



**Making a Gender Responsive Urban
Employment Guarantee Scheme**

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UN Women Asia and the Pacific's photostream, flickr

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Context

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures in India have taken a toll on all aspects of life, particularly on livelihoods. While job losses have been observed in both rural and urban sectors, recent figures show that there has been an increase in creation of non-salaried jobs in rural areas, but generation of wage employment in the urban sector has remained a challenge.¹ Over 21 million salaried jobs have been lost in India (out of a base of 86 million overall salaried jobs) between April and August 2020.² A survey by the Azim Premji University suggests that urban areas posted a loss in employment for 8 in 10 workers.³ This evidence points to the fact that urban livelihoods have taken a huge hit due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the ability of the urban sector to create new jobs to compensate for these losses is currently under a cloud.

Women have been disproportionately affected by job losses. A recent report tracking the pandemic's influence on informal work in India suggests that more women were out of work post-lockdown compared to men (about 79 percent of women surveyed, compared to 75 percent of the men).⁴ Such findings are expected as women are overrepresented in the informal and unorganised sectors such as domestic work, construction work, beauty and wellness industry, and sex work, which have been acutely impacted due to lockdowns.

Even in the formal sector, women are more likely to be hired for temporary or part-time positions, making it easier for firms to let them go if there is downsizing and not providing any social security benefits.⁵ This decrease is especially worrying, as female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in India has witnessed a decline since 1990.⁶ Declining female labour force participation in economies is known to lead to several negative externalities including a reduction in household financial, food and nutrition security, as well as a direct reduction in consumption expenditure of households, thereby creating a drag on the growth of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which depends largely on consumption expenditure.⁷

Lessons from states implementing urban employment schemes

Given the dire consequences induced by the pandemic and its severe impacts in urban areas, several policy experts and analysts have opined that this an opportune time for governments to step in and ensure some semblance of livelihood guarantee in urban areas, much like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) does for rural areas.⁸ Evidence shows that MGNREGA has mostly led to salutary impacts on women's health, food security, consumption, nutrition while promising equal wages and having a range of multiplier effects on the local economy.⁹ The Act has also increased work opportunities for women with almost 55 percent of all person-days created over the period 2015-17 having been availed by women.¹⁰ Additionally, data show that the programme has helped stem the decline in women's labour force participation.¹¹ However, challenges still remain in ensuring that the programme is truly gender responsive, as evident in the wage gaps that still exist in certain states.¹²

Given the largely positive effects of MGNREGA on women workers, many policy experts have recommended designing and implementing an urban employment guarantee programme to alleviate the problems faced especially by urban women workers, particularly those in the informal economy.

Recognising such a need for support in urban areas, various state governments have stepped in with their own urban employment guarantee schemes. The details of these schemes are provided in the table below.

¹ <https://www.theweek.in/news/biz-tech/2020/08/18/jobs-are-back-but-they-are-in-rural-india-and-not-in-cities.html>

² <https://cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=2020-09-07%2017:57:52&msec=996>

³ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/6-out-of-10-workers-lost-jobs-in-rural-india-during-lockdown-8-out-of-10-in-urban-areas-survey>

⁴ https://www.actionaidindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Workers-in-the-time-of-Covid-19_ebook1.pdf, Pg.24

⁵ https://www.actionaidindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Workers-in-the-time-of-Covid-19_ebook1.pdf, Pg.xxiii

⁶ 24.8% in 2020 as per a United Nations Global Compact India Study.

⁷ <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-cant-be-atmanirbhar-without-bailing-women-out/442894/>

⁸ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/editorial/a-case-for-an-urban-mgnrega/article31680518.ece>

⁹ <http://www.environmentportal.in/files/Empowerment%20Effects%20of%20the%20NREGS.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6548.pdf>

¹¹ https://nrega.nic.in/Circular_Archive/archive/MGNREGA_PerformanceReport27June2016.pdf

¹² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-to-peg-mgnrega-wages-to-inflation-in-bid-to-hike-incomes/article29443145.ece>

State scheme name	Initiation date	Scheme features	Reasons for implementing scheme
Odisha Urban Wage Employment Initiative	April 18, 2020	The programme envisages immediate execution of all labour-intensive projects in the ULBs in the state, with an allocation of Rs 100 crore, to be spent on wages of workers working on these projects during April to September. ¹³	Loss of income and livelihood faced by nearly one-third of the state's urban population (nearly 20 lakh people).
Himachal Pradesh Mukhya Mantri Shahri Ajeevika Guarantee Yojana	May 16, 2020	120 days of minimum assured unskilled employment to every household of the urban local body areas ¹⁴ . All adult members of a household can register and are eligible to work under the scheme. They should be residing within the jurisdiction of the urban local bodies and willing to do unskilled work at projects being executed or in sanitation services provided by the urban local bodies. ¹⁵	Unemployment rates in the state reached figures as high as 28.2 percent in May, 2020. ¹⁶
Jharkhand Mukhyamantri SHRAMIK (Shahri Rozgar Manjuri For Kamgar) Yojana	Received Cabinet approval on 8 September 2020.	Providing work for 100 days (person-days) a year for 5 lakh poor urban unskilled workers.	5.3 lakh migrant workers returning to the state till September 21, 2020. ¹⁷

¹³ <https://citizenmatters.in/bhubaneswar-odisha-urban-wage-employment-initiative-18080>

¹⁴ <http://ud.hp.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-05/New-Doc-2020-05-16-11-49-29.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.bloombergqint.com/bq-blue-exclusive/indian-states-attempt-urban-job-guarantee-schemes-amid-covid-crisis>

¹⁶ <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/unemployment-in-himachal-pradesh-increased-26-0-pct-points-rose-to-28-2-in-may-2020-cmie-11590970251562.html>

¹⁷ <https://pqars.nic.in/annex/252/AU1239.pdf>

Apart from these states, Kerala has been implementing the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme (AUEGS) since 2011. This scheme ensures livelihood security in urban areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.¹⁸ The AUEGS has been successful in creating work opportunities for women. It has also been recognised as a significant scheme for fighting unemployment created by the pandemic, with Kerala sanctioning an additional Rs. 41 crore towards the scheme as a measure to create more employment.¹⁹

While the urban employment schemes of Odisha, Jharkhand and Himachal Pradesh are fairly recent, the experience with Kerala's AUEGS has shown an increasing propensity for the scheme to create work since its inception. Even though, there have been complaints of shortage of funds by certain municipal corporations²⁰, the reported number of person-days created shows that the scheme has benefitted the intended target groups, especially women, with 94,783 women benefitting under the scheme in 2019-20 alone.²¹

The need for an urban employment guarantee scheme (UEGS) has also recently been recognised by the Union Government, with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs recently making a statement regarding the Ministry's intention to launch such a scheme. However, plans for such a scheme may have been set aside for now due to scarcity of funds.²²

Advocates for a UEGS argue that such a scheme would provide multiple benefits and alleviation measures during a crisis such as now. Firstly,

it would provide livelihood options to over 7 percent unemployed persons in urban areas. This would not only help in their subsistence but also assist in increasing consumption levels. As per the quarterly national income estimate²³, private consumption has contracted by 27 percent, and given that consumption expenditure forms over 50 percent of India's GDP, there is a urgent need to take up measures to get consumption levels back to pre-pandemic levels. The increase in consumption expenditure of households benefitting under MGNREGA is an example of the benefits that employment guarantee schemes could offer. Evidence on consumption expenditure shows that unsuccessful MGNREGA job seekers had a lower energy intake (2199 kcal/ capita/day) as well as lower protein intake (67.6 g/ capita/day) compared to the successful MGNREGA job seekers (2332 kcal/capita/day and 81.4 g/capita/day, respectively).²⁴

Secondly, an urban employment guarantee scheme would potentially provide an opportunity to increase the FLFPR in urban areas, much like it has in rural areas. Close to 50 percent (or more) workers under MGNREGA are women²⁵, who participate in the scheme on account of factors like insufficient agriculture work, migration of men to cities, lack of skills to do other work, illiteracy, or the availability of wages higher than other available options in rural areas.²⁶

Thirdly, the works undertaken under the UEGS may additionally create assets that improve the town's ecology and quality of public services, which have a direct impact on productivity and quality of life.²⁷

¹⁸ <https://cochinmunicipalcorporation.kerala.gov.in/web/guest/ayyankali-project>

¹⁹ <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/govt-sanctions-rs-41-cr-for-ayyankali-urban-employment-guarantee-scheme-1.4713818>

²⁰ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/workers-in-city-bear-the-brunt-of-patchy-implementation-of-job-scheme/article30926450.ece>

²¹ <http://urbanaffairskerala.org/index.php/mis-report2/aeugs-report>

²² <https://theprint.in/india/governance/modi-govt-stares-at-shortage-of-funds-for-mgnregs-urban-variant-drops-idea-for-now/517715/>

²³ http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/press_release/PRESS_NOTE-Q1_2020-21.pdf

²⁴ <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/152075/files/7-P-Kumar.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/v80j9EwDz6oykIST8ebqMM/Reversing-womens-decline-in-the-Indian-labour-force.html>

²⁶ https://himachal.nic.in/WriteReadData/1892s/15_1892s/1511325913.pdf

²⁷ https://cse.azimpremjuniiversity.edu.in/wpcontent/uploads/2019/04/SWI2019_Urban_Job_Guaranteee.pdf

Global experience of similar programmes

Besides experiences coming in from Indian states, the design of a UEGS may also draw upon some global experiences of similar schemes. Argentina introduced Plan Jefes, in response to its 2001 currency crisis, which offered voluntary job opportunities to unemployed heads of households in community projects and was federally funded but locally administered. While the programme did not solve Argentina's macroeconomic problems, it did ensure certain socio-economic advances like increase in household consumption expenditure, targeting women and reinsertion of programme participants in the formal labour market.²⁸

South Africa has also implemented a public works programme which creates paid work opportunities for large numbers of unemployed people, primarily women and youth. It provides them with both skills and work experience. The programme is designed to meet the lack of services in the early childhood development and home based care sectors (among others). A second positive feature is the inclusion of care work. Care, usually of children, sick people, and the elderly, is recognised as an important public good, that contributes to the well-being of society. Thirdly, the cash stipends under the programme contribute to household incomes and therefore, improve consumption related to health and nutritional outcomes.²⁹

Key proposals under discussion in India

In India, proposals for an UEGS have been led by experts like Jean Drèze and institutions such as the Azim Premji University.

Jean Drèze, for example, suggests a Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET) scheme³⁰, wherein state governments issue

'job stamps' and distribute them to approved institutions – schools, colleges, government departments, health centres, municipalities, neighbourhood associations, urban local bodies, etc. Each job stamp can be converted into one person-day of work within a specified period, with the approved institution arranging the work and the government paying the wages (statutory minimum) directly to the worker's account on presentation of job stamps with a due-form work certificate from the employer. This scheme also proposes a skilling component and whenever a skilled worker is employed, an assistant (unskilled) worker could be mandatorily employed as well, to impart an element of training and skill formation to the scheme. This sort of scheme ensures demand driven employment as well as capacity augmentation of public institutions which are in need of upkeep.

The scheme proposed by Azim Premji University, suggests 100 days of guaranteed work at Rs. 500 a day and is applicable to all cities and towns with a population less than 1 million (10 lakhs). It suggests a work list, to be implemented by the relevant urban local body, which includes public works such as building and maintenance of roads, footpaths, and bridges; creation, rejuvenation, and monitoring of urban commons like water bodies, forest land, wetlands, and parks; apprenticeship in public institutions like municipal offices, public schools, and health centres; and provisioning of care for children and the elderly. This scheme would likely ensure a basic sustenance for a large portion of unemployed urban workers due to the relatively high prescribed wage, provide for improvement in urban infrastructure as well as reduce urban ecological stress, while at the same time improve public services in urban areas.

²⁸ http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_534.pdf

²⁹ <https://theconversation.com/how-to-make-south-africas-public-works-programme-work-for-women-79049>

³⁰ [https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/poverty-inequality/duet-a-proposal-for-an-urban-work-programme.html#:~:text=Jean%20Dr%C3%A8ze%2C%20who%20took%20part,and%20Training\)%20for%20urban%20areas.&text=It%20is%20meant%20to%20create,urban%20unemployment%20and%20urban%20decay](https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/poverty-inequality/duet-a-proposal-for-an-urban-work-programme.html#:~:text=Jean%20Dr%C3%A8ze%2C%20who%20took%20part,and%20Training)%20for%20urban%20areas.&text=It%20is%20meant%20to%20create,urban%20unemployment%20and%20urban%20decay)

Designing an urban employment guarantee scheme with a gender lens

Given the possibility of the rollout of an UEGS, this brief identifies a few principles that can be considered while designing the scheme. These principles are aimed at ensuring that the design of a future urban employment scheme is gender responsive from the outset.

1. Nature of jobs

The nature of jobs provided under the scheme should be acceptable as much to women as to men. Thus, while work in sectors like construction maybe more suited for men (nearly 30 percent of construction workers are women³¹, but usually only in less meaningful roles³²), there should be provisions made for works that are more suited to urban women's aspirations and abilities. This could be achieved by providing for a list of work appropriate for women as well as a list of community assets that reduce gender vulnerabilities, e.g. community sanitation facilities, planting of trees near slums for shade, assistance in healthcare/educational facilities, running of community kitchens, among other works. Aspirations of women living in urban areas might differ from women in rural areas, which should be accounted for when offering jobs under such a scheme.

2. Geographical distribution of jobs

Proximity to the workplace is a critical factor for women in urban areas in deciding whether to take up a job.³³ Travel takes away time from domestic unpaid work and there are challenges of safety while using public transport in cities across India that act as a barrier for women. Therefore, jobs under any urban guarantee scheme should be available around the city so that women can avail work at a place near their residence. To meet this goal, a decentralised work provision system may be considered (as suggested by the DUET plan).

3. Safety provisions

An UEGS would benefit women more if safety concerns in urban spaces are addressed concurrently with the implementation of such a scheme. Some of the measures suggested by experts include improved street lighting, wider pavements to walk on, a well-developed public transportation system which assures safe last mile connectivity, a centrally controlled CCTV network, emergency response mobile-based applications like Delhi Police's Himmat app etc.

4. Equality of wages

Equal wages as those promised to men is one of the key reasons that attracts women workers to MGNREGA works in rural areas. This sort of equality must also be maintained in any urban employment guarantee programme across jobs. As the nature of jobs under UEGS is likely to be more varied than MGNREGA, publication of standard rates for jobs offered under this scheme could be helpful.

5. Flexibility in timings

Various studies have shown that women prefer forms of employment that allow them more flexibility at work as they juggle paid work and unpaid work during a given day. This was also highlighted by a report on women gig economy workers who reportedly prefer to participate in platform economy versus fixed forms of employment.³⁵ Given this evidence, experts have suggested including elements of a gig economy model in the UEGS, giving flexibility to women to work certain number of days per week or getting remunerated for the number of jobs done rather than being paid on a per day basis. The proposed DUET model allows building in such flexibility into the scheme.

6. Child care facilities

To increase urban FLFPR, Japan has built almost half a million government-funded crèches to help young mothers re-join the workforce.³⁶ The

³¹ <http://www.businessworld.in/article/Women-Workforce-In-The-Male-Dominated-Construction-Industry-In-India/09-02-2019-167009/>

³² <https://thewire.in/women/women-construction-workers>

³³ <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/jyFgs0yWYfgFSukwv8NcyH/Is-access-to-transport-slowing-participation-of-women-in-Ind.html>

³⁴ https://www.worldwidejournals.com/paripex/recent_issues_pdf/2016/October/October_2016_1477993119_135.pdf

³⁵ <https://iwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IWWAGE-Gig-Economy-Report.pdf>

³⁶ <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/v80I9EwDz6oykIST8ebqMM/Reversing-womens-decline-in-the-Indian-labour-force.html>

Indian government may utilise a similar strategy including the building of quality crèches and day-care centres under the proposed UEGS, especially as not all urban areas have quality Anganwadi-cum-crèches available.

7. Facilities at the workplace

Another reason cited for high participation of women in MGNREGA in rural areas is availability of worksite facilities such as potable drinking water, first-aid services, shade facilities, toilets etc. Experts have also suggested strict implementation of prevention of sexual harassment (POSH) guidelines by worksite managers, and making workers aware of their rights under the POSH Act.³⁷

Conclusion

An Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme that draws on the experience of other states in India and from global contexts, can help address the growing concerns around declining FLFPR and increase employment opportunities for urban women if it applies a gender lens from the outset. Drawing on data and evidence, the principles outlined above are aimed at ensuring that the scheme not only achieves the goal of creating jobs, but leads to equal work opportunities and wages for both men and women in urban areas.



Image credit:
UN Women Asia and the Pacific's photostream, flickr

³⁷ Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013

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