

CASE STUDY: DALIT WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVE (INDIA)

EXPANDING RURAL WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT/SCHEME (MNREGA/S)

In India, men and women are guaranteed equal constitutional rights, safeguarded by various legislative regulations and promoted through welfare measures and the ratification of international conventions. Despite this, women – specifically those who face increased marginalization – continue to face inequity when compared to their male counterparts, especially in claiming rights provided through legal frameworks. This is the case for many Dalit women as barriers prevent them from accessing entitlements provided by policies and laws, including those of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme (MNREGA/S).

THE MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT/SCHEME

The MNREGA/S of 2005 is an act that guarantees each rural household 100 days of paid employment per year within five kilometres of the applicants' residence. At least one-third of all workers in the program must be women with wages equal to those of their male counterparts. If employment is requested and not provided within 15 days, the MNREGA/S includes a provision for the applicant to claim an unemployment allowance. Furthermore, the MNREGA/S requires safe worksite facilities, including access to drinking water, shade, childcare, and healthcare.

The MNREGA/S represents a partnership scheme between the federal, state and local governments. It is a rights-based, demand-driven initiative that legalizes the right to work for the first time in India, guaranteeing job security for the unorganized sector in rural areas. Many members of vulnerable Dalit communities – particularly Dalit women and members of Scheduled Castes – were found to be underrepresented in MNREGA/S requests for work due to lack of knowledge about the Act's provisions and lack of access to information about the processes for claiming entitlements.

DALIT WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVE

In order to address this lack of knowledge and increase Dalit women's access to claim paid employment, the Dalit Women's Livelihoods Accountability Initiative (DWLAI) was implemented by Gender at Work in partnership with four local partner organizations in Uttar Pradesh. DWLAI works with Dalit women and women of Scheduled Castes who face increased discrimination due to their gender, caste and class. Representing a large portion of people working in the informal and unorganized sectors, Dalit women have not had an organized voice within MNREGA/S discourses, or a constituency within civil society that could systematically advocate for their needs.

DWLAI programming focused on increasing Dalit women's awareness, including the voices of Dalit women in on going social discourse, ensuring greater recognition of Dalit women's capacities in the community, and preparing Dalit women to take on greater leadership responsibilities. Gender at Work has successfully employed a gender action learning reflection process with the women's organizations to assist in the development of stronger programs that address issues relevant to Dalit women. The DWLAI also sought to improve economic and political conditions by increasing the capacity of Dalit women to claim their right to employment provided by the MNREGA/S and by introducing their priorities into the policy's design, thus including perspectives of Dalit women into social accountability mechanisms and processes.

IMPACT ON DALIT WOMEN'S ACCESS TO DECENT PAID EMPLOYMENT

Approximately 8,000 Dalit women were reached by awareness-raising activities, and through them, even more have gained knowledge about the MNREGA/S entitlements. During focus group discussions organized for the mid-term review, all of the participating Dalit women were aware that the MNREGA/S entitlements included 100 days of paid work and that women are entitled to obtain this work, with nearly 94% being knowledgeable of the wage rates. Dalit women's participation in MNREGA activities as workers and supervisors has greatly increased with 14,174 Dalit women participating in all eight districts of the DWLAI program (increased from only 2,811 participating in 2009).

Many Dalit women were unionized and had a collective voice to raise concerns. Unions are an important mechanism for capacity-building, increasing access to information, claiming MNREGA/S entitlements, and targeting social, political and gender discriminations. Between 2009 and 2011, there was a nearly 49% increase in union membership

Dalit Women's participation in NREGA increased by 406% in the 8 districts in Uttar Pradesh covered by this project.

and a 95% increase in union membership of Dalit women. Dalit women were more visible, gained broader respect, and more recognized as a force that cannot be ignored.



Training module simulation for women mates at the SSK training centre Photo Credit: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh

IMPACT ON MINDSETS OF MEN¹

In the beginning, the women faced opposition from the male-dominated community. “Village people started saying that women who only know how to run a kitchen will never be able to use heavy tools used for digging. We took this as a challenge and started working on the construction,” says Kamala of Manikpur block in Chitrakoot. The appointment of women mates in both Lalitpur and Chitrakoot also brought about a lot of opposition from men. “Not only did the Panchayat Mitra (panchayat coordinator) and Pradhan create problems, even the higher administration was discouraging,” says Meena, District Coordinator, SSK, which was one of the partner organizations of Gender at Work.

Today, the men of Lalitpur and Chitrakoot think differently about the work women do. “Now with the training of women mates there have been many positive changes. Women are able to perform technical tasks. They can measure work, explain work to labourers, supervise the worksites, etc,” says Pradhan Chunni Lal Verma. “I want to encourage more women to come forward and receive mate training.

¹ <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2013/5/in-india-s-northern-state-of-uttar-pradesh>

When they go out to work, they gain courage and become independent,” says Pradhan Ram Sevak Yadav of Mahroni, Lalitpur.

Working with a woman mate also encourages other women to participate and encourages them to become one. “We like having women mates because we don’t have to cover our heads while working. I will send my daughter-in-law for the next training of mates,” says Kamala.

“It has been said that women cannot compete with men in physical terms. But with the help of MGNREGA, we have proven everyone wrong. In our project, women have planned the pond, done the digging, and constructed the whole pond on their own. It was a very challenging task for us. But in the end, we proved ourselves which gave us an immense sense of pride,” said Pushpa from Vanangana, another of Gender at Work’s local NGO partners.

IMPACT ON THE ATTITUDE OF MNREGA/S OFFICIALS TOWARDS THE DALIT WOMEN



Minister of Rural Development Jairam Ramesh speaks at the National Consultation on Women and MGNREGA organized by Gender at Work and UN Women. Photo credit: UN Women

Leaders and officials are more aware of the concerns and needs of Dalit women since their participation in a variety of DWLAI activities, including seminars for elected Panchayat officials with village-level data and public hearings involving both duty-bearers and right-holder target groups. Newspaper reports have highlighted Dalit women and their collective unionized voice that has subsequently increased decision-makers’ awareness of the strengths, concerns and needs of Dalit women. Dalit women have noted changed behaviours of decision-makers and increased respect.

In a major breakthrough, the Government of India set clear deadlines and made definite commitments to ensuring that women will be included in the NREGA scheme and committed to the following.

- Strong efforts will be made to capture demand for work
- A nation wide study will be undertaken on the gender impact of NREGA
- An annual consultation on “Women and MGNREGA” will be organized every year
- Convergence with the Ministry of Women and Child Development for construction of Aanganwadi centers under MGNREGA and expansion of child care services
- Examining whether a national rule can ensure that delays in payment can automatically compensated to the worker

IMPACT ON HOUSEHOLD LEVEL DECISION-MAKING PATTERNS

In focus group discussions, Dalit women involved in the program also expressed increased respect and equality at home. These Dalit women felt empowered to decide whether to obtain work, participate in local meetings, and where to allocate funds earned through the wages of their work. They expressed that an important element of being empowered to decide where to allocate funds is holding a bank account in their own name. Generally the wage is used for household expenses, including food items, clothes, other necessities such as children’s school expenses, and saving schemes. These changes illustrate that Dalit women feel they are currently more empowered at home than they were prior to their participation in the program.

KEY FACTORS OF SUCCESS

The initiative combines:

- A strong accountability framework that empowers Dalit women to claim MNREGA/S entitlements, and capacity-strengthening of decision-makers to effectively deliver better services to right holders – the Dalit women.
- An empowerment framework, focusing on: improving the status of the Dalit women with increased access to information on MNREGA/S entitlements; enforcing their rights by creating a framework which enables them to express demands for paid jobs and engage in dialogue with government officials for better policy responsiveness and transformative change; and, strengthening their agency through organizational skill-building.