

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MGNREGS

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. Gender is the inevitable push factor for growth and development of a nation like India. In India women constitute a major share of chronically poor population. A large segment of Indian womanhood still suffers deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is necessary to mobilize the vast women power, if the country has to progress in all sphere of development. Empowerment of women is a long and difficult process which is to be promoted with full public support and this could be successful only when those women living at the lower strata who have been suppressed by the male dominated society taking undue advantage of their lack of education and poverty can rise up to claim their rightful place in their own society. In spite of the draw backs in the implementation of the legislation, significant benefits have already started accruing to women through better access to local employment, at minimum wages, with relatively decent and safe work conditions. The Government has framed different programmes/schemes to uplift the women from poverty and vulnerability of life. One such women friendly programme is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which was enacted in 2005. MGNREGS plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. It has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of the rural women and contributed substantially for the increased living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers. The present paper discusses status of women's participation in MGNREGS in A.P. this paper also presents challenges in the way of women participation in MGNREGS and suggestions for making MGNREGS more effective for women.

Keywords- *Empowerment, Women Participation, Employment Programs, and MGNREGA.*

INTRODUCTION

Active participation of any community in the development process is recognized as a tool for its empowerment. In Indian social set up, the participation of women in the development process has to be ensured through tangible measures taken at various levels for their overall development. The government has taken a conscious view to make adequate provisions in its policies and programmes, through which it is to be ensured that the women of the country are not only empowered but also become active participants in the development process in the country. Various programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development are formulated keeping in view the above perspective. These programmes have special components for women. Major schemes, having women's component, implemented by the Ministry include the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) now restructured as National Rural Livelihood Mission (Aajeevika) and the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY). The implementation of these programmes is monitored specifically with

reference to coverage of women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

By putting cash incomes into hands, MGNREGS is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. This was one of MGNREGS's main aims: with the increased participation of women in household income-generation a positive contribution to gender relations can be made. The survey data (both qualitative and quantitative) suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contribution to family expenditure and their work decision, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere (Asha Sharma 2012). The significant contribution of MGNREGS was that it has removed these constraints as the wage employment was made available within or closer to the village. It has provided them with the opportunity to earn without having had to forgo their other familiar obligations.(Singh, Nauriyal,2009).Looking at the response from widows separately, MGNREGS was also considered "very important" by 82% of widows in the sample. Of the total sample, more than two-thirds (69%) of the sample workers stated the MGNREGS had helped them avoid hunger, while 57% stated the MGNREGS had helped them avoid migration and equal proportion of workers also said they had used MGNREGS wages to buy medicines in the last 12 months.(Khera, R. and Nayak, N. 2009)All the women workers according to Thomas, EM. (2010) are fully satisfied with MGNREGS works. The main reason for their satisfaction is that; today they are assured of 100 days of jobs. It means that no longer they have to fear the occurrence of seasonal unemployment and poverty. Likewise all of them unanimously opine that, the MGNREGS enabled them to participate effectively in the civil society. Now all they have no fear to enter in to a commercial bank or government office to hold discussions with the officials. The overall impact of MGNREGS on women's lives is quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration, or fostering better awareness (and wider enforcement) of minimum wages.The role of MGNREGS as a tool of women's empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far. (Jandu, N. 2008). Account payment of wages also creates some other effects. Apart from increasing the chances for greater control over earnings, it leads to the development of a saving habit. Initially, most of these workers used to withdraw their entire wages at one go. Gradually, they have started withdrawing as per their needs. This has an added advantage as women are able to save money from wasteful expenditure, if husbands or other male members tend to spend on items like liquor. Women were also found to invest in fixed deposit schemes in the same bank (Pankaj, A. and R, Tankha. 2010).

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Women are found to be better change agents of socio-economic transformation, efforts are needed to strengthen their participation for household livelihood security as well as better asset management. During the last two decades, a number of development interventions such as social

mobilization, formation and networking and capacity building of women self-help groups have been put in place to empower women and MGNREGS is one out of them. However, active participation of women in any programme is a pre-requisite for the empowerment. Thus the present study proposes to assess empowerment of women through MGNREGS and their participation in MGNREGS.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. The role of MGNREGS in women's empowerment.
2. To find out the problems that gets in the way of women's participation in MGNREGS.
3. Suggestions to make MGNREGS more effective and responsive to the need of women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is a descriptive study based on secondary data collected from various published sources and websites.

MGNREGA ACT AND WOMEN

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed on 25 th August 2005. And renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides a legal Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. The act became effective at the state level in 200 districts, Guaranteeing employment up to 100 days a year to poor rural households on demand, Through women employment was not the soul objectives of the scheme but with its developmental goals it comes automatically.MGNREGS with its guarantee of 100 days of unskilled work for every household, has been envisaged as gender sensitive scheme. The design features of this scheme make this scheme gender sensitive. The participation of women in the workforce has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent and through this it has protected the women justice and rights. The Act provides some explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation. These include:

***Equal wages for men and women** – ‘Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers and the provisions of Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with.’ (p.26)

***Participation in Management and monitoring of the programme** – ‘The gram sabha will elect the members of the committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.’ (p.44)

***Participation in social audit** – ‘The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient for people to attend – that it is convenient for REGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalized communities.’ (p.56)

***Providing support for child care, and convenience to households** – The guidelines mention

the need for a crèche at the worksite, and for the works to be convenient for families.

***Ensuring that single women are eligible** – By recognizing a single person as a ‘household’, the Act makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work for widows and other single women to access work. (mgnrega.nic.in)

MGNREGS IN ANDHRA PRADESH

In Andhra Pradesh MGNREGS was introduced in the 200 poorest districts in 2006 and extended to all 615 rural districts in 2008. Participants were from the most marginal social and economic groups: 45 per cent were Scheduled Caste, 5 per cent Scheduled Tribe and 51 per cent female.⁸ By March 2010, 4.1 million works had been taken up in Andhra Pradesh and 45 per cent of them completed (Reddy et al. 2010). Reddy et al (2010) found that 100 per cent of the 481 households in the Andhra Pradesh component of their sample had job cards⁹ (the study was also carried out in Bihar and Rajasthan). Seventy-one per cent requested work and more than 90 per cent received work within 15 days. The average number of days worked per household was 74, and more than half of households claimed between 75 and 100 days. Reddy et al. (2010) note that payments were timely and higher than agricultural wages and estimate that they accounted for 9.6 per cent of household income. ‘Distress’ migration had been reduced; however, male migration for higher wages continued. This was partly due to a perception of MGNREGS work as sporadic and of short duration, which arises from a history of MGNREGS projects being delayed while awaiting approval or investigation of an irregularity, or postponed to accommodate peak agricultural periods after requests from landowners.

Many studies, e.g. CBGA (2006) in Drèze (2006), have placed Andhra Pradesh at the forefront in implementing MGNREGS because of the high level of population awareness of the scheme, relative to other States such as Jharkhand, and technological innovations. Its popularity within Andhra Pradesh was evidenced by the popular distress evident when the death of the Chief Minister who started the scheme threatened its continuation. MGNREGS appears to be successfully targeting poorer people as only 3 per cent of participants in Andhra Pradesh are above the poverty line (Reddy et al. 2010). However, Reddy et al. warn that ‘these very characteristics of the participating households [i.e. that they are predominantly poor and marginalized] may also create the conditions for misuse and neglect of processes, and therefore call for effective institutional and governance structures’ (ibid.: 66). They observe that despite the commitment of the political leadership, the local panchayats are weak, which reduces their ability to mobilize villagers in planning and monitoring the work (a core function identified by Moore and Jadhav 2006). Reddy et al. (2010) also note some warning signs in relation to the future of the scheme: guidelines and record-keeping requirements are perceived as burdensome, there is a lack of local technical expertise which affects the quality of work, and it is hard to track the granting of unemployment allowance. While many workers enjoy the experience of working in groups, the fact that these groups are often caste- or gender-based creates potentially discriminatory dynamics, for example, risky work being given to Scheduled Caste groups, or

single women struggling to find a group (Sai nath 2007; Young Lives data in Poompuhar echo this finding). Finally, as the majority of work in Andhra Pradesh is land development (45 per cent), there is some resentment that the benefits accrue to landholders, not the landless.

ROLE OF MGNREGS IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

MGNREGS plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. It has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of the rural women and contributed substantially for the increased living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers. The role of MGNREGS on women's participation can be examined through the following parameters:

Income-Consumption Effects: By income-consumption effects we mean an increase in income of women workers and as a result, their ability to choose their consumption baskets. MGNREGS empowers women by giving them a scope of independent earning and spend some amount for their own needs.

Intra-Household Effects: Women play a major role in raising the economic resources for their family but their contribution remains uncounted because of they perform a significant amount of unpaid work. In rural areas, the dominance of males in intra-household decisions has been seen. MGNREGS has significant impact in converting some unpaid work into paid work and widen the scope of decision making role of women in household matters.

Community-Level Effects: Women's participation at the local and district level of governance process is low in spite of 73rd Amendments of the Constitution. But women participation has increased after the implementation of MGNREGS in many areas. A large number of women workers attended the Gram Sabah meeting held in connection with MGNREGS. Community level empowerment of women is one of the great achievements of this Act.

There are various factors which encourage the women worker's participation under this scheme include nature of work, which do not need skilled worker, the limited hours of work, availability of work locally, reduction of migration of male member, substantial jump in the wage rate etc. Participation of women varies widely across the nation. Women participation under MGNREGS is measured in person days. At the national level women participation has increased significantly to 53.01% in 2012-13 (till January, 2013). Highest participation is seen in states like Kerala (92.66%) followed by Pondicherry (83.96%). Although, women workforce participation under the Scheme has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent, the Act stipulates that priority shall be given to women. In terms of implementation it mandates that a minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries are women who have registered and have requested for work. However, ideally, there should be gender equality in participation in MGNREGS. That means, women proportion should be around 50% both in terms participation and person-days of work. There are some issues which hinder women participation in MGNREGS in the State.

PROBLEMS IN THE WAY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MGNREGS

Corruption -Corruption is the foremost factor that directly or indirectly hampers the very spirit and effectiveness of MGNREGS.

Societal attitude and Discrimination-In many rural areas of India, there are tenacious social norms and stigmas against women working outside the home. It was commonly stated that women "cannot" work on worksites, that they are "too weak", and that it is "socially unacceptable" for them to undertake this work.

Negligence of childcare facilities-The Act requires that when there are more than five children under the age of six present at a worksite, a female worker be appointed to take care of them. But, non-implementation of these provisions has adverse impact on women labour force.

Low wage and irregularity in payments-In many states, workers do not earn minimum wages. Delays in wage payments make things particularly difficult for women. Moreover, every job card holder is supposed to have an account in nearby financial institutions, which is not an easy process for rural women. This often leads to complications and delay in the process of wage payment.

Low level of Awareness: In many states women participation is low because of low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the programme.

Nature of Work: Most of the studies reveal that nature of work is also not helpful for women workers. In most of the projects work requiring application of physical force, male workers were preferred to women workers.

Poor Worksite Facilities: MGNREGS funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place and first aid. But most of the studies reported that except drinking water facility all other facilities are generally absent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MAKING MGNREGS MORE EFFECTIVE FOR WOMEN

There are problems and challenges that limit the participation of women under MGNREGS. The following important interventions can make MGNREGS more effective and result oriented for the cause of women-

*The Panchayat must create awareness among the local people about MGNREGS. Awareness should be created among women regarding rights, entitlements, provisions and procedures under MGNREGS.

*Involvement of NGOs in MGNREGS has been very low. NGOs and self-help groups should spearhead the awareness programme among the women. This feature requires to be strengthened to make the rights-based MGNREGS more successful and meaningful.

* Women should be kept in the forefront of planning, execution and evaluation of MGNREGS programmes. Moreover, from policy to implementation level, there should be the involvement of anganwadi workers, health workers, self help groups, NGOs, village committees, cooperatives and other local bodies.

*Only male members get job card which makes women depend on them, Women should also be

provided a job card. Every individual worker should have his or her own job card.

*There should be joint bank accounts so women easily can withdraw money according to their need. This will reduce their dependence on men for withdrawing money.

*Some of the projects should be designed in such a way that can be done easily by women as all projects are not appropriate for woman. MGNREGS should promote semi skilled and skilled jobs such as social services and rural health, so that, women can get associated with rural literacy and health missions and infrastructural activities in the villages.

*A special provision should be made for the people such as widows, women with disabilities, single and deserted women in each household.

* The programme design includes a recommendation that mobile crèches need to be available at workplaces. The programme should improve quality of childcare.

* Extending reservation to dalits with particular reference to dalit women.

*Lastly it may be stressed here that effective information flows and dissemination about the various angles of this provision of the Scheme through all types of media and channels in the rural areas are essential.

CONCLUSIONS

MGNREGS has emerged as a very powerful tool for women empowerment due to its provision for women. This programme of government has taken care of that corner which remained untouched from changes in society from last many years. Since the introduction of scheme, there have been positive changes at the participation level of women in the MGNREGS. But there are also challenges that limit women participation at certain levels of women empowerment through employment opportunities. However, given the critical gains made by women workers, in accessing work and income, it needs to be ensured that the problems in implementation do not destroy the gains achieved so far and the objectives of MGNREGS. Women will go a long way in removing the short-term barriers to women's employment and participation to achieve longer term goals of gender equality. Effective levels of awareness and sustained public initiatives are crucial to ensure that the implementation problems are not only addressed but also resolved, and the objectives are met.

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