

The Impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme on Women Empowerment: A Case Study of the Chistipur-II Gram Panchayat in Purba Medinipur District of West Bengal

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Abstract: *The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 is regarded as a path-breaking legislation in respect of women empowerment in rural India. The Act provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members willing to do unskilled manual work and also ensures that a minimum of one third of total person days are to be generated with labour contribution of women. The Act also mandates for decent working condition and equal payment of wages for both women and men surely motivate the rural womenfolk to participate in the scheme. The present study empirically analyzes the impact of MGNREGS on the process of women empowerment and shows that a socio-economic change of the status of women is gradually taking place in our patriarchal village society with the participation of women in the scheme. The study also identifies the obstacles on the way of meaningful participation of women in the scheme and finally gives suggestions to address these problems and also to create a better village society based on gender equality and justice.*

Key words: MGNREGS, women empowerment, gender equality and justice.

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Introduction

Subordination of women is a fundamental feature of the patriarchal society. Patriarchy creates hierarchy in societal relations and interactions, where men stand at the top and women at the bottom. In the equation of power formulation, in every sphere from family to state, women has been offered very marginal role to play, even sometimes they are deprived from enjoying the human rights in a minimal extent. In the Human Development report of UNO (United Nations of Organization), women have been identified as the 'world's largest excluded category'(Datta, April 2002-March 2003). But, gender equality and justice or the equal treatment of women at par men is utmost essential for the success of democracy in any state of the world. A bird cannot fly only with one wing; it needs both the two wings for its smooth and swift flying and also reaches to the destination. Similarly, it is argued that no society can progress much more ignoring the development half of its population i.e.; women. Thus, gender equality and justice has become a key issue in the policy formulation process of any democratic country of the world for its effective running.

MGNREGA and the scope of women empowerment

Since independence, the policy makers of Indian state have been considering different ways for improving the socio-economic condition of women in our patriarchal society. They initiated different rural welfare programmes to make free the poor women from poverty and vulnerability in life. One such women friendly programme is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The Parliament of India passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in September, 2005 and the scheme came into force on 2nd February, 2006. This is regarded as a path-breaking legislation in respect of women empowerment in rural India. One of the key goals of the Act and the scheme (MGNREGS) is to make strengthening the process of empowerment of marginalized sections, especially women. For the purpose of ensuring social protection to these vulnerable people, the scheme provides guaranteed employment opportunity. The Act provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural house hold whose adult members willing to do unskilled manual work. And thus, it recognizes the right to work of the poorest people in rural India. This attempt, in fact, is consistent with the Article 41 of our Indian Constitution that directs the state to ensure to all citizens the right to work. Thus, employment is provided under the scheme to the rural poor including women as their legally mandated right not at the mercy of the local political leaders or elites.

MGNREGS is a right based employment generation programme. It provides certain facilities conducive to enlarge the scope of women participation in a large number into the scheme. First, the Act and the scheme (MGNREGS) give priority to women wage seekers in assigning work under the scheme. It is provided that, at least one-third of the workers should be women (Schedule-II, MGNREGA). The implementing agencies are also advised for taking effort to go beyond the stipulated minimum engagement of women. Secondly, the Act and the scheme ensure that, equal wage to be given both women and men. In fact, earning wages by the female equal to the male members in the family leads to improve their dignity and status in family and also strengthen the process of women empowerment in our patriarchal society. Thirdly, The Act also mandates to ensure certain work site facilities like drinking water, shade, first aid facilities and crèches for children. These work site facilities is very conducive to motivate to the rural womenfolk, especially mothers who are having children, to effectively participate as wage labour in the scheme.

Women Empowerment through MGNREGS: Field Experiences

We make an empirical study to get a clear picture of the impact of MGNREGS among rural women.

The **objectives** of the study are:

1. To understand the awareness level of the rural women regarding the MGNREGS, a right-based programme.
2. Nature of participation of women as wage seekers in the scheme.
3. To find out, whether socio-economic improvement of women has really been occurred through their participation in the scheme.

Methodology

The study is mostly empirical and partly descriptive and interpretative in nature. The data and information have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. In the study, much more emphasis has been given on the primary data. The bulk of primary data are collected from field surveys, through the use of questionnaire/interviews. Relevant government records, covering both of Union and State governments, have been accumulated for the purpose. Secondary data have been used in order to supplement the former.

The study is made in *Chistipur-II gram panchayat* in the district of Purba Medinipur of West Bengal. *Chistipur-II gram panchayat* consists of twelve *gram sansads*. Following the

method of simple random sampling, we selected two *gram sansads* namely *Palpara (East)* and *Baruipur (West)*, and then by applying the same technique we selected fifteen females from each of the selected *sansad* area. Thus we selected total thirty women for interview. The field survey is made during the month of June, 2021.

Awareness Level of the Rural Women

MGNREGS is the largest demand driven, right-based employment programme in India aims at enhancing livelihood security of vulnerable sections, especially women in rural society. It is expected that the rural women will come out from their houses to a largest extent and take advantages provided in the MGNREGA in order to uplift the living condition of them in society. The study shows that the rural women were not amply conscious of the right-based nature of the programme. All the women respondents were very much aware of the fact that the job card is essential for receiving work under the scheme and the scheme intends to provide 100 days' work to rural households. The study also shows that the respondents were well acknowledged about the fact that equal wages are to be paid them at per men and payment are made through their bank accounts. But, most of the respondents were not conscious of the demand driven nature of the programme. More than two-third, out of the total number of respondents, were not aware of the fact that only written application seeking for work is required for employment under the scheme (table-3.1). Most of the respondents hardly know that if an application is preferred asking for work for a minimum period of 14 days at one goes the *gram panchayat* is legally bound to provide employment. If the *gram panchayat* fails to provide work on demand the wage seekers is entitled to receive unemployment allowance (Table-3.2). However, such shadow zones in awareness among rural women prevent them to meaningfully participate in MGNREGS. In the process of empowerment, women would definitely realize their own rights and come forward to take the advantages of the legal arrangements in order to improve their vulnerable condition in society. In fact, without the awareness of the rural women that they are being deprived of enjoying their due rights, no empowerment of women would take place in society only through legal arrangements.

Table-3.1 Do you aware of the fact that the written application seeking for work is required for employment in MGNREGS?

No. of Respondents	Yes	No
30	4	26

Source: Field Data

Table-3.2 Do you know that a wage seeker is entitled to enjoy unemployment allowance if the gram *panchayat* fails to provide work on demand within a stipulated period?

No. of Respondents	Yes	No
30	2	28

Source: Field Data

Extent of Participation of Women in MGNREGS

It is the matter of fact that, the rural women in India are being deprived of enjoying their due rights in all spheres of their life largely due to their economic backwardness. MGNREGS provides enough job opportunities to the rural women. Through participating in the programme, rural women can fulfill their basic needs and requirements to an extent by their self-efforts. In fact, economic self-sufficiency leads one to get self-control in other spheres of life also. However, women's self-determination and active involvement in the programme is essentially required for improving their living condition in rural India.

At the national level, the participation of women in MGNREGS is encouraging. In the financial year 2020-21, 53.19 per cent participation of women in labour was counted and in the preceding financial year it was calculated 54.72 per cent (<http://mnregaweb4.nic.in>). The equitable and easy access to work, favorable working conditions (such as the facility of drinking water, shade, crèches for children), and equal payment of wages are the factors that motivated women to participate in MGNREGS. However, in terms of women participation, West Bengal lags behind the national average. In the financial year 2020-21, the person-days of women labour was counted 45.2 per cent and in the subsequent financial year it was counted 46.69 percent(<http://mnregaweb4.nic.in>). Moreover, there is found broad variation across the districts of the state in this respect. However, in terms of district wise performance, the record of Purba Medinipur district is overall good. In the financial year 2020-21, 47.03 per cent participation of women in labour was counted and in the previous financial year it was recorded 51.33 per cent (<http://mnregaweb4.nic.in>).

In the financial year 2020-21, the *gram panchayat* under study has generated 98240 person-days of work under the programme which, in fact, is much better compared to the total number of working days of the last two financial years. The share of women in the total number of working days provided under the programme in the financial year 2020-21 is counted 44.96 per cent which, in fact, also lesser than the previous two financial years (Table-3.3). The ratios

of male and female in the total number of working days generated under the programme in different financial years in the selected *sansads* are almost similar to the *gram panchayat* records (Table-3.4 & 3.5)

Table-3.3 Profile of the year wise working days generated under MGNREGS in *Chistipur-II gram panchayat*.

Financial Year	Total no. of Working days generated	Male	Female
2020-2021	98240	54071(55.04%)	44169 (44.96%)
2019-2020	46346	22951(49.52%)	23395 (50.48%)
2018-2019	76237	40634(53.30%)	35603 (46.70%)

*Source: Field Data

Table-3.4 Profile of the year wise working days generated under MGNREGS in *Palpara Sansad (East)*.

Financial Year	Total no. of Working days generated	Male	Female
2020-2021	8687	4777 (54.99 %)	3910 (45.01 %)
2019-2020	3958	1939 (48.98 %)	2019 (51.02 %)

*Source: Field Data

Table-3.5 Profile of the year wise working days generated under MGNREGS in *Baruipur Sansad (West)*.

Financial Year	Total no. of Working days generated	Male	Female
2020-2021	8068	4452 (55.18 %)	3616 (44.82 %)
2019-2020	3728	1861 (49.92 %)	1867(50.08 %)

*Source: Field Data

The government of India has expanded the MGNREGS by adding a number of new schemes in the basket. However, the *gram panchayat* under study has virtually achieved success to take up newer activities under the programme in order to generate more and more person-days of labour. As a result, the total number of person-days of labour has markedly increased in the *gram panchayat* compared to the last two financial years (Table-3.3).

MGNREGA permits work in private land. It is found in the study that the *gram panchayat* put importance on the work of land development and excavation of ponds of private owners in its plan of work under MGNREGS. The owners of the private land are found to create pressure on the supervisors of the programme to engage more and more number of male wage-seekers instead of female in their respective lands as the physical strength of male is much more compared to female. In many cases, the owners of the private land try to attain their goal taking the advantage of political well connection of them with the local political leaders. Consequently, many female wage seekers virtually deprive of getting the employment opportunity in spite of having the provision in MGNREGA that the priority should be given to women in the job-seeking house hold. However, to show a good number of participations of women in the total number of person-days of labour generated under the programme, the names of the women wage-seekers have deliberately been enlisted in paper whereas the male members of the respective family actually do the work in the field. In course of interactions, the female respondents confirm this fact and the supervisors of the programme also accept this reality. Thus, the ratio of male and female in the total number of person-days of labour has been shown in the *gram panchayat* report is not real. In reality, the total number of person-days of women labour is much lesser than the official record.

During interactions, we asked the question to the respondents that, "How many days have you worked in the programme in the financial year 2020-21?" The responses of them are summarized in the table 3.6.

Table 3.6 How many days have you worked in the programme in the financial year 2020-21?

No. of Respondents	No of Working days
7	32
6	33
8	34
9	37
Total-30, No. of average working days- 34.23	

*Source: Field Data

It is evident from the table that the average number of working days of women is 34.23 which, in fact, is much lesser than the official records of the *gram panchayat*.

We also asked the question that “Are you satisfied with the number of working days assigned to you under the programme?” All the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction in this respect and demand more number of working days for them under the programme (Table 3.7). The respondents also reported that there was no facility of shade, first aid facilities and crèches for children at the work sites.

Table 3.7 Are you satisfied with the number of working days assigned to you under the Programm?

No of Respondents	Satisfied	Highly Satisfied	Dissatisfied
30	0	0	30

*Source: Field Data

Socio-economic Impact

Rural women generally assist their husband or other male members of the family in the time of cultivation along with maintaining the house keeping activities, although they often receive no pay. Even, when poor women work as wage labour they are often paid less than their male counterparts. This traditional system in rural India has considerably changed after the implementation of MGNREGA. Now it has become possible for the women to earn wages equal to their male counterparts through participating in MGNREGS.

It is a matter of fact that, through participating in MGNREGS, the womenfolk not only financially help their own respective families but also themselves on the road to empowerment. Earning wages by the women wage seekers equal to male members in the family has strengthened their status and role in family. In course of interaction, all the women respondents admitted that they are given due importance in decision making process relating to the important family matters. In fact, economic independence increases women's role and status not only in family but also in society as whole.

Various studies have also been conducted across the country to see the impact of MGNREGS on rural women. In a study it was found that, out of the total number of respondent widows, 82 per cent regarded MGNREGS as a very important source of income and 69 per cent stated that the scheme helped them to avoid hunger. (Dheeraja, & Rao, 2010).

Vinita Arora et al. found in their study that MGNREGS enhances decision-making power in social and economic wellbeing of women (Arora, Kulshreeshta & Upadhyay, 2013)

MGNREGS provides huge scope of independent earning to the rural women resulting in several advantages at domestic level. The respondents under study felt that there has been financial security to an extent at domestic level after participation in MGNREGS and they also satisfied with the present rate of earning wages. They also informed that their standard of living enhanced after participation in MGNREGS and they spend their earning money in education of children, health care, repaying small loans and other household activities. A few respondents, who also work as wage labour at the time of cultivation as the activities of MGNREGS are stopped basically due to rainy season, informed that they receive wage the same as men from the owners of the private land which previously was unthinkable to them.

Conclusion

MGNREGS is a powerful instrument for addressing the issue of gender discrimination in our society. Most remarkable feature of MGNREGA is that it ensures to pay women the same as men which, in fact, was virtually unimaginable in rural India. The study reveals that women are benefited from the programme. Their socio-economic status has improved to a certain extent. A sense of economic independence takes place in their mindset. But, the respondents were not satisfied with the number of working days presently provided them by the *gram panchayat* authority under the MGNREGS. Women participation to a great extent in the scheme would be possible if there is goodwill on the part of the local administration. There is needed to go beyond the conventional works and also to identify the new works under the scheme in order to generate more and more number of working days. It is evident from the study that the *gram panchayat* authority is trying to work accordingly. However, it is required on the part of the *gram panchayat* to give priority to the women wage seekers in case of providing work under the scheme. Work should be provided women nearer to their house and also the nature of work should be as such which they can perform easily. Work site facilities as prescribed in the MGNREGA should be ensured by the *gram panchayet* authority so that the women workers, especially mothers can work free from physical and mental stress. Women SHGs may be involved in the implementation as well as monitoring process. They can play significant role in making aware of rural women about the right based nature the programme. It is also necessary to select a significant number of supervisors from among women. In case of implementation the women schemes, the supervisor must be selected from women category. However, we hope

that the entire machinery at the grass root level will come forward to implement the above mentioned suggestions in order to enhance the livelihood security as well as status of women in society.

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