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## Staking Claim to Entitlements under MGNREGA

How can Women Make Their Demands?

**By: Kalyani Raghunathan, Katrina Kosec, Jordan Kyle, Sudha Narayanan, Soumyajit Ray**

*There are internal constraints and structural barriers to women's claim-making under MGNREGA. Supporting more egalitarian decision-making within the village, designing interventions that can help women gain confidence to speak out in public and making officials more responsive could all help.*

*By Kalyani Raghunathan, Katrina Kosec, Jordan Kyle, Sudha Narayanan, and Soumyajit Ray*

“What will I do by going there?”, answered Phoolan Devi from Bolangir district of Odisha, when asked if she attended the *palli* (revenue village) *sabha*. The answer seemed obvious – “Nothing.” After all, it was her husband who took all important decisions at home. But in Odisha, deliberations about assets to be constructed under India's large national workfare programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), typically take place in *palli sabha* meetings. It is here that women like Phoolan Devi can stake a claim to assets that would be useful to them or their families. Yet, most of them do not. What can drive women to exercise that right in ways that benefit themselves and their families?

Many public sector programmes—like MGNREGA—provide entitlements that can provide women with critical resources and improve their livelihoods. Yet, to “claim” these entitlements, citizens must take actions like filing paperwork, attending and speaking up in public meetings, participating in community planning processes, or approaching officials and community leaders. To take these actions, citizens need to both aspire to claim entitlements and be capable of doing so (Kruks-Wisner 2018). While claim-making aspirations reflect beliefs about self-efficacy (or ability to effect change) and about whether the state can and will respond to claims, claim-making capabilities reflect the knowledge and skills which individuals need to make a claim on the state. For example, beneficiaries need to know about the programme and how to complete the formal or informal processes required of them, have access to the relevant functionaries, be willing and able to advocate for themselves, and have the ability to navigate and participate in public spaces.

In many respects, women are at a disadvantage relative to men in claim-making. Women routinely face normative and structural barriers that are likely to limit both their aspirations and their capabilities for claim-making. For example, they often have less mobility, lower knowledge about public programmes, diminished access to assets and decision-making in their homes, lower literacy, and less-developed public speaking skills (Kosec et al., 2024).

**If women are systematically less likely to engage in active claim-making, MGNREGA will be unable to benefit women to its full potential.**

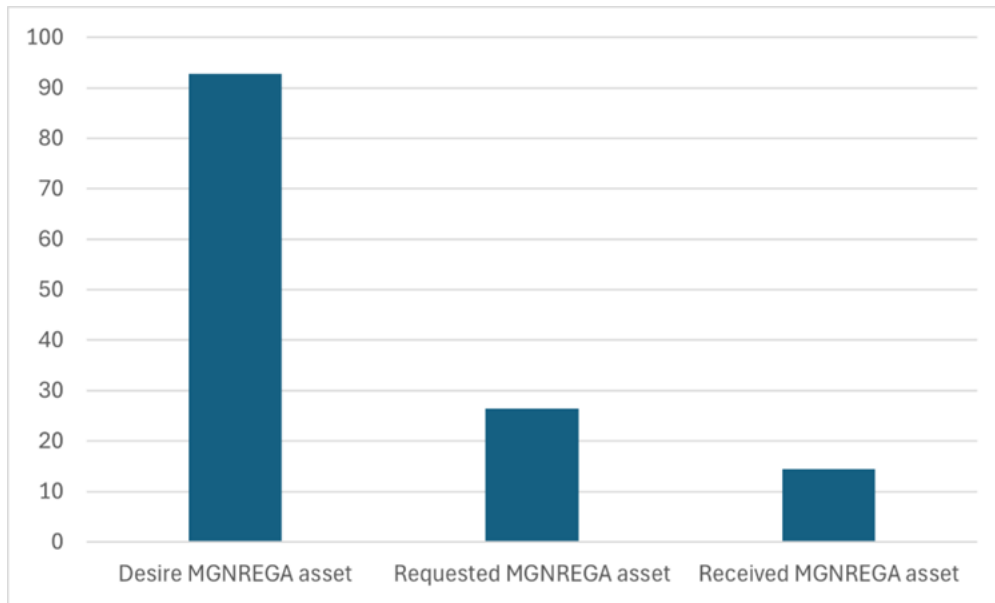
Within MGNREGA, which provides 100 days of work on demand at a stipulated minimum wage and aims to build durable assets through that work, the selection of assets is meant to be participatory. In theory, bottom-up, participatory planning should yield assets that are relevant and valued by the community, contributing to local well-being and livelihoods. Yet, whether MGNREGA can do so depends on who participates within the planning process. If women are systematically less likely to engage in active claim-making, MGNREGA will be unable to benefit women to its full potential.

To understand contextual factors around women's claim-making within MGNREGA, we conducted a mixed methods study in Odisha including both a large-scale quantitative survey of 3,426 women across 230 gram panchayats (GPs) in five districts (Ganjam, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanj, Bolangir, and Rayagada) and an in-depth qualitative study including both men and women from six GPs in three districts. All women in our quantitative survey are MGNREGA job card holders and thus part of the key population that the programme intends to include within the participatory asset selection process. Ideally, women working on MGNREGA job sites should be contributing their ideas on what should be built that could most benefit them and their communities.

Our quantitative survey showed a significant gap between those who wish they had demanded an asset and those who have ever done so. While 92.8% of women desire an MGNREGA asset, only 26.4% have ever requested one, either individually or as part of a group (Figure 1). Even fewer have been successful in their claims. High demand for MGNREGA assets corresponds with other research which

has found that an overwhelming 90% of those who have received assets through the programme find them useful (Ranaware et al. 2015).

Figure 1: Asset demands and successful claims



With such a significant gap between women’s aspirations and their active claim-making, understanding the contextual factors that explain why and when women are likely to make these active demands is critical for ensuring MGNREGA can better deliver benefits for women going forward.



### **Assets under MGNREGA**

The MGNREGA was rolled out in rural areas in three phases between 2006 and 2008 and provides 100 days of unskilled manual work per year at stipulated minimum wages to any rural household that requests it. The programme provided 2.4 billion person-days of work in 2023-24 and received an allocation of Rs 860 billion in the recently released annual Union budget for 2024-25, making it the largest workfare programme in the world.

The programme uses its resources to primarily focus on building rural assets that can serve as the basis for sustainable livelihoods. A pre-approved list of 262 eligible assets is considered, which fall under natural resource management, individual and community assets, rural infrastructure, and common infrastructure for women’s groups. Individual assets are privately owned and built on private lands. Community assets can be public goods, like rural roads for connectivity, or closer to “club goods”, where non-members can be excluded, such as farm ponds for aquaculture leased to and managed by women’s self-help groups (SHGs).

In theory, communities have wide latitude both to recommend which types of assets—whether individual or community, rural infrastructure or natural resource management, and so on—would be most beneficial and to deliberate among the various demands



within the *gram sabha*. Despite the large range of possibilities and the potential these assets have to transform communities and livelihoods, for many, the MGNREGA continues to be viewed as a source of income for days worked, not a pathway to achieve sustainable and remunerative livelihoods. As one woman we spoke to put it, “I do not know that one can demand assets under MGNREGA. I only know about this scheme as I sometimes worked as labourer (...) and got paid 150-200 rupees daily in cash.”

Notably, from a rights perspective, the Act envisions a participatory deliberative process for the selection of assets and their beneficiaries. On Gandhi Jayanti, October 2 each year, a village-level meeting or *gram sabha*, is to be held in every village, marking the start of the asset planning process. In Odisha, a series of ward or revenue-village meetings follow, where community members can raise their demands for assets. These demands are then placed before the *gram sabha* for deliberation by the community, and the list of works for that village agreed upon in a special village townhall meeting held early the next calendar year. Technical estimates of the materials needed, and the number of workdays required are drawn up and a “shelf of works” created.



**Many ways of making claims: Qualitative analysis**

Although MGNREGA spells out a process for requesting assets and deliberating which ones should ultimately be constructed, our research revealed that there are several informal processes in addition to the formal ones through which decisions around assets are made. These range from “top-down” – households being informed that they have been selected as the recipients of an asset – to those that rely on social networks, to more participatory approaches – such as women discussing asset requests with their SHG and placing a collective request. This is consistent with other research in India, which emphasizes the role of informal brokers and processes playing important roles in coordinating development requests from the state (Auerbach 2019; Kruks-Wisner 2018).

Even when asset demands are made and discussed within *gram sabhas*, villages vary widely in how *gram sabha* deliberations are conducted, what is discussed, and how inclusive those discussions are (Sanyal and Rao 2019). It follows, therefore, that the choice of assets to be built and of who will benefit from those assets depends crucially on power dynamics within communities and the inclusivity of decision-making. Our qualitative interviews indicate several possible ways of making claims, both formal and informal, though these differ across men and women. Some men report attending the *palli sabha* meetings to raise demands. Damodar from Bolangir, for example, gets information on the meetings from the ward member and he is a regular attendee. Others approach village functionaries directly. Ajit was told about cashew plantations by the udyan mitra, staff from the horticulture department, and then went to the GP office to register his demand. Madan from Ganjam used his own connections; the agricultural officer happened to be a resident of his relative’s village, so he approached the officer directly at a block level meeting.

Though few women we interviewed found personal success in ‘palli sabha’ meetings, many credited their SHG leadership for successful claim-making on their behalf—often not requiring them to personally attend a ‘palli sabha’ meeting.

For women, these formal channels are often much more formidable. Often, women do not know when and where *palli sabha* meetings are being held, and when they do, they are not always able to attend. A woman in Ganjam said she did not know much about the *palli sabha* or *gram sabha* meetings; her husband attends, but domestic responsibilities prevent her from traveling. Another woman from Bolangir said her husband attends the *palli sabha* without her; when she expressed her interest in attending, her husband resisted. Other women are aware of meetings, but do not attend due to internal barriers and social norms—such as doubts about what they would do, how they would be regarded, or whether they would have any real influence.

Some women do attend the meetings but struggle to voice their demands publicly. “I feel a little bit shy of saying something there [at the *palli sabha*]. I am uneducated and always worry that I might say something wrong,” said Janaki Devi, who received a community water tank. Janaki Devi rarely attends these meetings, reporting that they are male-dominated, and women do not participate actively. Contrary to the spirit of the MGNREGA, the community water tank she received was simply announced by the sarpanch, or village head.

Though few women we interviewed found personal success in *palli sabha* meetings, many credited their SHG leadership for successful claim-making on their behalf—often not requiring them to personally attend a *palli sabha* meeting. For example, Phoolan Devi got a mango plantation because an official visited her SHG—though she was not precisely aware of how the process unfolded. Jigyva Devi similarly received a nutri-garden by asking via her panchayat SHG madam, who helped her with the documents required for submission—whilst flagging that she never attends *palli sabha* meetings, only SHG meetings. Thus, speaking in SHGs and advocating with SHG leadership can be a substitute for engaging formally with local leaders and MGNREGA functionaries.

Many stories documenting these varying pathways to obtaining MGNREGA assets are documented in this [video](#) that highlights instances where women in Odisha have successfully obtained assets.





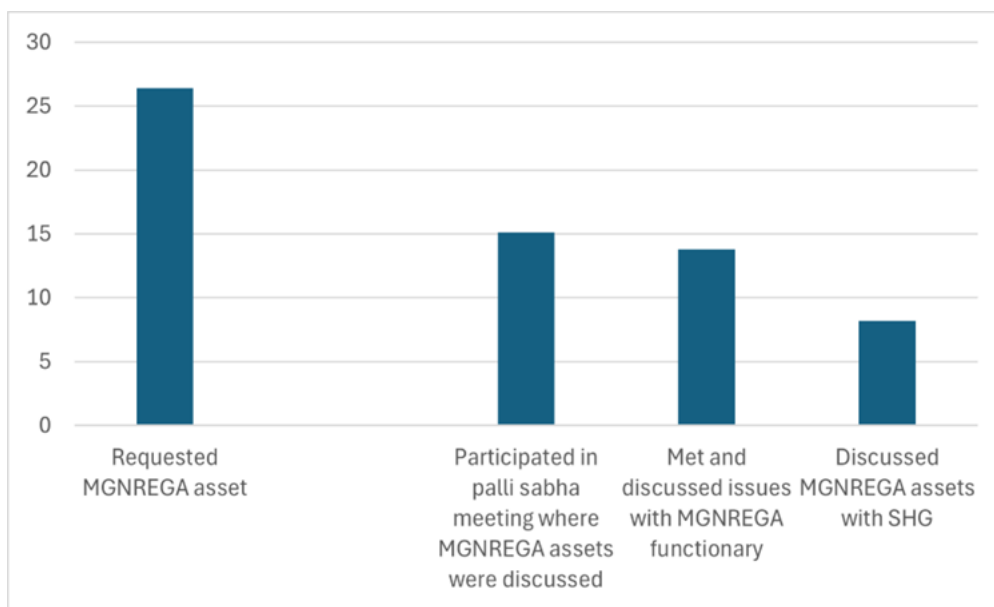
### Investigating the correlates of claim-making

Our quantitative study was conducted in five of the top 10 districts in the state in terms of the number of relevant MGNREGA assets constructed in the five-year-period before our survey. In each GP, we interviewed 15 female respondents from households selected at random from among the list of registered job card holders. All data on number and types of assets and on job cards were obtained from the MGNREGA MIS.

We capture claim-making behaviour in four ways. First, we look at whether the respondent has ever proactively requested an asset under the programme, either individually or as part of a group. This includes instances where women would jointly demand an asset with their husband, for example, or collectively with their SHG. We also look at three measures of how women may make claims based on the findings from our qualitative research: whether the respondent discussed requesting an asset in her SHG in the preceding year, whether she participated in a *palli sabha* meeting to discuss MGNREGA works, and whether she ever met with MGNREGA functionaries to discuss MGNREGA assets.

As shown in Figure 2, 26.4% of respondents have ever requested an asset, either individually or as part of a group. When considering how women may have requested these assets, we find that 15% of respondents have participated in a *palli sabha* meeting where assets were discussed, 13.8% met with the MGNREGA functionary to discuss an issue (whether asset selection specifically or other issues), and only 8.2% have discussed MGNREGA assets with their SHG. While initially surprising that such a small share of women are discussing assets within their SHG given how important this pathway may be to claim-making, fewer than half of respondents were members of SHGs in the first place (only 42%).

**Figure 2: Claim-making activities**



For each of these measures, we investigate their relationship with potential drivers of women’s claim-making. These include (among others) the respondent’s perception of their self-efficacy, their comfort in public speaking, and gender perceptions. We also include measures of socio-economic and social status, such as an indicator for the respondent having the same caste as the sarpanch or the Gram Rozgar Sewak (a key MGNREGA functionary at the GP level) and an indicator for someone in the respondent’s household ever holding an administrative or elected position. Importantly, these covariates allowed us to explore three broad categories of reasons for low claim-making: information asymmetry around processes, external barriers, and internal barriers.



**What do the data show?**

As we saw with Janaki Devi, MGNREGA assets appear to be fairly “top-down,” with a sizeable proportion of our respondents, ranging from 48.4% in Ganjam to 15.2% in Rayagada, saying that officials (as opposed to citizens) determined which assets would be built. Mobilizing village members to demand their entitlements, providing information on on *palli sabha* meetings and on how to request an asset, and active recording and passing on of women’s suggestions were some ideas respondents had for improving their ability to get assets under the programme.

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Our analysis of the correlates of claim-making shows that self-efficacy is not a significant predictor of proactively requesting an asset or participating in a *palli sabha* meeting and is negatively associated with the other two pathway measures. Women with high self-efficacy may not need to ask the SHG or key functionaries to intervene on their behalf.

In contrast, women’s comfort in public speaking is significantly associated with the respondent discussing assets in her SHG, participating in a *palli sabha* meeting to discuss MGNREGA works, and meeting with MGNREGA functionaries to discuss assets. Egalitarian gender views are also a strong predictor of a respondent ever proactively requesting an asset.

Shared caste identity with key functionaries does not play a role in claim-making, but being elected to an administrative position does—perhaps because it improves respondent awareness of procedures and helps expand their networks.

Finally, elite capture in the village seems to act as a significant deterrent to proactive claim-making by women, though it is not related to any of the more informal claim-making pathways, like discussing assets with the SHG. This is important; perceived corruption within community-level institutions could limit the effectiveness of participatory processes by discouraging participants from actively voicing their demands.



## What can we do to improve claim-making?

Our qualitative and quantitative findings point to several internal constraints as well as structural barriers to women’s claim-making under MGNREGA. Supporting more egalitarian decision-making within the village and designing interventions that can help women gain confidence to speak out in public could help, as could interventions to make officials more responsive to women’s demands.

All is not lost, though. Ashima Devi from Mayurbhanj has it all figured out: “My husband accompanies me to the *palli sabha* meeting when he is at home; otherwise, I go to the *palli sabha* (...) with my fellow women neighbours. Recently, I placed a demand for a cattle shed for my 3 cows and 5 goats. The sarpanch heard my demand.”

We hope many more women like Ashima Devi find the courage to voice their demands.

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*Note from the authors: Respondent’s names have been changed to protect their identities. This work is part of an ongoing study into women’s voice and agency in the MGNREGA asset selection process. Readers can access our paper on claim-making [here](#). Based on these initial results, we designed an [information leaflet](#), an [inspirational video](#), and a [skills training manual](#) that we delivered to close to 8000 women in the same districts. The causal impact evaluation for that study is pre-registered [here](#), and we will share results when available.*

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