

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH MGNREGS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Abstract

The study is based on women's empowerment through livelihood and income generation activities, particularly in rural India where women's participation in the labour force is notably pronounced, but they are often concentrated in unpaid, low-skilled work with arduous conditions and limited social protection. Their contribution to family well-being is often undervalued placing them at the periphery of recognition. This analysis unveils their pivotal role in the burgeoning transformative economy. The study underscores the need for balanced gender participation in MGNREGS, advocating for gender equality and consistent minimum wages. It navigates the changing landscape of employment patterns. Conclusively, this comprehensive analysis affirms MGNREGS as a pivotal mechanism for empowering women, manifesting as more than just an employment programme. It demonstrates how the programme fosters a transformative shift by addressing deeply ingrained gender disparities, enhancing women's economic contributions, and advancing their role as dynamic agents of change within rural communities. Through an in-depth exploration of women's participation and the associated socio-economic impact, this study contributes a holistic perspective to the ongoing discourse on women's empowerment through MGNREGS.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Socio-Economic Impact, MGNREGS,

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I. INTRODUCTION

“With more than a decade of implementation and a wealth of data at hand, the symbiotic relationship between MGNREGS and women empowerment comes under scrutiny, unravelling nuanced insights into the programme’s impact on bridging gender dispiriting and fostering socio-economic upliftment.”

The traditional notion that women are inherently responsible for domestic duties persists in society. Even as women increasingly in income-generating activities, they often continue to bear the primary burden of household chores even after their jobs. It’s imperative to acknowledge that economic progress cannot be achieved by disregarding the participation of women who constitute half of the population in the workforce. Empowering women involves granting them complete autonomy encompassing social, economic, political, and legal rights across all spheres. The disparity in gender roles within the workforce is influenced by various societal and cultural factors. Unfortunately, women's empowerment lagged except in certain developed countries (Rajalakshmi V, 2017). Hence, this study focused on women's empowerment and contribution through livelihood and income generation activities. Women's participation in the labour force is noticeably more than men's across developing and emerging countries. Rural women are more into unpaid low-skilled work with poor working conditions, long working hours, less payment, and less social protection. They are mostly concentrated under recognised contributions to the family members which indicates they are mostly undervalued. Whether they are most active in the informal rural economy far less than men in direct engagement of rural wage employment such as both agriculture or non-non-agriculture activities.

Women engaged in rural economic activities are deprived of getting wages equal to men. More women are the key players in household-based livelihood outcomes such as bidi making, paper packet making, sewing threat making, etc. It has been seen that rural women often manage households and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. They play key roles as the food producers and mandated supporting hand of agriculture-based family enterprises in rural households along with maintaining the stability of the family’s food supply in times of economic hardship. Eventually, they are also involved in the major responsibility of taking care of other members as such fetching water and firewood, taking care of basic education and health issues, etc. Therefore, rural women are being key agents of a growing, transformational economy (Rani, 2021). They must have more access to the resources which constitute empowerment capabilities and livelihood improvement. Although a majority of women in rural areas still seem invisible in this arterial rural lifeline and several studies on women empowerment have pointed out that MGNREGS has significant positivity but there have also been various lacks and corruption in implementation.

The raise has given the largest employment programme MGNREGS in human history by its design of a bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting, right-based approach. Since 2006 this programme has had incredible reach in villages and hence the programme is a demand-driven programme where the provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage seekers. One of the visible indicators is that women's participation in MGNREGS is more than in any other employment generation scheme. The reason behind huge participation across the country depends on various aspects such as not being away from home, wage priority, traditional women’s role touch-up, etc. (Kar, 2013). The Act insists that

priority shall be given to women to induce empowerment and make them financially independent. The programme ensures that a minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries should be women and make them frontline workers in the rural reconstruction process. However, ideally, there should be gender equality in participation in MGNREGS including upholding the rights of women and ensuring the minimum wage every year.

In India when people are migrating to urban and shifting occupations from the agriculture sector to another sector still agriculture remains a mainstay of the rural economy and employs half of the nation's population. Day by day spreading of education and awareness of such kinds of jobs raise priorities, especially among the youth. From 1999 to 2010 has been an incredible rise in the shift to rural non-farm livelihood among both males and females. One of the major changes has been that agriculture has also become dependent on mechanization in huge part which makes the small landholder and labourer vulnerable. The majority here switch to the construction sector or else move to the urban body and become unskilled labourers (Verick, 2016).

In general, several studies state that the participation of women in the workforce and multiple social practices have a direct tight correlation with each other. However, a decent work environment is still a big issue. This is not surprising that such a hilarious work environment, especially for low-wageworkers. Workers are suffering from many health and mental issues to adjust to the environment. MGNREGS is one of the public sector programmes where people can be self-selected and have to work as hard labour with a low wage. Most of the workers are unskilled those belong to the extremely economically deprived situation. This programme targeted the women of the half of beneficiaries to strengthen them economically in return for rural asset creation through their hard labour work. MGNREGS is a self-sustainable model that works toward village reconstruction by the people's choice (Ahmed, 2015). Assuring women of the villages as the main most targeted beneficiary segment, this right-based intervention MGNREGS is explicitly concerned with social equity in the rural labour force with the other along with positive impacts such as economic empowerment of women, economic decision-making for families, etc.

The act creates the legal and institutional framework for the right to work and right wage parity though at a minimum range. Women are being benefited by the law through ensuring work every year which will be in the locality and also stipulating onsite child care for children under 6 years of age. Moreover, another discussion, women workers' wages are being surpassed than the real wage The hypothesis is that MGNREGS can contribute to economic and social empowerment more effectively manner by increasing incentives for women's labour market.

II. DIFFERENT REGIONAL ASSESSMENTS OF MGNREGS

According to the report of the Ministry of Rural Development, women's participation rate in FY 2021-22 was 54.54%. Based on the ILO report assessment women's labour force participation has a positive direct correlation with the female proportion in parliament and also has a strong correlation that female labour force participation is higher in countries that have higher structural transformation (Verick R. C., 2014). As per NSS data at all national level status has found that women's job card registration is 50 per cent where as male registration was 71 per cent and even in states of Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar

Pradesh, Assam, and Jammu & Kashmir women participation percentage is even lower than 30 per cent. Issues at the ground level are much different than at the national level 17 percent of women with registered job card holders sought job card holders but did not get any job whereas the percentage for males was 20. It indicates that the exclusion of females is comparatively less than males (Singh, 2018).

The southern states have more participation in MGNREGS than the northern states. The reason behind the high rate of women participation in southern states is cultural acceptance of female participation in work, influence, and awareness among SHGs and Effective institutions of state and local level government bodies. Though women's participation has grown in states such as West Bengal (28 per cent), Assam (28 per cent), and UP (18 per cent) the gap is especially marked in J&K which is 9 per cent (Sen, 2017). Women's participation largely increased in the agriculture sector than men and men involved in non-agriculture wage employment in rural areas. 45 per cent of MGNREGS participating women were not paid labourers before implementing the programme. Women working in MGNREGS are slightly older and non-educated women of villages the majority belong to Dalits are Adibashi background (Desai, 2018). A majority of the respondents are women but their households are still headed by men. Even the amount they earn is very low, only Rs. 3000 per month. This scheme also enhances the social skills of women such as communication, participation, and mobility. Women have become habituated to a saving culture through bank accounts, RD, FD, etc. Certain drawbacks also exist that women are not satisfied with low pay and less number of working days. No payment increment for a long time (Kiruthika, 2017). In terms of economic empowerment women are getting enhanced economic security, they invest based on their own needs and can support the family. It also helps to invest in children's higher education which results in the future security of the next generation (K. Keerthi, 2016).

III. WOMEN LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION STATUS IN MGNREGS AND ITS IMPACT

As constituted MGNREGS ensures women's participation in the development process. The participation rate is fixed at 33 per cent. At all Indian levels, 17 per cent of females are registered as job card holders and the corresponding 20 per cent is male. The women labour force participation rate of women for MGNREGS is 697 per 1000 which is more than double that of non-card holders 292 per 1000. MGNREGS has a direct correlation with the unemployment rate. Unemployment among non-card holders is 39.92 per cent which is eight times higher than job card holders (4.59%) (Singh, 2018). Women empowerment and its particular economic empowerment can give the possibility to equal status of women in a male-dominated society.

IV. MGNREGS AND RURAL WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Gender is the unavoidable factor to push the economic growth of the nation. Since the dawn of human history, women have been contributing to economic productivity but still, it's observed that women are affected more by poverty due to household discrimination. Despite several provisions in the Indian constitution the reality of tough deprivation and degradation for women. However, the age-old mindset of families is the reason behind it considering women as the property of men. The initiative of inclusive growth can be achieved by gender

quality and the prosperity of rural women. The eleventh five-year plan concerns to conventional way to look at women's activeness in all sectors (Bhattacharyya). Then a major initiative taken to a five-year plan to raise the level of socio-economic status of the rural people under the Ministry of Rural Development is the MGNREGS. Certain provisions that have a major objective to improve a particular woman's status are;

- One-third of the beneficiaries are women.
- Allowing children facilities at the worksite for safety reasons.
- No gender discrimination on the ground in providing employment and wages.
- This is a policy response of the government of India to the situation of poverty and inequality.

V. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While MGNREGS has shown remarkable success in generating employment and enhancing rural livelihoods, the extent of women's participation and their empowerment within the programme remains a critical concern. MGNREGS is not only to provide employment but also to empower marginalized sections particularly women by promoting their socio-economic inclusion. However, despite the programme's intent, gender disparities persist in terms of participation rate, wage differentials, and decision-making role in MGNREGS sites.

One of the major challenges is the social and cultural norms that often restrict women's mobility and autonomy, limiting their ability to access and engage in MGNREGS work. Deep-rooted gender biases and power dynamics within rural households and communities can further hinder women's participation which results in their exclusion from the decision-making process related to work allocation and wage negotiation.

Moreover, MGNREGS aims to enhance women's empowerment, but its transformative potential is hindered by the prevalence of gendered roles and limited access to training and skill development opportunities. Women's ability to fully leverage MGNREGS for their socio-economic advancement is constrained by inadequate access to information, resources, and support systems.

VI. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are the specific socio-cultural norms and practices that act as barriers to women's full participation and empowerment within MGNREGS even after so many years of this scheme started? And how do they vary across different regions?
2. How does the interaction between women's participation in MGNREGS and their roles within the household and community influence their overall empowerment and socio-economic status?
3. What policy recommendation can be proposed to enhance women's participation, empowerment, and socio-economic inclusion within MGNREGS, taking into consideration the complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors?

VII. OBJECTIVES

MGNREGS was designed with the central goal of fostering women's empowerment within both the economic and social realms. However numerous research endeavours have revealed that women continue to face disparities in their participation in the economic and societal decision-making process. The anticipated strides in achieving women's empowerment have not materialized as envisaged. This study sheds light on the underlying factors contributing to this social phenomenon as well as addresses contemporary challenges that serve as an impediment to the realization of women's empowerment objective facilitated by MGNREGS.

- To examine the socio-cultural norms and practices prevalent in diverse regions of India that impede women's full engagement and empowerment within MGNREGS and elucidate the variations in these barriers.
- To understand the dynamic interplay between women's participation in MGNREGS and their roles within the household and community, exploring how this interaction influences their overall empowerment and socio-economic status.
- To identify certain innovative suggestions and recommendations to address the issue of women's participation and the challenges they face in the context of empowerment.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this paper is designed to provide a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of women's participation in workforce in India. Specially within the context of MGNREGS. This section outlines various component of the research methodology including data analysis, sampling, research design etc.

1. Research Design:

- The study utilizes a quantitative research design to analyse secondary data and draw meaningful insights.
- A cross-sectional research approach was used to study the secondary data of various time periods to assess the current status of women's participation and its impact.

2. Data Collection:

- **Secondary Data:** The primary source of data for this research is secondary data obtained from government reports, academic papers, and relevant publications. This includes data on MGNREGS participation, employment patterns, wages, and socio-economic indicators.
- **Review of Literature:** Extensive review of existing research papers, reports, and studies related to women's participation in MGNREGS that provide a strong theoretical foundation and references for the analysis.

3. Sampling:

- This study relies on secondary data, no specific sampling strategies are employed. The research aims to collect and analyse all available and relevant data pertaining to women's participation in MGNREGS.

4. Data Analysis:

- **Descriptive Analysis:** to provide an overview of women's participation and the challenges that they are facing with different consequences, this study is based on a descriptive method to summarize key data points.
- **Comparative Analysis:** This is to be conducted to assess variations in women's participation across different states, religions, and demographic factors.
- **Content Analysis:** For the literate review, content analysis is used to identify themes, trends, and gaps in existing research.

IX. FINDINGS & ASSESSMENT

1. **Participation Rate & Correlation:** The report of the Ministry of Rural Development indicates that in the fiscal year 2021-22, women's participation is significantly increasing, considering the multifaceted challenges that women often face. An ILO report suggests a positive correlation between women's labour force participation and their representation in parliamentary bodies emphasizing the importance of empowering women politically to drive broader societal change. The correlation between women's labour force participation and structural transformation underscores the role of economic growth and modernization in enhancing women's participation in the workforce.
2. **Disparities in Job Card Registration:** National Sample Survey (NSS) data reveals that women's job card registration is at 50%, while male registration is notably higher at 71%. Certain states including Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Odisha, Bihar, Utter Pradesh, Assam, and Jammu & Kashmir witness women's participation rates falling below 30%. This gap signifies the need for targeted interventions in this region.
3. **Challenges in Job Card Utilization:** At the ground level, issues arise in the utilization of job card holders who sought employment opportunities but did not receive any job, as opposed to 20% of their male counterparts. This indicates a relatively lower rate of job exclusions for females.
4. **Regional Disparities:** KapilMeena and Vinod Sen's research highlights regional variations in participation rates within the MGNREGS programme. Southern states exhibit higher female participation due to factors like cultural acceptance, influence from Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and effective local government institutions. States like West Bengal, Assam, and Utter Pradesh have shown improvements while Jammu & Kashmir lags at 9%.
5. **Sectoral Shifts in Employment:** Women's participation in agriculture-related work has seen significant growth compared to men. Non-agricultural wage employment is more

common among men in rural areas. Notably, 45% of women participating in MGNREGS were previously unpaid labourers and looking for jobs in other sectors, suggesting a positive impact on their economic engagement.

6. **Demographic and Social Background:** The research by Desai (2018) highlights that women engaged in MGNREGS are often comparatively older and less educated, with a significant representation of Dalit and Adiwashi communities.
7. **Household Dynamics:** E. Kirthika's study underscores that while many women are active participants, their households are still headed by men. The low monthly earnings, around Rs. 3000/- demonstrate economic challenges. However, the MGNREGS scheme contributes to enhancing women's social skills, mobility, and financial habits through savings in bank accounts.
8. **Drawbacks and Concerns:** Despite the positive impacts, certain drawbacks persist. Women express dissatisfaction with low pay and fewer working days. Payment increments have been stagnant over time, raising concern about the sustainability of the scheme's benefits.
9. **Economic Empowerment:** Women's economic empowerment through MGNREGS translates into enhanced economic security. This empowerment allows them to invest according to their needs and support their families. Moreover, it enables them to invest in their children's higher education, ensuring the future security of the next generation.

X. SUGGESTIONS

- To bolster the impact of MGNREGS, local Panchayats are urged to proactively disseminate knowledge within their communities. Especially, efforts must focus on awareness generation about their rights, entitlements, and programme provisions.
- Collaborative endeavours involving NGOs hold immense potential in this regard, but their current involvement remains limited. To fortify this aspect and enhance the effectiveness of rights-oriented MGNREGS, NGOs and SHGs should play a pivotal role in spreading awareness initiatives aimed at women.
- Furthermore, a pivotal shift is advocated, whereby women assume a central role in MGNREGS planning, execution, and assessment. This paradigm requires the active participation of multiple stakeholders, ranging from Anganwadi workers and health practitioners to SHGs, NGOs village committees, cooperatives, and other grassroots entities. A critical modification is the issuance of job cards exclusively to male members, contributing to women's dependency on them for accessing employment opportunities. Rectifying this each worker, regardless of gender, should possess an individual job card to empower women to independently engage with the programme.
- Addressing financial autonomy, the establishment of joint bank accounts is proposed, enabling women to withdraw funds in alignment with their requirements and thereby reducing their reliance on their male counterparts.
- Inclusive provisions should be devised to cater to vulnerable groups including widows, women with disabilities, and single or abandoned women within households. Along with this recommendation for mobile crèche at the workplace to ensure better childcare

standards for workers. Additionally, it advocates for the extension of reservation quotas to Dalit women and other vulnerable communities.

XI. CONCLUSION

MGNREGS has emerged as a potent catalyst for empowering women, driven by its provisions tailored to their needs. The government initiative has effectively targeted an area that had remained untouched by societal shifts for an extended period. That scheme's inception has brought about favourable changes in women's participation within the MGNREGS framework. However concurrent challenges persist, imposing limitations on women's progression toward empowerment through employment avenues.

Despite the stride made in enabling women's access to work and income, the hindrance encountered must not erode the hard-earned advancements or deviate from MGNREGS's core objectives. It became imperative to safeguard these achievements while addressing implementation issues that could jeopardize that programme's transformative impact.

In this context, women's concerted efforts can play a pivotal role in surrounding short-term obstacles to their employment and participation, ultimately diving into the overarching goal of attaining gender equality. To achieve sustained progress, a combination of heightened awareness and consistent public initiative is paramount.

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