

Women at the Crossroads

Implementation of Employment Guarantee Scheme in Rural Tamil Nadu

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While the transformation of rural gender inequalities was not an intended goal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, this study draws on evidence from two villages in western Tamil Nadu to show how the scheme has benefited rural women in particular. Major attractions of the MGNREGA work include local availability through the year, it being perceived as relatively “easy” work with fixed, regular, gender equal wages, and free from caste-based relations of subordination and discrimination. The gendered impacts of MGNREGA are partly due to the universal, right-based and women-friendly nature of the policy, and partly to the specific ways in which this policy is implemented in Tamil Nadu, where it has received significant cross-party political support.

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The *World Development Report (WDR) 2012: Gender Equality and Development* acknowledges a now long-established, yet significant, fact that economic development and income growth do not by themselves deliver greater gender equality. In its overview, the report starts from the recognition that “gender disparities remain salient even among the richest countries” (p 13) and explains that

Although women have entered the labor force in large numbers across much of the developing world in the past quarter century, this increased participation has not translated into equal employment opportunities or equal earnings for men and women. Women and men tend to work in very different parts of the ‘economic space’, with little change over time, even in high-income countries (WDR 2012: Overview 16).

Indeed, Razavi emphasises that it remains important to acknowledge that “gender equality, across numerous dimensions, will not occur automatically as countries get richer” (2012: 425). Rather, gender-based labour market segregation, wage gaps, and mobility disparities tend to persist over time and across countries despite income growth. In rural India, labour markets in agriculture and off-farm work remain highly segregated, wage gaps continue to be substantial (with women’s wages often still reaching just half of men’s in 2011), and women’s mobility and access to rural and urban employment severely constrained. Such inequalities are closely connected with disparities in power at home as well as with gendered norms and expectations.

We know that labour markets are “gendered institutions” that reflect, and reproduce, the wider gender norms and inequalities present in society (Elson 1999). If, as Razavi suggests, we “see labour markets for what they are – social institutions that operate on the basis of social norms and power inequalities (2012: 428), then solutions are to be found in the creation of social mechanisms that reduce wage gaps through effective institutions that represent the interests of different groups of workers” (ibid: 249). The question thus becomes: what may such “social mechanisms” consist of? The WDR (2012) underscores the importance of reshaping markets and institutions to reduce the gender gaps that currently exist in terms of access, remuneration and agency. However, it remains remarkably silent on the recent rise of social protection policies and employment guarantee schemes that have begun to make significant impacts on men and women alike. In terms of social policies, the WDR (2012) limits itself to

a discussion of conditional cash transfers (pp 288-329) with- out exploring any of the gendered impacts of the social wel- fare and employment security schemes that are now being implemented across countries. Nor does it address the ways in which such social policies may enhance or reduce gender inequalities in rural households and labour markets (Razavi 2012: 431). Harcourt similarly stresses that, as market mecha- nisms cannot be relied upon to lift people out of poverty and as economic crises have begun to reverse some gains made on gender equality, full-fledged social policies are needed “to ensure that all citizens and in particular marginalised and vulnerable women have entitlements and access to public provision of social security and protection” (2012: 310).

In India, as elsewhere, a series of social protection policies have been rolled out over the last decade, including pension schemes, employment guarantee schemes, unorganised sec- tor insurance schemes, etc, which seek to extend basic social security entitlements to the poor and vulnerable. While many of these schemes do not have gender equality as their primary objective – or not even as a stated goal – they nevertheless have gendered outcomes in terms of livelihoods and labour markets that require both empirical and conceptual investi- gation. This paper makes a contribution to our understanding of the gendered impacts of social protection policies through the study of one such scheme in India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). While this Act did not have rural gender equality as its primary objective, its gender-friendly design nevertheless significantly shaped how it is implemented, who benefits from it, and what its gender-related impacts are in terms of rural poverty, livelihoods, wage levels, bargaining position and labour markets.

India’s flagship MGNREGA is an unprecedented nationwide employment scheme that aims to benefit millions of rural households across the subcontinent. MGNREGA was enacted by Parliament in 2005, rolled out across a selection of districts in 2006 and extended across all districts in 2008. The scheme seeks to provide basic social security to India’s rural poor and provides 100 days of guaranteed waged employment to every rural household, at a wage of Rs 119 per day in Tamil Nadu (at the time of the study in 2011).

While MGNREGA did not include transformation of rural gender inequalities as an intended goal, there were a number of clauses within the Act that relate specifically to women. Thus, Schedule II (6) specifies that priority should be given to women for work, and that one-third of workers at the worksite should be women. Schedule II (28) requires the provision of childcare facilities at the worksite if children under the age of six accompany their working mothers. And Schedule II (34) prohibits gender discrimination of wages, with men and women being paid the same wages for the same work (Pellissery and Jalan 2011: 284; Holmes et al 2010, 2011). Other provisions, such as availability of work within a radius of 5 km of place of residence (or provision of transport) and the flexibility of choosing when work is undertaken, while not aimed specifically at women, have been particularly helpful to them (Pankaj

and Tankha 2010). These schedules demonstrate that while women’s empowerment was not an original objective of the Act, the “women-friendly’ provisions” (Chopra 2012) have certainly facilitated women’s participation, enhanced their share of the benefits, and addressed some gendered labour market inequalities. It is these outcomes that this paper is concerned with.

A number of commentators have begun to explore the gendered effects of the Act, in some cases using the share of women employed as a key indicator of the success of the scheme (Drèze and Oldiges 2011). Wide variations in the participation of women have been noted (Sudarshan et al 2010; Dasgupta and Sudarshan 2011), and a number of studies have examined the wider impacts of MGNREGA on gender equality as well as its transformative capacity to generate female empowerment (Pankaj and Tankha 2010). Khera and Nayak (2009), for example, found in a survey conducted in north India that MGNREGA led to better food security and enabled women to avoid hazardous work. In their study, MGNREGA provided opportunities to earn an income for many women, where few other opportunities existed. The main advantages of the scheme were that it was better paid than alternatives, that it was locally available, regular and predictable, that there was less chance of exploitation, and importantly, that this work was “considered socially acceptable and ‘dignified’” (ibid: 51). Tamil Nadu has seen high levels of women’s partici- pation in MGNREGA too; indeed, it had the highest partici- pation of women in MGNREGA in 2006-07 and 2007-08 “by a long margin” (Drèze and Oldiges 2011: 35). By 2011-12, women’s participation in Tamil Nadu as a whole was high at about 74% (compared to a national average of 48%), with peaks of more than 82% in 2009-10 and 2010-11.¹ We focus on who partici- pates in and benefits from the scheme, and how it affects household incomes, livelihoods and women’s position within labour markets.

Research Methodology and Field Sites

Our findings result from field research carried out in two villages in rural Tamil Nadu in November-December 2011. Both villages, which we call Allapuram and Mannapalayam, were the sites of previous fieldwork, conducted in 2008-09. As part of this earlier research we had carried out a year of in- depth fieldwork, collecting detailed ethnographic material as well as survey data on 240 households in Allapuram and 279 households in Mannapalayam. We had thus built up a broader picture of changing rural livelihoods, employment opportuni- ties and social relations in the region. Further fieldwork con- ducted in 2011 over a six-week period was designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data specifically on MGNREGA and its effects on rural livelihoods. We visited the MGNREGA work- sites in the two villages, and there we conducted a short survey of 109 MGNREGA workers (55 from Allapuram and 54 from Mannapalayam) which included information on occupations, incomes, caste, education, debt as well as information about their engagement with MGNREGA and attitudes to it.² Spending our days with the workers at the MGNREGA worksites as they

cleared roadsides and irrigation canals, we used a combination of participant observation, case studies, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with workers, in order to gain an understanding of how they view the scheme and its effects on their lives.

Allapuram and Mannapalayam are villages located within 20 km of the booming garment manufacturing and export town of Tiruppur, and more generally, are at the heart of the highly industrialised western region of Tamil Nadu. Allapuram, to the south-east of Tiruppur, is known for its successful and viable agriculture, but is also a village which sends significant numbers of commuters (across castes) to work in the Tiruppur garment industry. The second village, Mannapalayam, is located about 15 km south of Tiruppur, but is poorly connected to it and has very few people commuting to Tiruppur. This village, however, houses a large number of powerloom units employing both local people and migrants to keep the looms running day and night. Both villages have broadly the same social make-up. The landowning Gounders are the dominant caste in terms of economic wealth and political power, owning most of the land as well as most of the garment and powerloom units (De Neve and Carswell forthcoming; Chari 2004). At the other end of the social spectrum, dalits are the poorest and socially lowest ranking caste of the region. There are a number of different dalit groups, and elsewhere we have argued that these different dalit groups experience work opportunities very differently (Carswell 2013). The major dalit groups are Matharis (aka Arunthathiyars) and Adi Dravidas (aka Paraiyars).³ In addition, Mannapalayam has a significant number of migrants from a mix of dalit and non-dalit communities and is a more socially mixed village, although there is little interaction between the different social groups. Between these two extremes there are a number of other castes such as dhobi, barber, etc, who do not own land but are considered to be lower to middle-ranking socially within the villages.

Daily Routines of MGNREGA Work

In each village, MGNREGA work is organised and overseen by two local supervisors or “in-charge”. Until recently MGNREGA implementation was part of the village Human Welfare Officer’s (*makkal nala paniyalargal*) remit, but since the abolition of this post by Jayalalithaa in November 2011, site supervisors are now recruited from among MGNREGA workers who have completed at least eighth standard of study. In both villages, the supervisors were women; one of them was responsible for the daily registry and the muster roll, while the other measured and monitored the tasks to be completed. In Allapuram, both women were in their early 20s and belonged to the dalit Mathari community, while in Mannapalayam one was a Gounder woman in her early 30s and the other a Mathari woman in her early 50s.

MGNREGA work is locally referred to as road *velai* or road-work given that most of the public works carried out involved clearing roadsides. However, in addition, canals and ponds are also cleared. In accordance with a decision specific to the

Tamil Nadu government, no materials or machinery are used, and so all work is completed with manual and unskilled labour. Everyday, villagers turn up with their own hoe and are allocated a set distance of road or canal to clear. At the time of our research, each woman had to clear 5.5 metres by one foot of roadside per day, yet payment did not vary with the actual amount of work completed, as discussed later. Workers dig in small groups along both sides of the road, with men going ahead to remove larger bushes and branches, and women pulling out smaller weeds and digging a one foot deep ditch alongside the road. While pay is equal, work is gendered with men doing what was locally referred to as the physically harder and rougher work of removing the heavier growth, and women doing the “lighter” clearing work.

Here women are never required to work as couples (Pellissery and Jalan 2011; Holmes et al 2011) and tend to work alongside each other, usually in groups consisting of women belonging to the same hamlet. Within these hamlet-based groups, we found smaller groups of women belonging to the same caste working together. While they work in small teams and perform different tasks, men and women were always paid as individuals and received the same fixed sum per day, irrespective of the actual amount of work completed.

Men, women and supervisors all considered MGNREGA work as “easy work”. Let us examine what they meant by this. While they initially shared a generic narrative of the toil and hardship of doing manual labour under the scorching sun, once we came to know the workers better, they openly admitted that compared to the alternative private sector jobs available to them, this was an easy ride. MGNREGA work was primarily compared with agricultural *coolie* work and described as “easy” because of the limited amount of actual work that it involved as well as the limited amount of time they had to spend completing it. While an agricultural working day typically starts at 8 am and finishes by 3 pm (with an hour off for lunch), most workers, especially the younger and middle-aged ones, are able to complete the allocated MGNREGA work within 1.5-2 hours. By about 11 am, most workers had finished their day’s work, having started at around 9 am, and could be found sitting along the side of the road. Older workers may take longer to complete their task – usually three to four hours – but they can spread the work over a seven-hour working day and intersperse work with tea breaks and a lunch that is usually followed by a rest in the shade.

The work was also called easy because it is experienced as physically less arduous than agricultural coolie work or powerloom work, where workers have to stand or bend in the same position for hours at a stretch or where they may have to carry heavy loads across the fields. But easy was also understood as “convenient” for a number of different reasons. Women particularly liked the fact that MGNREGA fitted in well with school hours (9-4 pm) and with the availability of childcare in *balwadis* (crèches), but also that they were able to bring smaller children to the site where they are looked after either by one of the supervisors or by a woman allocated to do this. Finally, but as importantly, easy is also about the independence

that MGNREGA work entails. MGNREGA not only reduces workers' overall dependency on landowners and powerloom owners for work and income, but it also frees them from the incessant hassling by landlords who badger them to work faster and better (Carswell and De Neve 2013). These were factors frequently mentioned by workers, who often imitate the chasing gestures made by landowners in the field.

Supervision in agricultural fields was contrasted with MGNREGA where the rhythm of work is slower, where workers can set their own pace of work and time of rest, and where supervisors are nothing more than a *primus inter pares*. Our observation of two sites over a period of a month confirmed that supervisors are indeed gentle with the workers, occasionally stirring them on to do a bit more work, but more often turning a blind eye to workers sleeping along the road site, taking extended breaks, or not completing the work to the required standard – the one foot deep ditch probably being the least adhered to task.

Changes in Schedule of Work

Crucially, the schedule of work to be completed within an MGNREGA day (aka the schedule of rates) has changed since the start of the scheme, not in the least because officials struggled at first to attract workers. While initially villagers were required to complete a substantial amount of work in a day, norms were gradually relaxed to make the scheme more attractive. As Gayathri, a supervisor in the early days of MGNREGA in Mannapalayam, explained, they used to measure the amount of work very carefully and only pay for work completed. This meant that “people were only paid Rs 30 to 40 a day, and at that time nobody turned up. ...Who will turn up for Rs 36? So then they (the administrators) relaxed, and paid the full amount and...as people realised that they could sit and take rest, then the numbers started increasing.” The key reason for this relaxation of work schedules was that the administrators were themselves under pressure from their superiors to meet targets of numbers of workers, and realised that these targets could only be met if they made the work more attractive and less taxing (Carswell and De Neve forthcoming).

Drèze and Khera similarly reported from their 2008 study that taxing work schedules were one of the factors women complained about (2011: 56). Jeyaranjan's study of a village in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, also shows how uptake of MGNREGA was low while wages were low and workloads were high. Once, in his words, “the norms of the programme were quietly relaxed” (2011: 67), there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of villagers turning up for work. In Thanjavur, this relaxation not only involved an increase in take-home wages (following changes to the way work was measured and paid), but also the permission to finish work by 1 pm. This meant that workers – both men and women – could combine MGNREGA work with other work. In contrast to Jeyaranjan's study, in our research MGNREGA workers could not leave the worksite early nor combine MGNREGA work with other work: both local supervisors and block level inspectors were firm in demanding workers stay on until 4 pm. However, the daily workload was relaxed

and this downward revision itself was sufficient to attract more villagers to the scheme. Moreover, the workloads were reduced to such a level that now all workers are able to complete the target and thus earn the full daily pay.

The everyday routines of MGNREGA implementation in the two study villages are further shaped by another policy specific to the Government of Tamil Nadu: the 2008 decision to continue with cash payments. This contrasts with most other parts of India where payments are made into bank accounts (Adhikari and Bhatia 2010; Pellissery and Jalan 2011). In both villages, the weekly payment on Tuesday afternoon is a public event in which the village clerk comes to the site to pay workers for MGNREGA work completed in the week up to the previous Thursday. This payment is a completely open and transparent event in which workers are paid in the presence of others and during which any discrepancy between accounts is publicly resolved. While in one village even though workers were asked to open bank accounts as part of their application for a job card, in neither village nor in the wider region were MGNREGA wages deposited into these accounts. In questionnaires and interviews workers commented that wages were always paid correctly and without delay, and there was no suggestion of any misappropriation of funds. All workers expressed a preference for cash payment, with many fearing that bank accounts would lead to delays in access to the money, increased cost and effort of travelling to nearby ATMs, and disadvantages to certain workers – especially women with young children and older people – because of a lack of time or unfamiliarity with bank cards and ATMs. These responses contrast starkly with surveys from other parts of India which suggest a preference for banks over cash: just over half of those surveyed by Khera and Nayak preferred bank payments (2009: 55), while Adhikari and Bhatia found that 77% preferred banks over cash (2010: 35). These different reactions can only be understood with reference to the swift, reliable and corruption-free cash payments that are a current feature of MGNREGA implementation in Tamil Nadu.

In Annapuram men and women received Rs 114 per day, and in Mannapalayam, Rs 110 per day in late 2011. These wages were below the official state MGNREGA wage of Rs 119.⁴ Both local supervisors and block development officers justified this difference with reference to the fact that workers never managed to fully complete the allocated work schedule, and in particular, failed to properly dig the one foot deep ditch. They explained that the daily wage was marginally reduced to reflect workers' ability to complete the work to the required standard. Workers were neither aware of this deduction nor of the slight differences in net payments across the region.

Finally, all workers reported that it had been easy to get registered for MGNREGA and obtain a job card. They also told us that MGNREGA work was available on a daily basis and that they were given work whenever they turned up. This, as we have detailed elsewhere, is closely related to the current pressure on officials to recruit workers and spend budgets (Carswell and De Neve forthcoming). Particular to Tamil Nadu, again, is the fact that here both men and women have a

job card registered in their own name. Each job card number is made up of a long number that identifies the household followed by a letter (A, B, C, etc) to indicate the particular individual within the household.⁵ Having a job card in their own name is hugely important to women and contrasts with the scenario in other states where job cards are often only registered in the name of a male household head (Nayak 2012 for a detailed discussion of how this affects women in Madhya Pradesh). The muster roll contains the total number of work-days completed per household to date, which is the sum of days completed by all individuals in the household.

MGNREGA Workers: Who Are They?

In what follows, we describe MGNREGA workers in our study villages in terms of gender and marital status, caste, schooling, and stage in the life course. Our data indicates that – in line with state-level data for Tamil Nadu – the majority of workers are dalits and women. Of the total sample 88% of MGNREGA workers were women (91% in Allapuram and 85% in Mannapalayam) and 12% were men (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of Workers by Gender: Comparing Village Adult Population (2008-09 Survey) with MGNREGA Workers (2011 Survey)⁶

	Allapuram Whole Village	Allapuram MGNREGA Workers	Mannapalayam Whole Village	Mannapalayam MGNREGA Workers
Men	50.6	9	51.8	15
Women	49.4	91	48.2	85

Table 2: Percentage of Workers in Different Dalit Groups: Comparing Village Population with MGNREGA Workers

	Allapuram Whole Village	Allapuram MGNREGA Workers	Mannapalayam Whole Village	Mannapalayam MGNREGA Workers
Dalits	46	91	39	61
Of which:				
Adi Dravida	24	25	NA ⁷	0
Matharis	22	65	25	61

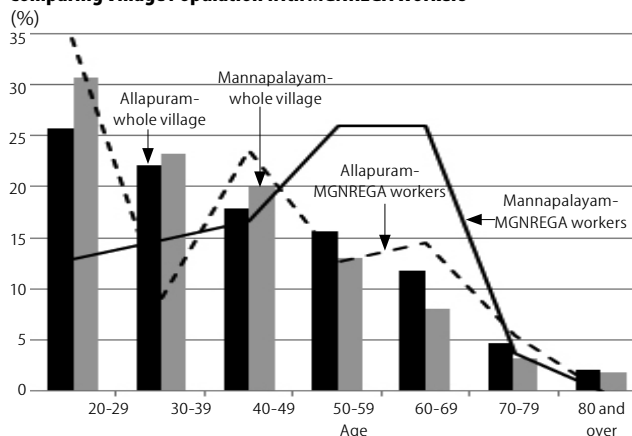
Table 3: Educational Standards: Comparing Village Population with MGNREGA Workers (%)

	Allapuram Whole Village	Allapuram MGNREGA Workers	Mannapalayam Whole Village	Mannapalayam MGNREGA Workers
Zero education	38	47	37	65
Primary (1-5)	NA	31	23	17
Lower secondary (6-8)	NA	13	19	14
Secondary plus	NA	9	19	6

As Table 2 shows most workers are also dalit (76% of those sampled). In Allapuram, dalits completely dominated the MGNREGA workforce (91%), while in Mannapalayam they made up 61% of the workforce. The reasons for these differences are explored later. Dalits are themselves not a homogeneous group, and both villages are home to more than one dalit community. Allapuram has Adi Dravidas and Matharis, while Mannapalayam has Matharis and a mix of other migrant dalit groups. In these villages, the socially and economically lowest ranking Matharis make up between 22% and 25% of the total population, but in both places they constitute over 60% of the MGNREGA workforce. The remainder of MGNREGA workers mainly consist of members of low to middle ranking castes as well as a handful of Gounders.

The research also found – unsurprisingly – that the workers were very poorly educated. As Table 3 shows, in Allapuram

Figure 1: Percentage of Workers According to Age-Groups: Comparing Village Population with MGNREGA Workers (%)



47% of the MGNREGA workers had no education at all, with a further 31% having only primary education and in Mannapalayam, 65% had no education at all, with 17% having completed only primary schooling. As a group, therefore, MGNREGA workers are more poorly educated than the village as a whole: amongst the general population 38% in Allapuram and 37% in Mannapalayam have no education.

Our data also revealed interesting insights into the age of MGNREGA workers and their stage in the life course (Figure 1).

Despite the age distribution of the population in both villages showing a similar pattern, the age distribution of the MGNREGA workers differed quite significantly between the two villages. In Allapuram younger workers made up a significant proportion of the MGNREGA workforce: 35% of the workers were in the group aged 20-29. The reasons for this, and for the dip in the 30-39 age group, will be examined below in the section on rural labour markets. In contrast, in Mannapalayam the age profile of the workers was older, with 26% being in their 50s and another 26% being in their 60s. In Mannapalayam, 55% of MGNREGA workers were aged 50 or above, while in Allapuram 33% were aged 50 or above. Both villages had a small proportion of workers over the age of 70. Whilst 60 years old is conventionally the boundary of old age, it has been argued that conditions of work create “functionally old” people well below the age of 60. Other studies from Tamil Nadu have suggested that “people are routinely made functionally old and forced out of work from the ages of 40 to 50 years” (Vera-Sanso 2006: 459). Our evidence certainly suggests that MGNREGA attracts workers for whom it is increasingly difficult to do other work because of their age or health. For example, Palani who is 50 years said that, he used to do powerloom work, but not for the past five years because he is unwell, and now his only work is MGNREGA work. Chinna, a 60-year-old man in poor health who lives with a married granddaughter explained he had not been able to do agricultural work for the last 20 years, but still manages to do MGNREGA work. And, of course, others are simply old by any standards. Rajeshwari explained that she and her husband are both in their 70s and are simply too frail to do agricultural work. No landowner would employ them, but they are well

enough to do MGNREGA work, given its relatively light work schedules and relaxed rhythm. For these functionally-old and chronologically-old workers, MGNREGA has become essential to their livelihoods: this is work they can continue to do with some degree of dignity.

Our research also found that, compared to the general population of the villages, a much larger proportion of MGNREGA workers was divorced, separated or widowed (Table 4). Thus, in Allapuram 18% of MGNREGA workers were divorced, separated or widowed (compared to 10% of the total village adult population), while in Mannapalayam the figures were a remarkable 31% compared to 8%. Importantly, in Allapuram all of them were women. While all divorced and separated workers in Mannapalayam were also women, the widowed workers included some men too. We also found that there were no unmarried men or women amongst the MGNREGA workers.

Table 4: Marital Status: Comparing Village Population with MGNREGA Workers⁹ (%)

	Allapuram Whole Village	Allapuram MGNREGA Workers	Mannapalayam Whole Village	Mannapalayam MGNREGA Workers
Married	76	82	78	69
Unmarried	13	0	14	0
Separated/divorced	2	5	1	7
Widowed	8	13	7	24

That divorced, separated or widowed women are over-represented amongst MGNREGA workers, contrasts with findings from other studies that such women were “systematically excluded from seeking employment” (Kelkar 2009: 10). These surveys from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh suggest that the reasons appear to be related to the way work was organised in these places: with women workers needing a male “partner”. Similarly, Pellissery and Jalan explain how in their study of Andhra Pradesh physically arduous work was often performed by a man and woman working in tandem, disadvantaging single women (2011: 287). Furthermore, Holmes et al’s study of Madhya Pradesh found that “social norms about the gender division of labour affect the type of work that is seen as ‘acceptable’ for women, ...[and thus] women receive fewer days of work because they are not allocated all the types of work available” (2011: 2-3). There, again, single women face particular discrimination when the work requires a couple working together (see Holmes et al 2010 for further detail). Nayak’s study of Madhya Pradesh also found that single women were disadvantaged because of the need to work in pairs and this, combined with difficulties over the “ownership” of job cards leads her to conclude that “women workers are engaged in a ‘struggle within a struggle’ to stake a claim to job cards and through these to the ‘right to work’” (Nayak 2012: Chapter 5). The findings of these studies contrast with our evidence from Tamil Nadu, where divorced, separated and widowed women were over-represented among the workforce, there being no requirement to work with a male partner. If anything, MGNREGA work operated along gender-segregated lines with men and women working in separate groups.

In our study villages, as we have argued elsewhere (Carswell and De Neve forthcoming) the pressure is on local administrators

to increase the overall turnout and the way the work is organised means that no one group is discriminated against in any way.¹⁰ In fact, because the scheme is much less popular among male workers due to the higher wages they can earn elsewhere, administrators are particularly keen to encourage women to turn up for work. Furthermore, as Khera and Nayak have noted, MGNREGA work is particularly attractive to single women such as widows: for them the socially acceptable and safe working conditions of MGNREGA are very important and allow them to avoid the harsh and sometimes hazardous working conditions of the private labour market (2009: 53-54). In our study villages too, the beneficiaries of the MGNREGA scheme are primarily women, dalits and villagers with little or no education. In villages to the north of Tiruppur, Heyer similarly found that, MGNREGA is attracting significant numbers of dalits, and that most workers are women (2012: 102). In terms of reaching vulnerable rural social groups, particularly women and dalit communities, the scheme is clearly succeeding in this region. What though are these individuals doing when they are *not* working on MGNREGA? It is to this question that we now turn.

MGNREGA and Rural Labour Markets

A first point to note is that a large majority of MGNREGA workers in our sample (nearly 90% of whom are women) were already active in the workforce before taking up MGNREGA work. This, again, contrasts with other studies that suggest that many MGNREGA workers are entering the workforce for the first time. Sudarshan et al for example note that “many women have been persuaded to come out of the house to work for the first time in response to this programme in both Rajasthan and Kerala” (2010: 78). Eighty-five per cent of the workers we surveyed are normally involved in other paid work, as shown in Table 5. The majority (73%) are employed as daily agricultural labourers, while a further 12% are employed in other activities (such as cone winding in the powerloom industry, construction work, etc). Only 15% people are not doing any other paid work currently either because they are too old or weak to do other paid work, or because they are caring for young children. These groups, and the reasons that they choose to do MGNREGA work, will now be looked at in turn.

Table 5: ‘Normal’ Activities of MGNREGA Workers (%)

	Allapuram	Mannapalayam	Total sample
Agricultural work (coolie)	85	61	73
Powerloom work	0	9	5
Other work (eg, construction, dhobi)	7	7	7
No other work	7	22	15

For the 73% of MGNREGA workers who normally work as agricultural labourers, MGNREGA is particularly important because of the seasonality of agricultural work which frequently leaves their household without income for days or weeks at a stretch. Many MGNREGA workers told us that their regular employment is agricultural coolie work and that this is their preferred choice, primarily because it pays better. As was intended, here MGNREGA is the employer of

“last resort”: villagers only participate in the scheme when there is no agricultural work available and as a result not everyone uses up their 100-day entitlement. In deciding whether to work in agriculture or on MGNREGA on any particular day, workers are very strategic and consider a number of factors: wages, availability of work, and convenience. In relation to wages, agricultural coolie work typically pays more (women earn Rs 150-200 compared to Rs 110-114 in MGNREGA), but agricultural wages vary with the seasons. Thus, on a day in early December when there was very little agricultural work available in the village, a group of women were being paid Rs 130 per day to harvest beetroot. But during the onion planting and harvesting seasons, women workers can expect to earn Rs 200 per day. Other work, such as tobacco processing, pays even better: paid on piece rate, an experienced tobacco processor can earn Rs 250-300 per day. Agricultural work may not be available if there is too much or too little rain and, well aware of these seasonal variations in demands for their labour, agricultural workers try to “save” their 100 days for those months when they know they really need the work. The year-long availability of MGNREGA work is therefore crucial – fulfilling an important income-smoothing function. Women such as Sarassa, a widowed Mathari woman of 40 with no sons, got into debt with her only daughter’s recent marriage. She normally does agricultural work which she prefers because it pays better (and she has a landlord for whom she regularly works), but whenever there is no agricultural work she takes on MGNREGA work, and is very glad of it.

Of our sample, 12% are normally engaged in other non-agricultural work. This is particularly important in Mannapalayam where 9% do powerloom work, and a further 7% do other non-agricultural work. This group chooses to do MGNREGA for a variety of reasons. For most, just like those who normally do agricultural work, MGNREGA pays less than their normal work, but MGNREGA is easy work and it is always available. People from this group may choose to do MGNREGA if, for example, they have been unwell, and do not feel up to the physically arduous work of construction or the tiring work of powerlooms. Or, as may be the case of women who work as cone-winders, there may be insufficient work for them in the powerlooms. Lakshmi, a woman in her 40s whose husband has left her, explained how both she and her son normally worked in the powerlooms and they had taken out a large “advance” from the owner. However, at the moment there was no work for her in the looms, so she came to do MGNREGA work. But whenever her owner needed her, because of the cash advance she had taken from him, she had no choice but to work for him (for further details about debt bondage, see Carswell and De Neve 2013).

The remaining 15% of the sample – those who are not normally in any other paid employment – are a particularly interesting group. These are the men and women who for a variety of reasons *only* enter the workforce to do MGNREGA work. The reasons vary – some are old, others find it too difficult to combine other work with childcare responsibilities, while others have alternative sources of household income. For those who

are too old, weak or unhealthy to do any other work MGNREGA, with its manageable work demands, offers a much-needed chance to earn a bare minimum to survive. Even the oldest workers are able to complete the allocated amounts of work. Whilst a young and fit worker can typically complete the work in less than two hours, an older worker can take her time and finish within the day, or can complete her task with the help of fellow workers. As we saw above, the workloads are themselves quite flexible and their completion is only loosely monitored. Rajamani, a 66-year-old Mathari woman, is hardly able to walk after she fell, let alone do agricultural work. She has long been widowed and lives alone in the village. Her sources of income are very limited, and she receives very little from her sons. For her MGNREGA provides a lifeline as she is no longer able to do any other work. Most of the day she sits in the shade on the side of the road, dressed in an old and torn saree, and is rarely asked to get up and work. Without this income she would quickly slide down into complete destitution, and it is no surprise that when asked about MGNREGA she exclaims: “I would do even 300 days of this work!”.

Others in this 15% group include women with child caring responsibilities. These are women, typically in the 20-30 age group, who welcome MGNREGA as a place of work where they can take their children. In both our villages we found young children were often brought to MGNREGA work, and were looked after by a member of the group. This is in contrast to the findings of others who found no childcare provided at the sites they studied (Khera and Nayak 2009; Drèze and Khera 2011; Dev 2011). Moreover, many working women mentioned that their children were either in school or in the village crèche (*balwadi*), where children can be left from the age of two, and that MGNREGA work was convenient precisely because the work hours fitted in with those of the school and crèche.

Changing Participation with Age

It is clear that patterns of participation in MGNREGA reflect key changes along the life course that shape workers’ reproductive and productive labour capacities. There is higher participation in MGNREGA among women in their 20s, when many of them find it difficult to manage other paid work alongside their domestic responsibilities, particularly in Allapuram, where there are few non-agricultural jobs available in the village itself and where agricultural wages are particularly low for women (Carswell 2013). In their 30s women are generally fit and strong and able to work as agricultural coolie workers for better rates of pay than they can achieve under MGNREGA; while some women in this age group do take up MGNREGA work, few of them complete their 100 days. Among women in their 40s, we again see higher rates of participation in MGNREGA. These include the functionally old: women worn out by years of hard and arduous work in the fields or powerlooms. For women at this stage in their life course, MGNREGA becomes an important supplementary source of income. Crucially, however, participation rates remain high among women in their 50s and 60s. For them, as they grow older and weaker, MGNREGA work

often moves from being a supplementary or secondary to being their main or only source of income, gradually replacing agricultural and other work. This is supported by our data, which show two trends. First, that a significant 34% of the MGNREGA workers sampled had completed 90 days or more in 2010-11. Second, that of those who completed 90-100 days in 2010-11, 65% were in their 50s or older. This indicates that older people are much more likely to make use of their full 100 days and consequently confirms their high reliance on MGNREGA incomes. In Mannapalayam this is particularly pronounced, with 55% of MGNREGA workers being aged 50 or above. Here, many struggle with powerloom labour in their old age and are keen to earn an income under MGNREGA. While overall we can conclude that MGNREGA is of primary importance for older women, it provides an important source of income for women at different stages of their life course and with different sorts of domestic responsibilities and physical abilities.

MGNREGA and Household Income

Our evidence reveals that MGNREGA forms an important source of income for most households involved in the scheme, but it is unusual for it to be the primary source of household income. Informants were asked to rank their top three sources of household income, and only 4.6% put MGNREGA as their primary source of income. However, for 66% of the sample MGNREGA was their second most important source of income, while 27% considered it their third most important source of income. Table 6 shows the primary source of income for MGNREGA workers' households, compared to the villages as a whole.

Table 6: Primary Income Sources (Percentage of Households): Comparing Village Population with MGNREGA Workers

	Allapuram		Mannapalayam	
	Whole Village	MGNREGA Workers	Whole Village	MGNREGA Workers
Agric work (coolie)	22.5	54.5	11.51	44.4
Garment work	25.4	25.5	3.24	1.9
Powerloom work	0.0	0.0	55.4	31.5

As Table 6 shows, about half of the MGNREGA workers (54.5% in Allapuram and 44.4% in Mannapalayam) cite agricultural coolie work (daily wage labour) as their household's most important source of income. This is much higher than for the villages as a whole: with only 22.5% of households in Allapuram and 11.5% of households in Mannapalayam having agricultural labour as the most important source of income. It is clear, therefore, that MGNREGA workers are drawn particularly from those households that are considerably dependent on agricultural, rather than from households drawing their primary income from better paid, non-agricultural activities such as Tiruppur garment jobs or village based powerloom work (Carswell 2013).

For those MGNREGA workers who have family members working in the textile industry (garment and textile combined), and whose household's primary source of income is from that industry (26% in Allapuram and 33% in Mannapalayam) MGNREGA work provides them with a crucial source of income

during downturns in the textile industry. Our research found that in 2011 the Tiruppur garment industry was facing a crisis brought about by an ongoing conflict over pollution that culminated in the closure of swathes of the dyeing industry in early 2011. The effects of these closures on the industry and in turn on livelihoods were immediate. The availability of garment work in Tiruppur dropped dramatically, with work becoming less regular and shifts shorter. In our two villages it was the Adi Dravida dalit community of Allapuram who were the worst hit. Many of the younger households in this community had never undertaken regular agricultural work, feeling their families had moved beyond this. Thanks to garment incomes they no longer needed to work in the fields. But with the ongoing downturn in garment work, MGNREGA suddenly became an attractive option to make up for a drop in household income. MGNREGA allows villagers to bridge gaps in their household's income without having to do agricultural work, which for many "garment households" carries the stigma of poverty, dependence on landlords and hard physical work. There is, however, a significant gender dimension to the employment decisions being made, as it is typically *women* who take up work under MGNREGA to make up for the loss of *male* earnings. With reduced work in Tiruppur, households struggle to maintain their income yet neither husbands nor sons consider taking up MGNREGA work themselves. They loiter in the village using their mobile phones to try and find jobs in Tiruppur, leaving it to the women to provide for the household through MGNREGA.

Similarly, in Mannapalayam, the powerloom industry has seen repeated strikes in recent years, usually over the price of yarn. Backed by both owners and workers these strikes have seen powerloom production cease for weeks at a time, most recently, for example, for 35 days in September-October 2011 (Preetha 2011). At the time of strikes, the numbers of people seeking MGNREGA work increased significantly across the powerloom region. In Mannapalayam the numbers of villagers showing up for MGNREGA work increased on strike days to 300 per day, up from a normal average of 100-150 per day. MGNREGA is thus an important way of bridging prolonged periods without work, even for those households who normally have access to regular and relatively well-paid non-agricultural employment.

The positive and direct effects of MGNREGA on the incomes of some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of rural society in India are clear. A minimal income is available to people at times when other jobs are scarce and thus the scheme has the effect of income smoothing over the year. Furthermore, jobs are provided for those who are otherwise excluded from better paid non-agricultural jobs, and those who are too old or weak to work elsewhere. As we saw, the large majority of them are women. For most of these workers MGNREGA wages are used to meet day-to-day expenses: food, medical costs, family functions, and so on. Other studies, such as Pellissery and Jalan's study of Andhra Pradesh (2011) and Holmes et al's study of Madhya Pradesh (2010) similarly suggested that most of the income gained from MGNREGA was

used for meeting day-to-day needs and that MGNREGA had a positive effect on food security (Khera and Nayak 2009).

Knock-on Effects on Wages, Independence, Dignity

But MGNREGA also has knock-on effects, which are as – and possibly even more – significant than its direct impacts on MGNREGA workers. In particular, there is the effect of the scheme on agricultural wages. Ascertaining what proportion of agricultural wage increases is *caused by MGNREGA* is a complex task. A huge range of agricultural wages exists in any village (depending on season, task to be completed, gender, caste, etc) making the calculation of average agricultural wages difficult (Carswell 2013). Inflationary effects and other labour market pressures need to be isolated from MGNREGA as causes of general wage increases. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, economists such as Berg et al have investigated the agricultural wage effect of MGNREGA. Exploiting the phased roll-out of MGNREGA they use monthly wage data from the period 2000-11 for 249 districts across 19 states, and found that on average MGNREGA “boosts the real daily agricultural wage rates by 5.3%” (2012: 19).

Similarly Imbert and Papp have undertaken modelling and used the gradual roll-out of the scheme across India to examine the programme’s impact on wages and aggregate employment. They found that casual wages increased by 4.5% during the dry season in early districts (i.e., those which implemented the programme earlier), while there was an even larger increase in wages (9%) in the five “star” states, where the programme is best implemented: Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh (Imbert and Papp 2012: 8). They also note that for poorer households “gains from the rise in equilibrium wages are of a similar magnitude to the direct gains from participating in the programme”, and that “the changes in welfare due to the wage change are large in absolute terms and large relative to the direct welfare gains for participants” (2012: 5, 10). Azam has explored labour market outcomes of MGNREGA using National Sample Survey (NSS) data from 18 states in India and found that MGNREGA has a significant positive impact on the wages of female casual workers: real wages of female casual workers increased 8% more in MGNREGA districts compared with the increase experienced in non-MGNREGA districts. However, the impact of MGNREGA on wages of casual male workers was only marginal (about 1%) (2011: 2).

Drawing on data from both the NSS survey and MGNREGA data Dasgupta and Sudarshan present evidence that suggests that in states where the gender wage gap is higher, women’s participation in MGNREGA is higher. They conclude that MGNREGA “can be expected to exert an upward pressure on women’s agricultural wages” (2011: 13). In a recent study Dutta et al find that poorer states have a higher demand (and unmet demand) for MGNREGA work. While they note that MGNREGA could push up the market wage rate, “it is not the case that the MGNREGA wage is everywhere well above the market wage rate”, and for half the states the MGNREGA wage rate was actually lower in 2009-10 than the average wage rate for casual

labour (Dutta et al 2012: 61). Finally, Jeyaranjan’s study undertaken in Tamil Nadu suggests that MGNREGA has doubled nominal agricultural wages rates for women – from Rs 40 in 2007 to Rs 80 in 2010 – and thereby their income from agriculture (2011: 69).

It is certainly the case that average agricultural wages have increased in the period 2008-11 during which MGNREGA has been in place in our study villages. A newspaper headline has suggested that agricultural wages have “skyrocketed”. According to this report actual agricultural wages (as distinct from legal minimum wages) increased in Tamil Nadu by 73.6% between January 2008 and December 2010 “an enormous improvement even allowing for inflation of 30-33% in this period” (*The Economic Times* 2011).¹¹ Our evidence supports the view that agricultural wages have risen considerably, while not attempting to argue that this rise is *solely caused by MGNREGA*. In 2009 informants in Mannapalayam reported that the typical agricultural coolie rate (daily rate) was Rs 100 for women and Rs 200 for men, while these stood in 2011 at Rs 150 for women and Rs 300 for men.¹² These are 50% wage increases that, even allowing for the high levels of inflation during this period, clearly indicate a significant hike in real wages.

We have anecdotal evidence that agricultural wages have increased in parallel with increments in MGNREGA wages, a pattern which Heyer also noted in her study villages to the north of Tiruppur (2012: 102). Gayathri, one of the previous supervisors of MGNREGA in Mannapalayam, recounted how MGNREGA wages had risen as supervisors stopped paying on a strictly piece-rate basis. The result was that the amount paid increased from Rs 36 in the very early days of the scheme (2008-09) to the minimum stipulated wage of Rs 80, and then later to Rs 100. By December 2011 the MGNREGA wage in Mannapalayam stood at Rs 110, still below the state minimum wage of Rs 119. When we asked her uncle, a prominent landowner, how these changes had affected him as a farmer he replied,

When they (MGNREGA) paid Rs 80 I paid Rs 100 for women and Rs 200 for men. It is always that I pay men double what I pay for women. And now (with MGNREGA paying Rs 110) I have increased it to Rs 150 (for women) because they won’t come unless you pay that. Even I’ll have to pay up to Rs 170, because it depends on your necessity.

He went on to explain how workers know how desperate a farmer can be for workers: “I only have the irrigation one day in four (because I have a shared well) and I have the seedlings ready (to be planted) and I go to their house (to call workers) and they know how much to ask. I say Rs 150 and they say Rs 180!” Clearly MGNREGA has helped give agricultural workers more confidence to ask for higher wages when their labour is in high demand. But even when there is very little agricultural work available in the village, daily wage labourers are now better placed to negotiate for a wage that is at least the MGNREGA wage. The key point is that the starting position for any agricultural wage negotiation is now *at least* the MGNREGA wage rate, and negotiations move up from there. For example, a small group of women harvesting beetroot in December (when there was little other agricultural work available in the

area) were being paid Rs 130. While this would be considered a low wage for that work in the area, it is no coincidence that this wage was just a little higher than the MGNREGA wage. MGNREGA's knock-on effect on agricultural wages is not only important in terms of the *extent* to which it has pushed up wages, but also in terms of the *reach* of these impacts: wage hikes benefit all the rural poor who are dependent on agricultural work for their livelihoods, not just those who participate in MGNREGA.

One reason villagers like MGNREGA work is that they do not need to negotiate a wage, nor deal with landowners. For all MGNREGA workers a key benefit of this employment – compared to other work locally available to them – is that it is free from the largely caste-based relations of subordination, discrimination and exploitation that are a feature of both agricultural coolie work and powerloom employment. This corroborates Khera and Nayak's finding that "the 'dignity' associated with doing government work and not having to seek work from private landlords or contractors is also a very significant benefit for women" (2009: 54). The dalits of both villages mention the dependency and discrimination that mark both agricultural work and powerloom work. In MGNREGA, workers, although supervised by the "in-charge", feel that they are able to work independently and free from relationships of patronage, inequalities of caste and employer-employee hierarchies. There is, undoubtedly, a certain stigma associated with doing manual work on roads, canals and ponds, and households working outside agriculture feel they have worked hard precisely to move *beyond* that. But the stigma is not as bad as that associated with agricultural wage labour, and with MGNREGA villagers feel they can earn something without taking a step backwards and returning to agriculture. This is especially important for those dalit households who have turned to MGNREGA following the downturn in the Tiruppur industry, and particularly for the Adi Dravidas of Allapuram, who are increasingly removed from the agricultural economy of the village. Social perceptions of work are important, and agricultural work is particularly assessed with reference to past relations of subordination and servitude that all dalits aspire to move away from (see Carswell and De Neve 2013; and De Neve and Carswell forthcoming). MGNREGA work is seen – like free rice or housing loans – as a government scheme that one can access for little in return and that one would therefore be imprudent to turn down. Or, as Bagyalakshmi put it, "Older people who never even saw a 100 rupee note now get such a note for free!"

As elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, the scheme offers employment that is independent from village caste relations and that, as a form of government work, is seen as dignified and status-neutral. These features of MGNREGA have had a number of rather unexpected consequences. Jeyaranjan found in 2010 that MGNREGA was attracting increasing members of Vellalar households (the landowning community of the Thanjavur region), especially women who had previously been confined to the home. While few members of wealthy Vellalar households demanded work under MGNREGA, poorer Vellalars saw

MGNREGA as work that – unlike manual labour on other people's fields – was "not a threat to their 'dignity' and identity" (2011: 67). It similarly drew young dalit women (Adi Dravida), whose husbands had secured non-farm jobs and who had begun withdrawing from agricultural labour, back into the workforce.

In our villages we identified similar but not identical trends. In Mannapalayam, MGNREGA recruits a significant number of women from higher castes (typically Kongu Vellalar Gounders and some Vanniyars), but by far the majority of them were from poor and landless households and were not new to paid employment. Only a very small number of these higher caste women came from relatively well-off households and were entering paid employment for the first time. They, however, seemed to treat MGNREGA work almost like a day out. Dressed rather smartly for people participating in manual labour, they wore gold jewellery and flowers in their hair, and only participated if the work was organised in their own hamlet. In Allapuram, on the other hand, MGNREGA draws in younger women from the Adi Dravida community, many of whom have recently withdrawn from agricultural labour as their household incomes were boosted following their husbands' successful employment in the Tiruppur garment industry. They would probably not turn up for MGNREGA work at all was it not for the fact that the downturn Tiruppur experience in early 2011 was having a considerable impact on their household income. With husbands now regularly out of work and idle at home, MGNREGA offers these women an important opportunity to make up for a dip in household income without having to turn to what they perceive as more demeaning manual labour on the fields of Gounder landlords.

Conclusions

In Tamil Nadu MGNREGA is being implemented with a large degree of success and is certainly benefiting the rural poor, and poor women in particular. Here, the already "women-friendly" stipulations of the scheme are further complemented with state-specific policy decisions that reveal a political commitment to the implementation of this central government welfare policy. These state-level policy decisions include the imposition of top-down implementation targets, the development of administrative support structures, the issuing of job cards in individual workers' names, the continuation of weekly payments in cash, the relaxation of workloads over time, and the ban on the use of materials and contractors. These policy choices not only reflect the state's commitment to the implementation of this social protection policy but have also nurtured the policy's substantive success in reaching out to the rural poor and to rural women, in particular (Carswell and De Neve forthcoming). While one might question the long-term financial sustainability of the scheme, we can only note that the strong political commitment to this scheme in Tamil Nadu means that even though the project is creating very few productive assets, it is sustained by political will. This is in line with a series of other welfare policies that the Tamil Nadu state government has been committed to since at least the 1970s (Heyer 2012).

MGNREGA has indeed a number of *direct* advantages for the rural poor: most importantly, it is available whenever they need it and fills gaps in households' income where normal employment is subject to seasonal variations or other fluctuations in labour demand. It is particularly valuable for some of the most vulnerable members of rural society: widows, divorced and separated women, the weak and the old, and people for whom other work is increasingly difficult to manage. Also significant in gender term is that childcare provisions at the MGNREGA worksites mean that even women with young children are able to work. When comparing MGNREGA work with local private employment, the disadvantage for the rural poor is that the MGNREGA wage is lower than most alternatives in this region of Tamil Nadu: MGNREGA pays less than both agricultural work (particularly at certain times of the year) and non-agricultural work, especially for men. But MGNREGA work has the advantage of being available both continuously and locally, which again benefits women in particular. Furthermore, it is locally considered an "easy" work, with fixed and regularly paid wages and, crucially, with equal pay for men and women, which enhances women's self-perception and self-confidence. Finally, there is no stigma attached to doing MGNREGA work: it is a "government" work, and free from the caste-based relations of subordination and discrimination that mark both agricultural wage labour and village powerloom work. The attractions and disadvantages of MGNREGA work are weighed up by workers, and people make strategic decisions as to where they work on any particular day.

Another significant benefit of MGNREGA is its *indirect* effects on agricultural wages. Evidence has suggested that MGNREGA has pushed up agricultural wages, and our evidence supports this too. This means that MGNREGA has a positive effect that reaches far beyond those directly employed by the scheme. Higher agricultural wage levels mean a better "fall-back position", and in turn, a stronger bargaining position for rural day labourers. But the picture is not a simple and

straightforward one. The specific impacts of MGNREGA relate in part to the complexity of local labour markets. In this region, as in most parts of rural India, labour markets are highly segmented (Carswell 2013), not in the least along gender lines. Thus, in one of our villages, Allapuram, we see a large proportion of younger women doing MGNREGA work, as their local alternatives are fewer and poorly paid, while men are almost completely engaged in urban work. In Mannapalayam, by contrast, the age profile of MGNREGA women workers was older. Here, MGNREGA participation is shaped by the local availability of powerloom work, which attracts younger people but is much more taxing for the elderly. They choose to join MGNREGA instead. Varying patterns of MGNREGA participation reflect not only the compulsions of age, gender and stage in the life course, but also the different ways that local labour markets are uniquely embedded in particular social, historical and geographical contexts. Across both villages, however, it is patently clear that MGNREGA has made a real difference to many rural poor: giving them work during the quiet seasons, pushing up wages across sectors, strengthening their bargaining position in the labour market, and offering a dignified source of employment independent from landowners and other employers. And most of them are women.

Social protection and other welfare policies, such as MGNREGA, that do not explicitly seek to address gender inequalities often play as important a role in reshaping gender relations as policies and development interventions that are explicitly designed to address gender inequity or women's empowerment. It is surprising therefore that a WDR with a focus on gender and development fails to incorporate any serious gender analysis of contemporary social protection schemes like MGNREGA in India. Perhaps this is because policymakers have not yet fully realised the extent to which MGNREGA – as an employment guarantee scheme that annually benefits more than six million households in Tamil Nadu alone – is having far-reaching impacts on rural women's

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livelihoods, labour market participation and bargaining position. This paper has shown that the gendered impacts of MGNREGA are partly due to the universal, right-based and women-friendly nature of the policy, which has made it particularly accessible and suitable for women and other vulnerable social groups, but partly also to the specific ways in which this

policy is implemented in Tamil Nadu, where it has received consistent cross-party political support. Some effects of the scheme have been direct and planned, others have been indirect and unintended, but most of them make a significant and encouraging contribution towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

NOTES

- 1 Data from official MGNREGA website (http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mpr_ht/nregampr.aspx, accessed on 8 June 2012).
- 2 The 109 MGNREGA workers were selected from amongst the workers at the work site on the days we did fieldwork. Some of these individuals had been surveyed in the 2008-09 survey, but we did not deliberately sample such individuals.
- 3 Some members of both these dalit groups have converted to Christianity, but all are generally treated as dalits in the villages.
- 4 In June 2012, Chief Minister Jayalitha further increased the official wage to Rs 132.
- 5 Unfortunately the same detailed breakdown is not used systematically in the official MGNREGA data available online, where the individual letter is not used consistently (Carswell and Cripps 2013).
- 6 In all figures that follow the whole village data comes from the 2008-09 survey and the MGNREGA worker data comes from the 2011 survey. The whole village data is calculated using respondents aged 20 and over only.
- 7 In the 2008-09 survey it proved impossible to distinguish between the different dalit groups who (mostly migrants) lived in accommodation provided by powerloom owners. Matharis, in contrast, all lived in a "colony" and could be distinguished by this as well as by the fact they speak Telugu.
- 8 In the 2008-09 survey of Allapuram, we had problems with the way we grouped our data on education, and so it has not been possible to separate out the grade achieved for this sample.
- 9 Calculated using respondents aged 20 and over only.
- 10 If anything men have to work more than women. In both the roadside work and irrigation canal work, the men had to go ahead of the women, clearing the larger branches before the women followed clearing weeds and smaller branches. This means that a small group of four or five men had to cover the full length of the road/canal. When I asked why they did not complain because they had more work to do than women (especially if very few men turned up for work one day), they laughed and told me that there was so little work that (even if it was more than the women's work) they really could not complain.
- 11 The same report identifies MGNREGA as being one of the causes of wage increases, although considers it to be secondary, with high GDP growth and high commodity prices being the biggest driver of wages.
- 12 In 2009, informants in Allapuram reported that a typical daily wage for a male agricultural worker was Rs 120, and Rs 80 for a female agricultural worker. In late 2011 the rate was Rs 200 to Rs 250 for men and Rs 150 to Rs 200 for women.

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