine are seeking work and administrative rationing. The survey documents both for each individual surveyed in the household; these however come with important caveats.

The NSS records whether the household possesses a job card, and the number of job cards a sample household might possess. The 68<sup>th</sup> Round goes further and records for each member of the household 18 years of age and above, whether (s)he is registered in any MGNREGA job card if the household in question is in possession of a job card. For those members whose names are registered in the job card the NSS examines their work participation in the MGNREGA. The NSS guidelines mention that the “situation will be determined with a reference period of last 365 days in respect of whether got work in MGNREG work for at least one day or sought but did not get work and did not seek work”. Each member therefore is categorized as either having worked on the MGNREGA, having sought work but not actually worked and those who did not seek work at all. Unfortunately, it is not clear as to what “seeking work” implies or whether this was explicitly asked. The fact that in many cases, the system of applying for work has not been followed strictly and people show up at worksites when sites are opened, raises questions on what these data might represent. This has to be borne in mind in the context of this analysis.

In principle, the MGNREGA being a demand driven programme ought to provide employment to anyone who seeks work. Ideally, there would no rationing at all so that anyone who desires work is indeed granted work. This must be true for men and women alike. In practice, this is not exactly the case and there is some evidence based on field surveys that there could be some rationing (Bhatty, 2008; Das, 2013b; Holmes, et.al., 2011; Khera and Nayak 2009). This has been inferred from national surveys as well (Liu and Barrett, 2012; Dutta, et al, 2012).

In general, the extent of rationing can be determined based on two different datasets and both are not necessarily consistent with one another. Administrative data from the MIS records document how much work is demanded and work that is provided. This information is available at the household level so that it is possible to compute the proportion of the households who sought work who did get work. An alternative is to turn to data from the NSS that collects data on whether or not a household sought work and whether or not they indeed got work. The recent 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the NSS builds on the 66<sup>th</sup> round from (2009-10) to record this information at the level of the individual so that these variables are available for each adult member of the household possessing an MGNREGA job card. The two sets of data are not strictly comparable and there has been some discussion on what each of them represents (Government of India 2012). The administrative data which comes from the MIS is real time data that is available publicly. The data available includes the number of households who sought work and the number of households provided work, although it is not clear whether the work demanded truly reflects those seeking work through applications for work or something else. The NSS data, as described earlier, is based on a 365-day recall period with self-reported request for work and status (whether or not any member of the household worked on NREGA worksite).

The administrative data indicates that employment generation more or less matches the demand and that this is virtually true across the states. There is neither much variation across states nor is there variation across time. In contrast, the figures from the NSS data present a much higher administrative rationing rate for the country and a lot more variation across states. The rationing rate here is computed as the proportion of those who sought work who did not get work and represents one kind of rationing, that on the extensive margin. The inconsistency of estimates between the administrative data and those derived from the NSS is an open question and should serve to qualify the results that follow. For the purpose of this work, we rely exclusively on the NSS because it offers a granularity that the administrative data does not. Thus, if the NSS rationing is regarded as an overestimate of the true rationing rate, the premise of this work is that the comparison of rationing rates across gender would be overestimates of both men and women, but would not vary across these groups and hence still be a valid comparison.

In this section we use data from the NSS to examine the gender differential in rationing, by computing rationing rates across men and women to assess if women are more likely to be excluded from MGNREGA employment, but also focus on different sub-groups of women workers.

## **b. Constraints to Women's Participation**

Table 2 presents the rationing rate for households and individuals (belonging to the age group is 18 to 60 years), segregated by gender for the major states. At the All-India level there are indications that, on average, work allocation is progressive in the sense that women face a lower administrative rationing rate than men. Whereas the proportion of households who do not obtain MGNREGA work despite "seeking" work is 0.23 for India as a whole, the proportion of men who face administrative rationing is 0.28 and the figure is 0.25 for women. At the same time, for every three men seeking work, only two women seek work in the MGNREGA. The proportion of total rural population who have worked on the MGNREGA worksites also mirrors this pattern, suggesting that although there appears to be no "administrative discrimination" against women, the proportion of adult women seeking work on MGNREGA is lower than the proportion of adult men seeking work. That said, it is noteworthy that rural male work participation rate (all types of employment) is 54% as compared to 18% for rural females.<sup>5</sup> As with the previous comparison between administrative data and the Census 2011, these figures too imply that the MGNREGA is progressive when compared to overall employment trends for women.

There is another sense in which the MGNREGA is a women's programme. Of the households that report working in the MGNREGA in many states an overwhelming majority of the MGNREGA households sends only its female members to work in the MGNREGA underscoring the importance of the MGNREGA as an option for women (Table 3). The proportion is over 50% in states such as Tamil Nadu (64.9%), Kerala (85.2%). There are several other states where the proportion of households that sends only its women to MGNREGA worksites is high relative to that of households that sends only its male members. These include Himachal Pradesh (39.1%), Rajasthan (40.7%), Andhra Pradesh (22.3%), Uttaranchal (21.5%) and also Punjab (36.7%) and Haryana (23%). This is true at the All India level as well. In contrast, states like Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal the ratio of

households where only women members constitute MGNREGA workforce to those where only male members are represented in the MGNREGA workforce is less than one.

The positive performance at the all India level in terms of rationing and women's representation among MGNREGA belies the variable performance across states in the pattern of rationing (Table 3). For several states, we find corroborating evidence for the observation made in Dutta, et al (2012) that the rationing process does not favour women, even if they might be participating in the MGNREGA. At the same time, in other states the rationing perhaps seems to explicitly favour women. In one group of states that include the four southern states (except Karnataka) as well as Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, rationing rate for women is lower than that for men. This group includes states where the proportion of rural adults registered, seek work and have worked on MGNREGA sites is high. But it also includes those where these rates are somewhat low, including Haryana, Jharkhand, Assam and Punjab. In contrast in the second group of states, females face higher administrative rationing than do males. This group includes Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jammu & Kashmir, Odisha, Gujarat and Uttarakhand where the scale of work participation in MGNREGA is less than six percent. States such as Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal where the scale of work participation in the MGNREGA is much higher also find themselves in this category. Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have administrative rationing rates that are indistinguishable across males and females, though in Chhattisgarh the rationing rate is lower and the scale of MGNREGA participation is much higher.

**Table 2: Proportion of households, where only males and only females worked among all the working households.**

For households who got work			
States	Females only participated	Males only participated	Ratio
Andhra Pradesh	0.223	0.006	34.80
Assam	0.052	0.141	0.37
Bihar	0.016	0.108	0.14
Chattisgarh	0.129	0.062	2.09
Gujarat	0.035	0.022	1.61
Haryana	0.230	0.097	2.38
Himachal Pradesh	0.391	0.067	5.83
Jammu & Kashmir	0.021	0.122	0.17
Jharkhand	0.084	0.070	1.19
Karnataka	0.085	0.079	1.07
Kerala	0.852	0.002	448.37
Madhya Pradesh	0.082	0.060	1.35
Maharastra	0.072	0.011	6.49
Odisha	0.045	0.070	0.65
Punjab	0.367	0.037	9.87
Rajasthan	0.407	0.015	27.57
Tamil Nadu	0.649	0.004	169.20
Uttar Pradesh	0.047	0.077	0.61
Uttaranchal	0.215	0.035	6.10
West Bengal	0.064	0.072	0.90
India	0.201	0.052	3.89

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12).

**Table 3: Rationing Level at Household and Population level.**

<b>States</b>	<b>Share of all rural households</b>				<b>Share of rural males</b>				<b>Share of rural females</b>			
	<b>(i)</b>	<b>(ii)</b>	<b>(iii)</b>	<b>(iv)</b>	<b>(i)</b>	<b>(ii)</b>	<b>(iii)</b>	<b>(iv)</b>	<b>(i)</b>	<b>(ii)</b>	<b>(iii)</b>	<b>(iv)</b>
India	0.38	0.30	0.23	0.23	0.29	0.21	0.15	0.28	0.20	0.14	0.10	0.25
<i>States where males have a higher rationing rate than females</i>												
Andhra Pradesh	0.50	0.38	0.32	0.17	0.43	0.30	0.24	0.19	0.43	0.33	0.27	0.16
Rajasthan	0.67	0.52	0.41	0.21	0.55	0.32	0.19	0.40	0.53	0.36	0.27	0.26
Tamil Nadu	0.48	0.43	0.40	0.06	0.18	0.13	0.12	0.14	0.40	0.35	0.32	0.07
Kerala	0.29	0.20	0.19	0.06	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.18	0.20	0.13	0.13	0.05
Haryana	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.15	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.09
Himachal Pradesh	0.50	0.39	0.33	0.14	0.37	0.24	0.18	0.22	0.34	0.22	0.18	0.15
Jharkhand	0.35	0.30	0.22	0.28	0.29	0.24	0.17	0.30	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.28
Assam	0.36	0.31	0.23	0.26	0.27	0.22	0.17	0.26	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.14
Punjab	0.12	0.11	0.07	0.31	0.07	0.06	0.03	0.42	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.28
<i>States where males and males have comparable rationing rates</i>												
Chattisgarh	0.73	0.62	0.56	0.09	0.58	0.48	0.43	0.10	0.47	0.38	0.34	0.10
Karnataka	0.20	0.15	0.10	0.35	0.16	0.12	0.07	0.41	0.10	0.07	0.04	0.41
Maharastra	0.17	0.12	0.05	0.58	0.14	0.10	0.03	0.65	0.12	0.09	0.03	0.65
<i>States where females have a higher rationing rate than males</i>												
Madhya Pradesh	0.64	0.32	0.21	0.35	0.61	0.26	0.16	0.39	0.53	0.18	0.10	0.42
West Bengal	0.60	0.52	0.38	0.26	0.49	0.42	0.31	0.26	0.21	0.16	0.10	0.35
Uttaranchal	0.36	0.32	0.28	0.13	0.25	0.22	0.19	0.12	0.14	0.11	0.08	0.29
Odisha	0.47	0.36	0.24	0.33	0.38	0.30	0.20	0.33	0.11	0.35	0.24	0.30
Gujarat	0.24	0.14	0.07	0.54	0.20	0.12	0.07	0.46	0.16	0.10	0.05	0.48
Jammu & Kashmir	0.37	0.32	0.30	0.08	0.25	0.22	0.20	0.08	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.42
Uttar Pradesh	0.26	0.23	0.19	0.16	0.20	0.17	0.14	0.16	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.21
Bihar	0.22	0.18	0.11	0.43	0.17	0.14	0.08	0.43	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.58

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)

Notes: (i) refers to possessing a job card (ii) is sought work, (iii) means worked in MGNREGA and (iv) means rationing rate.

The large inter-state variation in women's participation however continues to be a relevant concern because it is indicative of many potential issues. On the one hand, it could be the case that women opt out of the MGNREGA, voluntarily or involuntarily. In the former case, women perhaps do not seek work because of competing opportunities. In the latter, there could be insurmountable social barriers, including but not restricted to norms for women working outside, especially for widows, child care roles, etc. A lack of awareness is also a significant problem in many parts of India. For many, the opportunity cost of seeking NREGA work might be too high. If there is uncertainty about whether or not they will get work they might prefer to seek work elsewhere or not work at all.

Apart from factors that constrain demand for work, there might also be problems at the worksites themselves. It could be the case that women do seek work but are rationed out. An explanation for low participation rates of women could then be that women face a higher rationing rate than do men, given comparable rates of seeking work. In general, it could be a combination of the two issues described above. Indicators should thus be assessed in conjunction with one another. A particular concern of this paper is whether specific vulnerable populations and household types are most likely to face serious constraints; we therefore examine the indicators for such groups relative to those of other categories, first at the All India level (Table 4) and then at the state level (Table 5).

For India as a whole, among households, female-headed households face a lower rationing rate. The administrative rationing rate is higher for all other categories. Widows too face a lower rationing rate. While this is an encouraging indicator, the difficulties faced by women are apparent in both participation rates and work seeking. For example, only 19% of all households report having 'sought' work. Those who worked in the MGNREGA sites in 2011-12 is even lower at 16%. These women are likely to value MGNREGA work a great deal and it is possible that they face substantial social barriers in accessing the programme. There exists anecdotal evidence to suggest that women are sometimes turned away from the worksites either because the work might not be appropriate for them or on account of the very norms that they overcome to seek work. Field surveys in some of the villages of West Bengal suggest women are not encouraged to seek work since they are turned away by the local authorities under the pretext that men are more efficient in labour intensive work.

The other vulnerable group among women are widows who sometimes had to accompany men in order to get work (Bhatty 2008, Holmes, et al. 2011). Single women are often routinely excluded citing that the nature of work demands pairs. Others have reported similar issues. Holmes et al (2010) quote '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 Focus Group Discussant (FGD), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009). '[Women] were side-lined and men given preference – there were more women than men preferring to work in MGNREGA. As women fought among themselves, it was decided that women had to accompany men' (Widow (General Caste), Bhagwanpura Village 1, 2009).

Perhaps these factors manifest in fewer women from these groups demanding work. Women in households with young children appear to face constraints from accessing the MGNREGA – they are less likely than all other types to possess a job card, less likely to have sought work and least likely to have worked in the MGNREGA (only 9%) relative to say, females from SC/ST households (17%) or widows (17%).

State level rationing rates for the different groups reveal that there are states that have systematically lower administrative rationing rates for vulnerable groups, widows, female headed households and female headed households with no adult male members and to a lesser extent for women in households with children. The southern states, and notably Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and to an extent Himachal Pradesh all appear to have low levels of 'administrative discrimination' against most if not all of these groups (Table 5). This is noteworthy and is indicative that the MGNREGA is a credible social safety net for vulnerable groups of women.

**Table 4: MGNREGA participation of select groups (All India)**

	Possessing a Job Card	Sought work	Worked in MGNREGA	Rationing Rate
Female headed households	0.31	0.24	0.19	0.19
Female headed households with no adult males	0.26	0.19	0.16	0.19
Widows	0.28	0.21	0.17	0.20
Females	0.20	0.14	0.10	0.25
Females from households belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes	0.31	0.22	0.17	0.26
Females from households with children (0-5 years)	0.18	0.12	0.09	0.26
Males from households belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes	0.41	0.31	0.23	0.27
Males from households with children (0-5 years)	0.30	0.22	0.16	0.28
Males	0.29	0.21	0.15	0.28
Households	0.38	0.30	0.23	0.23
Persons	0.25	0.17	0.13	0.27

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)

**Table 5: Rationing rates for various sub populations**

States	SC/ST households		Households with Kids (0 to 5 years)		Female headed households		Female widows
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All	No adult males	
Andhra Pradesh	0.182	0.18	0.122	0.102	0.104	0.141	0.124
Assam	0.286	0.122	0.156	0.099	0.522	0.368	0.584
Bihar	0.382	0.577	0.523	0.575	0.516	0.807	0.582
Chattisgarh	0.131	0.11	0.099	0.154	0.021	0.009	0.048
Gujarat	0.474	0.4	0.336	0.33	0.846	1	0.432
Haryana	<b>0.23</b>	0.124	0.122	0.185	0	0	0.217
Himachal Pradesh	0.224	0.117	0.185	0.189	0.11	0.136	0.245
Jharkhand	0.276	0.344	0.323	0.31	0.265	0.135	0.414
Karnataka	0.37	0.306	0.378	0.363	0.212	0.045	0.242
Kerala	0.303	0.019	0.119	0.106	0.064	0.074	0.088
Madhya Pradesh	0.337	0.398	0.425	0.491	0.357	0.575	0.277
Maharashtra	0.685	0.634	0.681	0.734	0.72	0.925	0.847
Odisha	0.314	0.284	0.343	0.246	0.348	0.155	0.385
Punjab	0.434	0.311	0.501	0.416	0.512	0	0.771
Rajasthan	0.406	0.252	0.389	0.24	0.178	0.16	0.209
Tamil Nadu	0.094	0.074	0.192	0.078	0.042	0.05	0.046
Uttar Pradesh	0.159	0.201	0.125	0.204	0.125	0.087	0.116
Uttaranchal	0.163	0.321	0.086	0.139	0.2	0.207	0
West Bengal	0.231	0.316	0.274	0.348	0.27	0.258	0.368
<b>India</b>	<b>0.274</b>	<b>0.255</b>	<b>0.275</b>	<b>0.258</b>	<b>0.186</b>	<b>0.186</b>	<b>0.195</b>

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)



Despite these positive indications in many states, demand rates and registration rates in MGNREGA for these groups continues to be very low in several states. The proportion of widows seeking work is remarkably small in Uttar Pradesh (9.8%), Punjab (3.4%), Bihar (3.9%) Assam (6.8) and Karnataka (8%). This is despite a large proportion of them having registered for work. This perhaps points to persistent social barriers and lack of awareness that prevent women from these groups in making demands on the state. Similarly in households with young children, fewer share of women seek and find work on MGNREGA sites, relative to other groups except in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, states that are known for better implementation.<sup>6</sup> These mostly likely reflect the well-recognized difficulties faced by young mothers in terms of child care, which prevent them from participating in MGNREGA (Bhatty, 2008). Even in states such as Tamil Nadu data from worksites suggest that of those who reported harassment at the workplace, more than half of these are related to the issue of child care (Narayanan, 2008).<sup>7</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Assessments on gender dimensions of public works programmes typically revolve around three issues related to women's access to the direct and indirect benefits associated with these programmes: whether or not women have equal access to direct wage employment benefits; factors of design and implementation that determine women's participation; and whether women benefit equally from the assets created by public works. This paper addresses the first two questions. On these counts, nationally representative data suggest that the MGNREGA has performed reasonably well. The programme is explicit in its commitment to be inclusive of women and to facilitate their access to the programme. It is beyond doubt that the MGNREGA has proven to be an important arena of women's participation in wage employment – these have been somewhat stable over time and on average above the norm established by the programme design itself. Yet, variations across states as well as across sub-population point to significant problems that suggest that the MGNREGA operates with very different characteristics in different states. The differentiated nature of women's experience in accessing the MGNREGA underscores the need to recognize that in the different states the policy emphasis needs perhaps to be different. In states where allocation of work appears to be progressive, the state needs to continue to play a supporting role and address higher order concerns such as conditions in the work place and women's participation in decision making processes locally. In states where women's participation is weak and rationing indicates some sort of administrative discrimination, policies have to focus on enabling women to access work and sensitizing implementing staff.

## **NOTES**

1. There is rich evidence on the Maharashtra EGS looking at aspects of gender. While women workers dominated EGS employment, observers have also commented on the progressive programme design.
2. Women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work on worksites nearer to their residence.(page 22, Government of India, 2013).
3. 4.1.2 (ii) page 25 While designing the selection criteria for mates, preference should be given to the most deserving families and priority should be given to women and differently abled.
4. As Liu and Barrett (2012) emphasize, this is one measure of rationing, on the extensive margin, and does not take into account the intensive margin, whether households got as many days of work as they would have liked
5. For more information, please refer NSSO (2013).
6. These results are not presented here due to paucity of space. Please refer to Appendix Table 1-3.
7. A related perspective is that even in the absence of child care facilities at the workplace, young women who are pushed to work either on account of their economic circumstance or by their husbands families compromise on child care (Nair, et al., 2014)

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**Appendix Table 1: Registration rates for various sub population**

States	SC/ST households		Households with Kids (0 to 5 years)		Female headed households		Female widows
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All	No adult males	
Andhra Pradesh	0.565	0.577	0.499	0.45	0.464	0.609	0.514
Assam	0.267	0.046	0.327	0.043	0.319	0.831	0.107
Bihar	0.269	0.082	0.166	0.035	0.149	0.859	0.046
Chattisgarh	0.632	0.504	0.591	0.393	0.571	0.557	0.463
Gujarat	0.338	0.286	0.258	0.203	0.197	0.881	0.151
Haryana	0.085	0.074	0.056	0.035	0.076	0.925	0.156
Himachal Pradesh	0.451	0.426	0.469	0.336	0.393	0.715	0.335
Jharkhand	0.295	0.03	0.285	0.055	0.225	0.943	0.055
Karnataka	0.358	0.147	0.297	0.105	0.333	0.788	0.16
Kerala	0.21	0.149	0.151	0.083	0.118	0.923	0.109
Madhya Pradesh	0.083	0.361	0.048	0.128	0.257	0.825	0.291
Maharashtra	0.738	0.653	0.651	0.542	0.622	0.407	0.535
Odisha	0.24	0.204	0.123	0.097	0.134	0.889	0.115
Punjab	0.447	0.146	0.388	0.091	0.294	0.774	0.269
Rajasthan	0.14	0.105	0.084	0.039	0.055	0.993	0.034
Tamil Nadu	0.679	0.676	0.562	0.527	0.624	0.393	0.573
Uttar Pradesh	0.223	0.513	0.194	0.359	0.473	0.528	0.492
Uttaranchal	0.325	0.089	0.205	0.038	0.133	0.894	0.11
West Bengal	0.373	0.205	0.288	0.098	0.304	0.742	0.22
<b>India</b>	0.52	0.274	0.49	0.181	0.386	0.726	0.234

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)

**Appendix Table 2: Demand rates for various sub population**

States	SC/ST households		Households with Kids (0 to 5 years)		Female headed households		Female widows
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All	No adult males	
Andhra Pradesh	0.419	0.468	0.362	0.328	0.369	0.308	0.435
Assam	0.236	0.033	0.273	0.031	0.264	0.123	0.068
Bihar	0.237	0.051	0.133	0.021	0.101	0.08	0.039
Chattisgarh	0.524	0.389	0.478	0.276	0.519	0.389	0.414
Gujarat	0.245	0.218	0.161	0.127	0.068	0.007	0.055
Haryana	0.065	0.07	0.042	0.031	0.076	0.075	0.135
Himachal Pradesh	0.267	0.266	0.294	0.193	0.286	0.191	0.219
Jharkhand	0.238	0.027	0.238	0.027	0.199	0.052	0.033
Karnataka	0.299	0.112	0.264	0.081	0.305	0.181	0.146
Kerala	0.151	0.112	0.117	0.063	0.075	0.027	0.08
Madhya Pradesh	0.047	0.283	0.023	0.08	0.176	0.121	0.208
Maharashtra	0.362	0.262	0.248	0.167	0.335	0.297	0.205
Odisha	0.176	0.152	0.092	0.074	0.096	0.078	0.101
Punjab	0.382	0.104	0.311	0.054	0.163	0.109	0.166
Rajasthan	0.113	0.094	0.067	0.039	0.054	0.005	0.034
Tamil Nadu	0.424	0.519	0.33	0.365	0.462	0.419	0.401
Uttar Pradesh	0.181	0.442	0.141	0.298	0.4	0.402	0.402
Uttaranchal	0.286	0.074	0.172	0.031	0.115	0.09	0.098
West Bengal	0.338	0.17	0.247	0.064	0.263	0.218	0.145
<b>India</b>	0.453	0.225	0.415	0.122	0.3	0.212	0.154

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)

**Appendix Table 3: Working (Participation) rates for various sub population**

States	SC/ST households		Households with Kids (0 to 5 years)		Female headed households		Female widows
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All	No adult males	
Andhra Pradesh	0.343	0.384	0.318	0.294	0.33	0.264	0.381
Assam	0.168	0.029	0.231	0.028	0.126	0.077	0.028
Bihar	0.146	0.022	0.063	0.009	0.049	0.015	0.016
Chattisgarh	0.455	0.346	0.431	0.233	0.508	0.385	0.395
Gujarat	0.129	0.131	0.107	0.085	0.01	0	0.031
Haryana	0.05	0.062	0.037	0.025	0.076	0.075	0.106
Himachal Pradesh	0.207	0.235	0.24	0.157	0.255	0.165	0.166
Jharkhand	0.254	0.023	0.224	0.015	0.181	0.052	0.033
Karnataka	0.216	0.074	0.179	0.056	0.224	0.156	0.085
Kerala	0.095	0.078	0.073	0.04	0.059	0.026	0.06
Madhya Pradesh	0.033	0.278	0.02	0.072	0.165	0.112	0.19
Maharashtra	0.24	0.157	0.143	0.085	0.216	0.126	0.148
Odisha	0.055	0.056	0.029	0.02	0.027	0.006	0.015
Punjab	0.262	0.075	0.204	0.041	0.106	0.092	0.102
Rajasthan	0.064	0.065	0.034	0.023	0.026	0.005	0.008
Tamil Nadu	0.252	0.388	0.201	0.278	0.38	0.352	0.317
Uttar Pradesh	0.164	0.41	0.114	0.275	0.383	0.382	0.383
Uttaranchal	0.24	0.059	0.151	0.024	0.101	0.082	0.086
West Bengal	0.283	0.115	0.226	0.055	0.211	0.173	0.145
<b>India</b>	0.348	0.154	0.301	0.08	0.219	0.157	0.097

Source: Authors Calculation based on NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round of the employment-unemployment survey (2011-12)