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VIEWPOINT

## The paradoxes of empowerment: gendering NREGA in the rural landscape of India

Diego Maiorano, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, and Hans Blomkvist

### ABSTRACT

The growing importance of public works programmes (PWP) as a social protection tool has attracted significant scholarly attention. However, despite the fact that the empowerment of marginalised communities is one of the key objectives of most PWPs, scant attention has been dedicated to this crucial issue. We contextualise these concerns in relation to India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). In particular, we propose two areas which are relatively unexplored. First, the methodologies currently used to research NREGA and PWP, more generally, need to be broadened. Second, the processes that lead to empowerment need to be researched empirically.

L'importance croissante des programmes de travaux publics (PTP) comme outil de protection sociale a suscité une attention considérable de la part des théoriciens. Cependant, bien que l'automatisation des communautés marginalisées soit l'un des objectifs clés de la plupart de PTP, cette question cruciale n'a suscité guère d'attention. Nous contextualisons ces préoccupations par rapport à la loi nationale Mahatma Gandhi sur la garantie de l'emploi dans les zones rurales (*Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* — NREGA). En particulier, nous proposons deux aspects relativement inexplorés. En premier lieu, les méthodologies actuellement utilisées pour mener des recherches sur la NREGA et les PTP, de manière plus générale, doivent être élargies. En second lieu, les processus qui donnent lieu à l'autonomisation doivent faire l'objet de recherches empiriques.

La creciente importancia adjudicada a los programas de obras públicas (POP), en tanto mecanismo de protección social, ha sido objeto de considerable atención académica. Sin embargo, a pesar de que uno de los principales objetivos de la mayoría de estos programas apunta hacia el empoderamiento de las comunidades marginales, se ha prestado escasa atención a esta cuestión crucial. Los autores del presente artículo contextualizan estas preocupaciones en el marco de la Ley Nacional Mahatma Gandhi para Garantizar el Empleo Rural de India (NREGA por sus siglas en inglés). Al respecto, proponen específicamente dos áreas que han sido poco examinadas: en primer lugar, deben ampliarse las metodologías utilizadas actualmente para investigar la NREGA y, en términos más generales, el POP; en segundo lugar, es necesario investigar empíricamente los procesos que propiciaron el empoderamiento de estas comunidades.

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## Introduction

The growing importance of public works programmes (PWP) as a social protection tool has unsurprisingly attracted significant scholarly attention (e.g. Aderman and Yemtsov 2013; Dutta et al. 2014; Gilligan 2009; Jalan and Ravallion 2003; Ravi and Engler 2009; Subbarao et al. 2013). PWPs operate through the twin objectives of providing: (a) an additional income to poor households (especially in times of crisis, for example during a drought) and aiding in the development process by building infrastructures; and (b) the empowerment of marginalised communities (Subbarao et al. 2013). Yet the empowering potential of PWPs remains largely under-researched. This is mainly due to the growing tendency to rely almost exclusively on econometric analysis for the study of development programmes and processes (Narayan and Petesch 2007, 10). Easy to quantify variables such as income and poverty levels are widely used to test PWPs' efficacy, whereas other critically important aspects (including empowerment processes) are either reduced to their quantifiable dimensions or are treated very superficially (Devereux et al. 2013).

We would like to contextualise these concerns through the world's largest PWP, namely India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). In particular, we propose two areas which are relatively unexplored. First, the methodologies currently used to research NREGA and PWP, more generally, need to be broadened. Second, the processes that lead to empowerment need to be researched empirically.

## Empowerment

Empowerment as a political concept emerged from feminist critiques in the 1980s which expressed concerns with the pre-dominance within development discourse of the "welfare approach" towards women or that women had been brought into policy processes on very sex-specific terms, primarily in their capacity as housewives, mothers, and reproducers (Kabeer 2005). Arising largely as a critique of the modernisation approach, these debates foregrounded women as active contributors to economic development rather than as passive recipients of welfare programmes. The 1990s, together with the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), were marked by a concern of introducing empowerment to state actors, who were eager to promote gender-equality and "mainstreaming" gender. Mainstreaming arose from the lessons learnt from previous experiences of women in development, and gender and development, that women were having no real impact on the social and economic processes and though there were the formation of women's components within larger projects, these had little relation to the main concerns of the projects, and a smaller claim to the overall project resources. There were also some concerns around not women's participation as such, but the terms of their participation. Moreover, if women could not influence both the choice and direction of development strategies at both national and local levels, it was not useful in the long run. At the turn of the century, issues of gender equality and women's empowerment were included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

It is clear, therefore, that empowerment is an inherently political concept as it entails the redefinition of women's role not only in the development process, but also within their households and communities. In fact, Baltiwala (1994) defines empowerment as a process of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups in three critical ways: challenging ideologies that sustain social inequalities; changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural, and intellectual resources; and transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures. In a similar vein, Mayoux (2001) identifies three critical dimensions of women empowerment: an economic dimension (women's increased access to material resources should enhance their decision-making power within the household); a welfare dimension (women who have control over economic decisions can increase the welfare of themselves and their children, especially in terms of daughters' education); and a socio-political dimension (through the

above two, women get increasing social mobility and can form groups to challenge social problems such as alcoholism and domestic violence).

Perhaps the most comprehensive feminist interpretation of the concept of empowerment is provided by Kabeer (1999, 2010), who defines empowerment as *"the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them"* (1999, 437) – and suggests three components to this: first, access to resources, whereby if a woman's primary form of access to resources is as a dependent member of the family, her capacity to make strategic choices are likely to be limited. The second element is agency, which implies not only actively exercising choice but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. It encompasses not only decision-making and other forms of observable action but also the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions. The third element is achievements, which refers to the extent to which people are able to realise their choices. This, of course, is dependent on the socio-political context in which people's lives are embedded. Finally, Kabeer's work on empowerment clearly grasps what has become a defining feature of any conceptualisations of empowerment. This is the fact that empowerment is not a state of being, but is rather a process of change (Kabeer 1999; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). This, again, reflects the inherently political nature of the concept, so much so that, as Rowlands (1995) notes, the questioning of power relations involved in the empowerment processes goes beyond formal and institutional definition of power, making the personal, political.

The feminist reflections on empowerment inspired scholars and development practitioners to expand the scope of the concept to include not only women, but also, more generally, poor people and marginalised communities. The World Development Report 2000/01, strongly influenced by Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen 1999), mainstreamed empowerment as a crucial element in the fight against poverty. Since then, empowerment has been at the centre of the development discourse. Unsurprisingly, many definitions of empowerment mushroomed. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) list as many as 32 different definitions of the empowerment, while Hennink et al. (2012) show how different development organisations understand the concept.

Despite a plethora of definitions, three common elements can be found. The first is the idea of "choice", that is, the exercise of human agency. Being able to choose, to put it in Amartya Sen's words, the kind of life one has reason to value is seen as constituting or even a defining element of empowerment. The second is the actual opportunity to realise one's choices, that is, the existence of a favourable social, political, and institutional environment that does not impede the exercise of agency. Some authors (e.g. Sen 1999) emphasise the first of these elements, as they believe that empowerment is the expansion of agency which, together with the expansion of opportunities (i.e. a favourable context), constitutes development. Other authors (Narayan and Nankani 2002) do not separate the context from the exercise of agency, which are thus considered as inseparable elements of empowerment. The third element, as mentioned earlier, suggests that empowerment should be understood as a process rather than as a state of being. All this implies that empowerment is a multidimensional concept that revolves around power relations at numerous domains (individual, household, community, market, and institutional) and in different spheres of life (economic, social and political).

These theoretical considerations have informed numerous empirical studies. However, there is an evident gap between theory and empirical research. In short, most empirical studies attempted to measure empowerment as an (quantifiable) outcome, rather than as a process (Malhotra and Schuler 2005). As a result, the mechanisms that lead to empowerment remain to a large extent either assumed or unexplored. A number of studies, for example, tried to measure empowerment outcomes using proxy variables such as ownership of certain assets, like literacy or employment history. This approach has been criticised (Malhotra and Mather 1997) as it did little more than equating the expansion of agency with its possible determinants.

Scholars have then attempted to measure agency and empowerment directly. A number of indicators have been used: decision-making power within the household; freedom of movement; control

over resources; control over one's body, and so on. This scholarship has been very useful for policy evaluation as its main objective was measuring empowerment outcomes (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002; Samman and Santos 2009). However, the vast majority of these studies "*do not measure the process element of empowerment*" (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 82). As a result, the mechanisms that underpin empowerment outcomes remain largely unexplored.

This is due to two kinds of problems. First, measuring processes is objectively difficult and it ideally requires data from two points in time. However, such data are seldom available. The second problem is the over-reliance on quantitative methods to measure a phenomenon (empowerment) that is essentially qualitative in nature (Sen 1994). In fact, the vast majority of the studies on empowerment use quantitative methods that, while appropriate to measure empowerment outcomes, are inadequate to grasp the mechanisms underpinning the very outcomes they measure. Studies using mixed methods (e.g. Malhotra and Mather 1997), are more informative, but they still do not use processes as the main units of analysis, and qualitative evidence is mainly used to explain specific results obtained through quantitative analysis. Two important exceptions that do take empowerment processes as their main units of analysis are both based on qualitative data (Kabeer 1997; Mayoux 2001). These studies are also extremely informative because, not having to reduce everything to numbers, they offer a deeper understanding of both the subjective dimension of empowerment by giving voice to the subjects of their investigation themselves and of the complexity of the socio-political and cultural environment in which they are embedded.

These considerations make us believe that there is an urgent need to link theory with empirical research by studying empowerment as a process rather than (only) as a measurable outcome. In particular, there is the need to understand the mechanisms that underpin empowerment processes. In fact, causal mechanisms "*turn the black box into a transparent box and make visible how the participating entities and their properties, activities, and relations produce the effect of interest*" (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010, 51). In the context of empowerment, looking for causal mechanisms means reconstructing the steps (intentional or not) that women and marginalised people take towards empowerment. In other words, the search for empowerment mechanisms, on the one hand, allows bringing into the analysis those contextual factors that are an inseparable element of empowerment processes and the complex systems of power relations in which women and marginalised communities are embedded. On the other hand, the search for "*causal mechanisms is an important way of linking empirical research and theoretical analysis*" (Rueschemeyer 2009, 20), which, in the context of empowerment, means understanding and analysing it as a process.

### **The (dis)empowering potential of the NREGA**

The NREGA confers to every rural household the right to be employed in public works for up to 100 days per year and to be paid a decent minimum wage, which is equal for men and women. Last year, more than 47 million households were provided employment under the scheme. More than half of the beneficiaries were women.

Most scholars agree that the NREGA has constituted a safety net for the rural poor, contributing towards their food security, reducing distress migration, and increasing access to health and education. The NREGA has also contributed to the increase of rural and urban wages, thus helping to reduce poverty also among non-beneficiaries. Overall, NREGA's positive material contribution is virtually undisputed (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2011; Deininger et al. 2013; Dreze and Sen 2013; Dutta et al. 2014; Imbert and Papp 2012, 2014; Klonner et al. 2012; Mookherjee 2014).

The NREGA is also designed in such a way that beneficiaries, rather than being considered passive recipients of the state's benevolence, are actively involved in all phases of the scheme's implementation. This refers to the fact that the support of the state is only obtained through hard labour and not benevolence. One NREGA wage seeker from Andhra Pradesh told the first author that he was proud of working under the scheme because his work "*benefit[ed] the whole community*" and because it was not "*benevolence*" (interview, Karimnagar district, 13 August 2013).

Furthermore, the wage seekers are requested to perform a number of tasks in order to obtain work. First, they have to demand it and, in numerous cases, fight to have their right to work respected; second, they are (or should be) involved in the planning of works to be taken up in their village; third, they have to monitor the scheme's implementation through the participation in "social audits" that are explicitly prescribed by the NREGA; and so on. Furthermore, there are numerous instances in which the villagers actively protest if some of their rights under the act are violated. For example, various forms of protests – both organised with the help of civil society organisations or more spontaneous actions – erupted in recent years to protest against delays in the payment of wages. In short, the NREGA, by its own institutional design, turns the beneficiaries into active actors in the village political economy.

There is some scattered evidence in the literature that NREGA is indeed empowering marginalised communities, especially women and lower caste labourers. Some scholars point out that the NREGA has generated income-earning opportunities, through wage work, for women in a predominantly agricultural economy, where the options would otherwise be to work on somebody's agricultural fields (at extremely low wages and at the risk of harassment and exploitation), stay at home, or remain unemployed. This has increased women's material independence and there is evidence that women exercise autonomy on how to spend NREGA wages, indicating greater decision-making powers within the household. It has also facilitated monetary and social security for single women and widows (Nayak and Khera 2009; Pankaj and Tankha 2010; Pellissery and Jalan 2011) and, in some cases at least, helped reducing domestic violence (Mathur et al. 2013). Furthermore, working under the NREGA means interacting with the public sphere, which, by itself, is a potentially transformative element. A woman from Rajasthan mentioned to the first author that: "*I used to avoid talking to a stranger at all. But now after years of interaction with NREGA staff, I am much more confident about what I am allowed to do or say*" (interview, Churu district, 14 February 2014).

Lower caste (especially Dalits, i.e. former untouchable castes or Scheduled Castes) agricultural labourers, on the other hand, have seen their bargaining power in relation to landlords to increase significantly since the introduction of the scheme. This is not only due to the unwillingness of agricultural labourers to accept anything lower than the minimum wage paid under NREGA; but also, as some micro-level studies show, to an increasing reluctance by agricultural labourers to work on the fields of (upper or middle caste) farmers, where their "dignity" is violated and where they face all sorts of discrimination, especially in terms of untouchability practices (Carswell and De Neve 2014; Roy 2014). Prior to the introduction of the NREGA, labourers had to beg landowners to let them work in their fields; now there is increasing evidence that the pattern has been reversed, with farmers approaching labourers asking to work on their fields (Maiorano 2014). A Dalit man from Andhra Pradesh told us:

"The relation with the Reddys [Andhra Pradesh's dominant landowning caste] is often marked by confrontation. A few years back they decided that they would not give us any work in their fields, as they claimed we had to be punished for our insolence. The Reddys brought labourers from outside the village. It was very hard for us. But something like this cannot happen anymore. We have guaranteed employment with NREGA now. We are less dependent. We are confident now." (interview, Chittoor district, 19 October 2013)

This literature, our own observations, and numerous journalistic reports (e.g. Naina 2013; Sainath 2009) show, on the one hand, that empirical evidence of the empowering potential of the NREGA can be found across states, indicating that, despite the existing significant institutional, political, and administrative differences, the impact of the programme on power relations is significant enough to justify further analytical scrutiny. On the other hand, however, it is clear that "*it would be rash to conclude that the NREGA is breaking down social hierarchies big time. It is certainly calling them into question, though*" (Sainath 2009). In other words, it is crucial to examine "*the possibility that employment generated under this programme may inhere transformative possibilities in some contexts, but not so in others*" (Roy 2015, 8). It is important thus for researchers to further investigate the mechanisms through which this empowering potential unfolds (or does not unfold) and in what way the guarantee of employment challenges accepted social norms and with what consequences.



## Future directions

Two analytical points look particularly promising for future research. First, as some literature shows, empowerment processes sometimes result – paradoxically – in disempowerment, as powerful actors at household, local, and state levels can come to resent processes that entail upward mobility and can retaliate, often violently (Kabeer 1999; Thapar Björkert 2006; Vyas and Watts 2009). Thapar-Björkert, in the context of rural Bihar, suggests that the upward mobility of Dalits breaks the nurtured dependencies in an exploitative hierarchical political economy of labour. This leads to reprisals such as sexual violence against Dalit women, whose bodies are seen as impure, available, and disposable. So the question that we want to ask is whether the empowerment brought about by the NREGA is unfolding similar dynamics.

Qualitative methodologies seem particularly apt to study these (dis)empowerment processes. Simply measuring empowerment outcomes will not suffice. Narayan (2005) notes that there is a difference if a woman owns a cow because she had worked and saved money to buy it, or if she has inherited it. Similarly, if a woman experiences violence within the household because she insists on using her wage to pay for her daughter's school uniform and not for her husband's alcohol, then that woman is surely being disempowered. But her disempowerment is something qualitatively different from a woman who is beaten by her alcoholic husband for no apparent reason. In order to grasp these crucially important (not least for policy development) differences, it is imperative to reconstruct life histories and narratives that can uncover the mechanisms underpinning empowerment processes.

Second, more attention has to be paid to the context in which poor people and women are embedded. In fact, the social, political, and institutional context, as the latest World Development Report puts it, shapes what “*individuals perceive as desirable, possible, or even ‘thinkable’ for their lives*” (World Bank 2015, 3). In the context of NREGA, it is unclear if and how (and with what consequences, also in terms of disempowerment) the scheme is contributing to alter caste and gender relations and the intersections between the two. Dependency is intertwined with both caste and gender relations, thus making the analysis of the socio-political and cultural context in which poor people are immersed and within which they try to escape poverty and oppression crucial to understanding empowerment processes. Yet this important understanding is absent from the debate on the NREGA. The existing literature suggests that the NREGA is providing women and poor people with a set of assets that, in theory, should make them more independent, thus enhancing the exercise of their agency. However, on the one hand, the link between increased control of assets and empowerment is often assumed or taken for granted. On the other hand, there is no evidence if these assets are contributing to make marginalised people less dependent on powerful actors within the household and community (e.g. moneylenders, husbands, village authorities, landowners, etc.). This is a crucial precondition for empowerment, as dependency leads people to “*accept the legitimacy of the unequal order*” (Sen 1995) or to “*internalise their subordination*” (Kabeer 2010), thus limiting their ability to conceive themselves as agents.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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