

Women's Voice and Agency in Choosing Assets

A New Study on MGNREGA in India

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Background

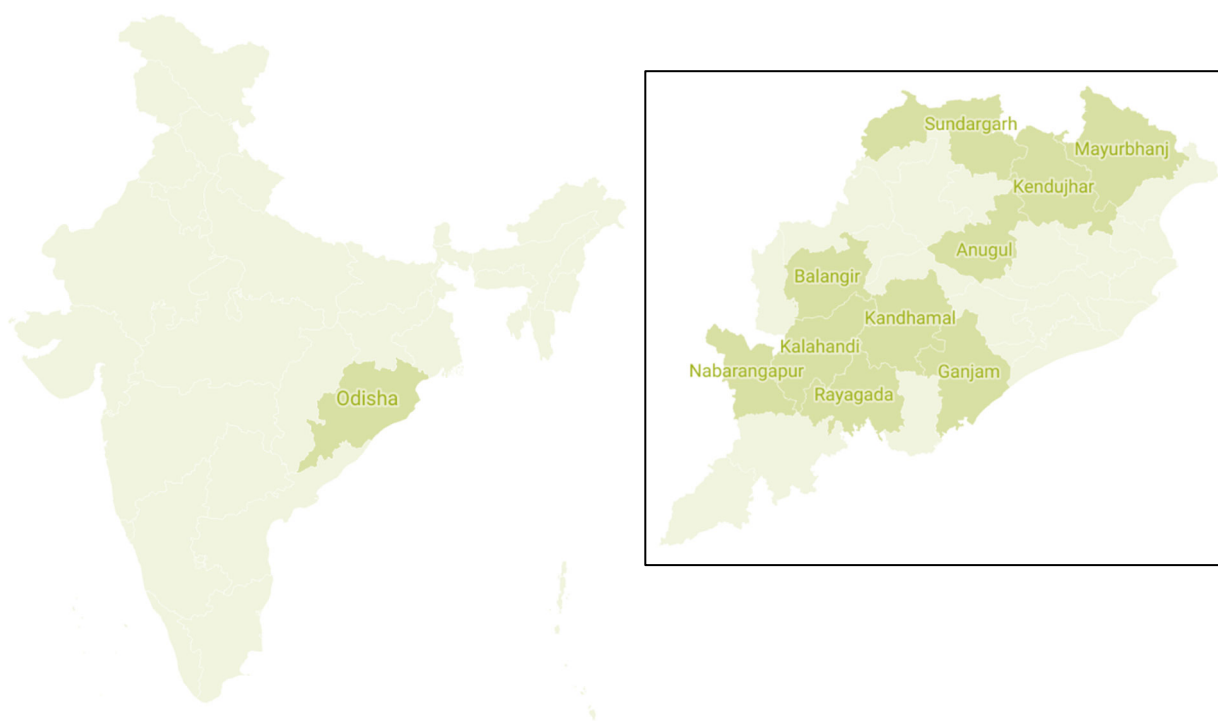
In 2005, India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, “the Act”), a law guaranteeing all rural households 100 days of work at a minimum wage through the building of durable assets, which created one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the world. Now known as the Mahatma Gandhi NREGA (MGNREGA), a notable feature of the program is that it envisions a democratic, bottom-up process of choosing which durable assets would be built within a community. Toward this end, the Act gives citizens the right to participate in the process of identifying potential projects and delegates responsibility to village governments in selecting which assets to build.

Yet, in the long history of public works programs, there has been limited research on how assets created under such workfare programs are selected, or how to increase the role of women or other marginalized groups in the decision-making process. The Act provides a list of permissible works that span natural resource management, individual and community assets, common infrastructure for women’s groups, and rural infrastructure more broadly. Given the scale of the program, the assets selected at the village level have tremendous potential to enhance rural resilience to unexpected shocks and crises, especially those related to climate change. This is important, as extreme weather events on the Indian subcontinent are increasing, both in frequency and in the magnitude of their impacts on agricultural productivity, household livelihoods, assets and incomes, and health and nutrition. These events, as well as their impacts on incomes, often affect women more severely (Mason and Agan 2015; Kosec et al. forthcoming).

Understanding how to enhance women’s voice and agency within the process of selecting community assets is important for three major reasons. First, women and men may have different asset preferences (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). Recent time-use survey data from India find that women spend far more time on unpaid domestic and care work than men (eight times as much) (India, NSO 2019). Thus, women may place relatively more value on projects that reduce effort in collecting fuel and water, for example. If their voices are not included in the asset selection process, the village could miss out on a

range of development projects that would improve overall productivity, resilience, and well-being. Second, where projects are built affects who benefits from them. Households that had MGNREGA assets built on their own land or that live near an asset cultivate more land, use more inputs (including their own labor), and have higher agricultural output (Gehrke 2015; Muralidharan et al. 2021). Ensuring that women influence asset placement is thus critical. Third, greater participation and inclusivity in the process of selecting community development projects can increase the perceived legitimacy and satisfaction with projects, as well as willingness to contribute toward their construction and maintenance (Olken 2010). Within MGNREGA, households that report playing a greater role in project selection also report greater satisfaction with the usefulness, quality, and maintenance of the projects (Ranaware et al. 2015).

Figure 1: Potential Study Districts in Odisha, India



Source: Authors (2022).

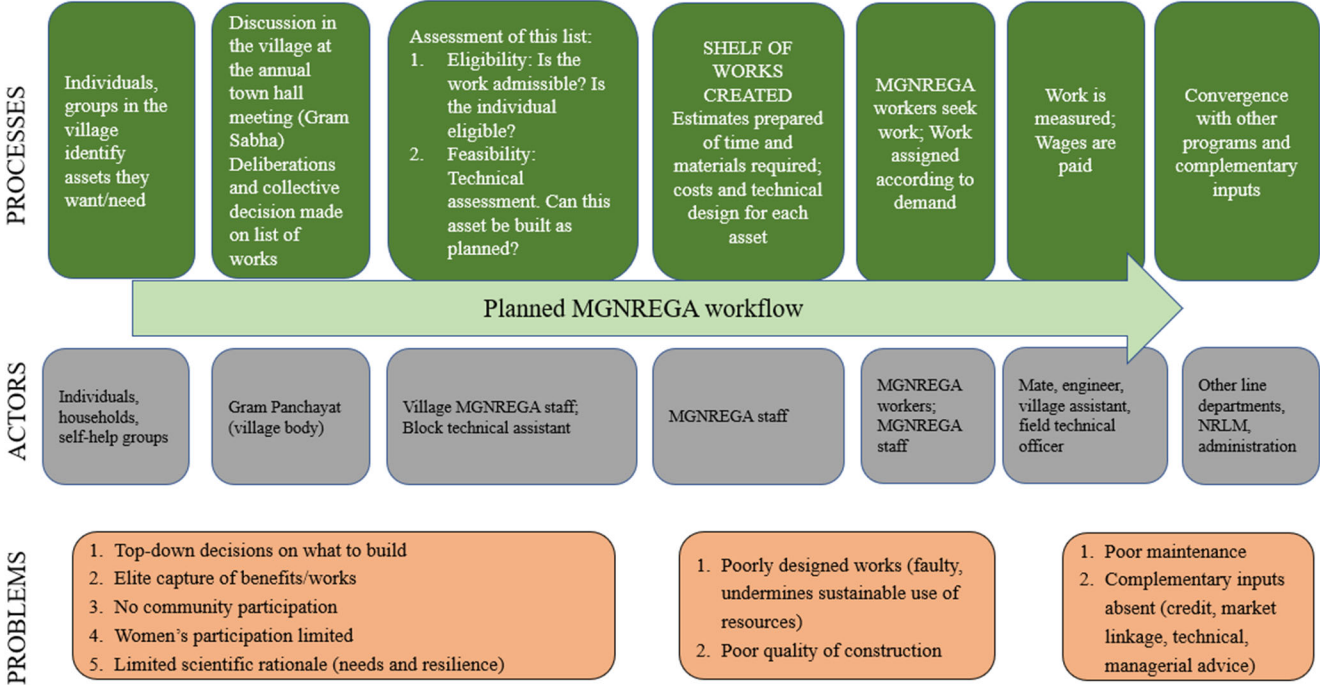
Note: Potential study districts in the state are indicated in blue. The boundaries, names, and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

Interventions

In this project, IFPRI will partner with the NGO Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) to test interventions to increase women’s voice and agency in the process of selecting MGNREGA assets. While Odisha is among the poorest states in India, it has also emerged as a front-runner in many progressive livelihood interventions and innovative policies related to agriculture, social protection, and climate resilience. Odisha straddles as many as 10 agroclimatic zones, presenting interesting contexts to study the choice of assets and their role in enhancing rural resilience, especially to climate shocks. In the past, Odisha’s state government has demonstrated a commitment to enhancing women’s economic empowerment through several state-specific schemes, such as Mission Shakti. Given this, and the convergence between MGNREGA and Mission Shakti within the state, there is potential for our research to inform state government policies.

Every year, individuals and groups within villages can identify assets that they would like the MGNREGA workfare program to build. According to the program rules, these ideas should be discussed in an annual village town hall meeting, where the village collectively decides on a list of works to prioritize. MGNREGA staff and a block technical assistant assess project submissions based on their eligibility and technical feasibility; for those that pass this screening, MGNREGA staff prepare project cost and labor estimates. Then, when MGNREGA workers seek employment, they are assigned work based on these estimates. Figure 2 provides a stylized depiction of the work-planning process.

Figure 2: MGNREGA Workflow and Potential Bottlenecks



Source: Authors

Note: NRLM is National Rural Livelihoods Mission.

Despite the detailed guidance on how to foster grassroots participation and collective decision-making, implementation of this guidance within the MGNREGA program has been weak compared to other aspects of the program, as occurs in many community-driven development programs with similar goals. For example, existing field surveys find that a third of beneficiaries of assets reported playing no role in deciding which works to undertake, and nearly half felt that works were decided without the involvement of the village town halls (Ranaware et al. 2015). Women’s involvement is likely to be even more limited given the added barriers they face to public participation, including mobility constraints, social norms that discourage their speaking in public, and lower perceived self-efficacy (Cheema et al. 2019; Chang et al. 2020; Brule and Gaikwad 2021; Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Robinson and Gottlieb 2021).

We plan to test two distinct pathways for enhancing women’s voice and agency in selecting MGNREGA assets to build: 1) access to female role models who have successfully navigated the MGNREGA process already and 2) gender-sensitivity trainings for village MGNREGA staff. The role model intervention will introduce women within treatment villages to other women who have successfully secured MGNREGA

assets. This holds potential to increase both women’s understanding of how the process should work in practice and their aspirations to participate in the process as they see examples of women who have successfully done so.

Given the prominent role of local administrators and local elected representatives in the project planning process, gender-sensitivity trainings aim to encourage these village leaders to be receptive to women’s suggestions. Trainings will address potential differences in policy preferences between men and women, the value to the village of including women’s ideas, the ways that the MGNREGA guidelines protect women’s participation, the significant barriers women may face in bringing their proposals to the village meeting, and effective ways of eliciting women’s ideas to ensure that they are part of the process.

In the coming months, we plan to conduct qualitative research in a small number of villages on how the community planning process for MGNREGA asset selection works in practice. This exercise will help us work with our partners to refine the interventions before implementation.

Evaluation Design

IFPRI will be collaborating with PRADAN and the state government of Odisha to conduct a randomized controlled trial, which is designed to test the effects of these two potential pathways for increasing women’s voice and agency within the MGNREGA asset selection process. The sample will include 10 districts across Odisha where MGNREGA operations are most significant and active, and which represent the priorities of both state government and implementing partners. These districts span agro-ecological contexts to ensure that a variety of asset types and conditions are reflected.

Randomization will be conducted at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, the basic village-governing institution in rural India. Our study design is summarized in Figure 3. Overall, we aim to select a total of 300 GPs from across the 10 study districts. Approximately 150 villages will be assigned to each of the two treatment arms; in one treatment arm, villages will receive the role model treatment, and in the second treatment arm, villages will receive the gender sensitivity training for leaders. Among treatment villages, half will receive both the role model intervention and the gender sensitivity training to assess whether there are any complementarities between the treatments. The remaining 75 villages will be assigned to a control group. If our initial qualitative research reveals that many potential program participants lack information on the basic process for submitting project ideas, then we may also include an information treatment.

Figure 3: Study Design

| | Role models | No role models |
|-------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Training | Role models + training | Training only |
| No training | Role models only | Control group |

Source: Authors

Research questions include:

- ▶ Does exposing women to female role models affect the likelihood that women submit projects for consideration, and that their projects are selected at the community level?

- ▶ Does sensitizing village leaders to how and why women should be involved in the MGNREGA asset selection process affect the likelihood that women submit projects for consideration, and that their projects are selected at the community level?
- ▶ Are the interventions more effective if combined?

At baseline, we will collect administrative data from villages on the projects submitted for consideration, as well as on the projects selected to be built through the MGNREGA program. We will also interview the local MGNREGA technical staff who evaluate projects and village leaders involved in facilitating community meetings and project selection. We will conduct a baseline household survey with a sample size of approximately 15 households per village, sampling from the list of MGNREGA job card holders in each village (those who can potentially access the program if they choose to).

The interventions will be conducted after the baseline survey, but before the project planning cycle begins for the 2023–2024 MGNREGA project cycle. The endline survey, in turn, will be conducted after the projects have been selected for the year.

Broader Context and Policy Relevance

Our study will contribute to a growing body of experimental evidence on interventions that enhance women’s voice and agency in public policy, as well as the overall role of local communities in deciding how to allocate community development resources. Giving communities a prominent role in selecting development projects is an increasingly important development strategy employed by both international donors and national governments, for at least three major reasons. First, information asymmetries imply that communities almost always have more knowledge about local needs and priorities compared to central planners. Second, communities may have greater incentives and ability to use funds well and to monitor corruption, given that they are the beneficiaries of the spending. Third, transferring decision-making to communities may strengthen social capital within communities, encourage the development of local dispute resolution mechanisms, and expand communities’ experiences with participation in governance.

However, the evidence is mixed on how well community decision-making works in practice. Ideally, a process that affects the use of community resources should include the voices of all community members. Local decision-making, however, can be dominated by local elites, and the voice of women and marginalized citizens in decision-making is by no means guaranteed, even within a process that is formally open to all. Rent-seeking can also be high within programs that are implemented by local governments. Attempts to increase women’s participation in community deliberations and monitoring of community-selected development projects have had limited effects. For example, van der Windt, Humphreys, and Sanchez de la Sierra (2018) find no evidence that requiring parity between men and women in community decision-making over development projects changes the types of projects that are selected or affects the role of women in the community.

Existing literature points to at least three constraints to raising women’s voice and agency in the asset allocation process. First, citizens may lack information on how transfer programs are supposed to work, preventing them from effectively advocating for their views, even within well-established and long-standing programs that should theoretically be well-known to the public (Banerjee et al. 2018). Second, deliberation around asset allocation for community development projects often rests on preexisting traditional groups and institutions. Women are frequently involved in social or economic self-help groups, but social

and leadership capital in these single-gender settings often do not translate to mixed-gender settings (Kosec, Bleck, and Gottlieb 2022). Devolving decision-making to the local level can make it more difficult—rather than less—for women to participate if the process requires significant interaction with local male elites (Kosec, Song, and Zhao 2020). If women have not had the opportunity to build experience expressing preferences in a mixed-gender setting, then even attempts to adjust program rules to enhance their participation may not yield meaningful changes in deliberations or project selection.

Third, local elites can play an outsized role in shaping the outcomes of community deliberations, even unintentionally. In an experiment that randomly varied leaders of community decision-making, Humphreys, Masters, and Sandbu (2006) find that leaders' preferences explained one-third of all variations in policy prioritizations by local communities, even when leaders were instructed to play a moderating role and small community groups were tasked with working together to express policy priorities. Leaders may also react differently to preferences expressed by women, which itself could affect whether women are willing to voice preferences (Chaturvedi, Das, and Mahajan 2021).

Overall, there is a need to unpack the mechanisms through which both supply and demand constraints on women's voice and agency can be eased within the community decision-making process of selecting and maintaining development projects. Working with our partners, we can expand the knowledge base on how to raise women's voices in Odisha.

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