



FROM FIELDS TO FREEDOM: WOMEN'S JOURNEY WITH MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands as one of India's flagship social welfare programs, aiming to provide employment opportunities and sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. Amidst its multifaceted impacts, MGNREGA has emerged as a catalyst for women's empowerment, particularly in rural communities. This study delves into the transformative journey of women within the framework of MGNREGA, highlighting their progression from mere beneficiaries to active participants and leaders in rural development initiatives. This study sheds light on the pivotal role played by women in various aspects of MGNREGA projects. It examines how the program has empowered women by providing them with access to employment, financial independence, and decision-making opportunities within their households and communities. Furthermore, it explores the challenges faced by women in asserting their agency and the strategies adopted to overcome societal barriers. The study also explores the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that shape women's experiences with MGNREGA, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class. It underscores the importance of addressing structural inequalities and promoting inclusive policies to ensure equitable participation and benefits for marginalized women. The study encapsulates the empowering narratives of women who have traversed the pathway of economic and social emancipation through their engagement with MGNREGA. It underscores the imperative of recognizing and amplifying the agency of rural women in shaping sustainable development agendas and fostering inclusive growth in India's rural landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands as a beacon of hope and opportunity for millions of individuals residing in rural hinterlands of India. Enacted in 2005, MGNREGA represents a significant milestone in India's quest for inclusive growth and poverty alleviation, guaranteeing a hundred days of employment to every rural household willing to participate in unskilled manual labour. However, beyond its economic objectives, MGNREGA has emerged as a powerful instrument for social transformation, particularly in the realm of women's empowerment. In rural India, where patriarchal norms and socio-economic disparities often constrain women's agency and autonomy, MGNREGA has offered a glimmer of hope and empowerment. This study sets out to explore the profound impact of MGNREGA on the lives of rural women, tracing their journey from the fields of labour to the corridors of freedom and self-determination. Through the analysis of different indicators, this paper seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of women's engagement with MGNREGA and its transformative implications for gender relations and rural development.

Against the backdrop of India's complex socio-economic landscape, characterized by entrenched inequalities and systemic barriers, MGNREGA has provided women with unprecedented opportunities for economic independence, social mobility, personal development, decision making and community leadership. By guaranteeing

women's participation in public works projects and ensuring equal wages, MGNREGA has not only augmented household incomes but also challenged traditional gender roles and norms, fostering a more equitable distribution of resources and responsibilities within rural households. Moreover, MGNREGA has served as a catalyst for women's collective action and empowerment, catalyzing the formation of self-help groups, federations, and grassroots organizations. Through collective bargaining and advocacy efforts, women have been able to assert their rights, voice their concerns, and shape the agenda of local development initiatives. In this sense, MGNREGA has not only empowered individual women but also inspire collective movements for social change and women's rights in rural India.

However, the journey towards women's empowerment through MGNREGA is not without its challenges and complexities. Structural barriers such as caste-based discrimination, lack of access to education and healthcare, and entrenched patriarchal norms continue to hamper women's full participation and realization of their rights within the MGNREGA framework. Moreover, the sustainability of women's empowerment initiatives under MGNREGA remains contingent upon adequate institutional support, capacity-building efforts, and gender-sensitive policy interventions.

In light of these considerations, this paper seeks to critically examine the achievements, limitations, and future prospects of women's empowerment through MGNREGA in rural India.

By shedding light on the experiences and aspirations of rural women, this research endeavors to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersecting dynamics of gender, poverty, and development in the rural landscape of India.

Provisions Related to Women under MGNREGA

Several provisions in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) are specifically designed to empower and ensure the participation of women. Some of the important provisions related to women in MGNREGA include:

1. **Equal Wages:** MGNREGA mandates equal wages for men and women for the same work, ensuring gender parity in wage rates.
2. **Priority for Women:** The Act prioritizes the participation of women in MGNREGA works, aiming to enhance their economic empowerment and social inclusion.
3. **Job Cards:** Women are entitled to obtain job cards individually under MGNREGA, enabling them to access employment opportunities independently of their male family members.
4. **Priority for Maternity Entitlements:** Pregnant and lactating women are given priority in MGNREGA works, with provisions for suitable work assignments and access to maternity entitlements as per the Maternity Benefit Act.
5. **Childcare Facilities:** MGNREGA mandates the provision of childcare facilities at worksites to enable women with young children to participate in employment opportunities without hindrance.
6. **Shelter for Pregnant and Nursing Mothers:** Pregnant and nursing mothers are entitled to suitable work arrangements and shelters at worksites to ensure their comfort and well-being during work hours.
7. **Formation of Self-Help Groups:** MGNREGA encourages the formation of women's self-help groups (SHGs) to facilitate collective action, skill development, and entrepreneurship among rural women.
8. **Women's Participation in Decision-Making:** MGNREGA promotes the active participation of women in Gram Panchayats and Village Development Committees, empowering them to contribute to decision-making processes related to MGNREGA implementation and utilization of funds.

These provisions underscore the commitment of MGNREGA towards promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and social justice in rural India. By ensuring equal opportunities and addressing the specific needs of

women, MGNREGA aims to harness the potential of women as agents of change and catalysts for inclusive rural development.

Problem Statement

Despite the significant strides made in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, rural women in India continue to face multifaceted challenges that hinder their socio-economic advancement and hinder their participation in development initiatives. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands as a beacon of hope for rural women, offering employment opportunities and potential pathways out of poverty. However, amidst its transformative potential, several persistent issues and gaps remain to be addressed to fully harness the benefits of MGNREGA for women in rural India. This problem statement aims to critically examine the challenges and barriers that hamper women's empowerment through MGNREGA and hinder their meaningful participation in rural development initiatives. Despite provisions for equal participation, women in rural areas continue to face barriers in accessing MGNREGA worksites, obtaining job cards, and securing employment opportunities. Social norms, lack of awareness, and logistical constraints often limit women's ability to engage fully with the program. Deep-rooted gender norms and discriminatory practices persist within MGNREGA worksites and project implementation, affecting women's agency, decision-making, and access to resources. Patriarchal attitudes and unequal power dynamics constrain women's ability to assert their rights and participate fully in MGNREGA initiatives.

Women's experiences with MGNREGA are shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, ethnicity, and geographic location, leading to differential access to opportunities and resources. Marginalized women, including Dalits, Adivasis, and other disadvantaged groups, face compounded barriers that further marginalize them within the program. While MGNREGA provides employment and income support, its impact on women's empowerment beyond economic dimensions remains limited. Structural inequalities, lack of supportive infrastructure, and inadequate institutional mechanisms hinder women's ability to translate MGNREGA benefits into sustained empowerment outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting factors that shape women's experiences with MGNREGA and the development of targeted interventions and policy measures to promote gender equality, social inclusion, and women's empowerment in rural India. This problem statement sets the stage for further research and action to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of MGNREGA in realizing its transformative potential for rural women.

Importance of the Research for Society

This research is important for advancing gender equality and social justice in Indian society. By identifying the barriers and opportunities for women's participation and empowerment within the program, the research contributes to shaping policies and interventions that promote gender-sensitive development agendas and ensure equitable outcomes for women in rural communities. MGNREGA plays a pivotal role in poverty alleviation by providing rural households with a guaranteed source of income and employment opportunities. By focusing on women's empowerment within the program, the research helps to maximize the poverty-reducing impact of MGNREGA, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized groups who are disproportionately affected by poverty. Women's empowerment is essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable development in rural India. Research on MGNREGA and women's empowerment highlights the importance of addressing gender disparities and promoting women's role in decision-making processes, community development initiatives, and resource allocation, thereby ensuring that development efforts are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all segments of society. Empowering women through MGNREGA contributes to fostering social cohesion and community resilience in rural areas. By promoting women's participation in collective action, leadership roles, and local governance structures, the research

strengthens social networks, promotes mutual trust, and builds community solidarity, laying the foundation for cohesive and vibrant rural societies.

Importance of the Research for Policy Makers

This research on women’s empowerment through MGNREGA holds significant importance for policymakers as it provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of the program in promoting gender equality, poverty alleviation, and social inclusion in rural India. By identifying the barriers and opportunities for women’s participation and empowerment within MGNREGA, policymakers can formulate evidence-based policies and interventions to enhance the program’s outcomes and ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for women in rural communities. Moreover, this research informs policy decisions related to the design, implementation, and monitoring of MGNREGA and related rural development initiatives, facilitating the creation of more responsive, inclusive, and effective policy frameworks that address the specific needs and priorities of women and marginalized groups. By leveraging the findings of this research, policymakers can strengthen their efforts towards achieving sustainable development goals, fostering inclusive growth, and promoting social justice in rural India.

Status of MGNREGA in India

Table 1 MGNREGA at a Glance

Total No. of Districts	742
Total No. of Blocks	7,205
Total No. of Gram Panchayats	2,69,121
Total No. of Job Cards Issued (in Cr.)	14.25
Total No. of Workers (in Cr.)	24.95
Total No. of Active Job Cards (in Cr.)	8.94
Total No. of Active Workers (in Cr.)	12.89

Source: www.nrega.nic.in (Accessed on 18-04-2024 at 6:12 pm)

This table reveals that there are 742 districts in India. Within those districts, there are 7,205 smaller administrative units called blocks. These are often used for planning and administrative purposes. Gram Panchayats are local self-governing bodies in rural areas. There are a total of 2,69,121 Gram Panchayats in the country. Total 14.25 crore job cards have been issued by the administration. These are likely related to government programs providing employment opportunities. Out of the total job cards issued, 8.94 crore are currently active. This means they are being used for employment purposes. Similarly, there are 24.95 crore workers involved in these programs or other relevant activities. Likewise, out of the total number of workers, 12.89 crore are currently active in these programs or activities.

Table 2 Financial Year wise National Progress under MGNREGA

Indicators	Financial Year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Total Center Release (in Cr.)	1,09,810.68	96,812.25	88,290.43	89,390.43	4,248.36
Total Availability (in Cr.)	1,18,887.86	1,07,968.48	1,04,430.82	1,03,497.67	4,583.75
Total Expenditure (in Cr.)	1,11,719.55	1,06,489.92	1,01,120.08	1,05,417.01	3,361.52
% age Utilisation	93.97	98.63	96.83	101.85	73.34
Wages (in Cr.)	78,016.86	75,091.63	65,266.08	74,242.86	2,232.27
Material and Skilled Wages (in Cr.)	29,557.92	28,041.35	31,685.94	27,343.38	877.46
Material (%)	27.48	27.19	32.68	26.92	28.22
Total Administrative Expenditure (in Cr.)	4,144.77	3,356.94	4,168.06	3,830.78	251.8

Indicators	Financial Year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Administrative Expenditure (%)	3.71	3.15	4.12	3.63	7.49
Average Cost Per Day Per Person (in Rs.)	266.19	269.79	291.11	356.76	322.02
%age Payments Generated within 15 Days	96.18	96.54	92.5	98.34	100

Source: www.nrega.nic.in (Accessed on 18-04-2024 at 6:12 pm)

Table 2 depicts that the total funds released by the central government for the MGNREGA program show a significant decrease from 2020-21 to 2024-25, dropping from 1,09,810.68 Cr. to 4,248.36 Cr. The total availability of funds also decreases over the years, reflecting a trend similar to the center release. Total expenditure fluctuates but remains relatively high compared to available funds, indicating effective utilization of resources. The percentage utilization of funds fluctuates but generally remains high, suggesting efficient use of allocated resources. In 2024-25, however, there is a notable decrease in utilization efficiency, dropping to 73.34%. Expenditure on wages for workers decreases over the years, possibly indicating fewer work opportunities or changes in program implementation. Expenditure on materials and skilled wages fluctuates but doesn't show a consistent trend. The percentage of expenditure on materials relative to total expenditure fluctuates but shows a slight increase in 2022-23. Total administrative expenditure decreases over the years, with a significant drop from 2020-21 to 2024-25. However, the percentage of total expenditure allocated to administrative tasks increases notably in 2024-25, reaching 7.49%. The percentage of payments generated within 15 days to workers remains generally high throughout the years, with a notable increase to 100% in 2024-25, suggesting improvements in payment efficiency. The average cost per day per person for the program increases over the years, indicating a rise in program costs.

Table 3 Financial Year wise National Progress under MGNREGA

Indicators	Financial Year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Approved Labour Budget (in Cr.)	385.67	337.76	285.33	307.26	221.04
Persondays of Central Liability so Far (in Cr.)	389.09	363.19	293.7	309.18	5.63
%age of Total Labour Budget	100.89	107.53	103.61	101.72	2.55
%age as Per Proportionate Labour Budget	20.99	0	0	0	0
SC Persondays % as of Total Persondays	19.87	19.17	19.55	19.17	17.7
ST Persondays % as of Total Persondays	17.95	18.33	18.02	17.63	19.63
Women Persondays Out of Total (%)	53.19	54.82	57.47	58.89	55.78
Average Days of Employment Provided Per Household	51.52	50.07	47.83	52.09	9.03
Average Wage Rate Per Day Per Person (Rs.)	200.71	208.84	216.57	235.63	239.93
Total No. of Household Completed 100 Days of Wage Employment	71,97,090	59,14,761	35,96,873	45,04,469	0
Total Household Worker (in Cr.)	7.55	7.25	6.18	6	0.62
Total Individuals Worker (in Cr.)	11.19	10.61	8.75	8.35	0.86

Differently abled Persons Worked	6,06,149	5,76,250	5,04,167	4,98,301	72,021
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Source: www.nrega.nic.in (Accessed on 18-04-2024 at 6:12 pm)

Data in the table provides that the allocated budget for labor under MGNREGA decreases over the years, from 385.67 Cr. in 2020-21 to 221.04 Cr. in 2024-25. There is a significant decrease in the total days of work promised by the central government under the program from 2023-24 to 2024-25. The percentage of the total labor budget utilized fluctuates, with a notable decrease in 2024-25. Percentage as per proportionate labour budget indicates the proportion of the labor budget utilized compared to the total budget allocated. It is zero from 2021-22 to 2024-25. The percentage of persondays contributed by Scheduled Caste individuals fluctuates slightly over the years. Similarly the percentage contributed by Scheduled Tribe individuals remains relatively stable. The percentage of persondays contributed by women shows an increasing trend, reaching its peak in 2023-24. There is fluctuation in the average days of employment provided per household over the years, with a sharp decrease in 2024-25. The average wage rate per day per person increases gradually over the years. The number of households completing 100 days of wage employment decreases significantly in 2024-25. Both the total number of households and individuals participating in the program as workers show a decreasing trend over the years. The number of differently-abled persons participating in the program also decreases over the years.

Table 4 Financial Year wise Works Progress under MGNREGA at National Level

Items	Financial Year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
No. of Gram Panchayats with Nil Expenditure	6,594	4,797	5,505	7,288	1,03,256
Total No. of Works Taken up (New+Spill Over in Lakhs)	222.39	235.43	231.18	217.06	134.24
No. of Ongoing Works (in Lakhs)	138.04	145.47	136.73	132.84	130.44
No. of Completed Works (in Lakhs)	84.35	89.96	94.45	84.21	3.8

Source: www.nrega.nic.in (Accessed on 19-04-2024 at 3:46 pm)

The table indicates that there is a notable increase in the number of Gram Panchayats with nil expenditure from 2020-21 to 2024-25, with a significant jump in 2024-25. There is a fluctuating trend in the total number of works initiated, including both new projects and those carried over from previous years. There is slight decrease in the number of works ongoing works from 2020-21 to 2024-25. There is a decrease in the total number of completed works from 2020-21 to 2024-25, with a significant drop in 2024-25.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent and nature of women's participation in MGNREGA works in rural India.
2. To assess the challenges and barriers faced by women in fully engaging with MGNREGA, including issues related to access, representation, and agency.
3. To identify best practices, innovative approaches, and community-driven solutions for enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment and socio-economic development.

METHOD

The present research was analytical in nature and utilizes secondary data sources, including national-level surveys, administrative records, programmatic reports, official website of Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India and some required documents to analyze trends and patterns related to women's participation, employment, and empowerment within MGNREGA. Percentage method of data analysis was employed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MGNREGA is helping women in multiple ways, contributing significantly to their empowerment and well-being in rural India:

Economic Empowerment: MGNREGA provides women with access to employment opportunities, ensuring that they receive equal wages for their labor. This economic empowerment enhances women's financial independence, enabling them to contribute to household income and reduce their dependency on male family members.

Social Inclusion: By prioritizing the participation of women in MGNREGA works, the program promotes social inclusion and gender equality in rural communities. Women are empowered to assert their rights, voice their concerns, and actively engage in community development initiatives.

Skill Development: Through participation in various MGNREGA projects, women acquire valuable skills in areas such as construction, agriculture, water conservation, and infrastructure development. These skills not only enhance their employability within the program but also open up opportunities for income generation and entrepreneurship beyond MGNREGA.

Access to Maternity Entitlement: MGNREGA ensures that pregnant and lactating women are given priority in worksite assignments and provided with suitable work arrangements and maternity entitlements as per the Maternity Benefit Act. This support enables women to balance their work responsibilities with maternal and childcare duties.

Social Security: MGNREGA serves as a social safety net for women in rural areas, providing them with a reliable source of income during lean agricultural seasons or in times of economic distress. This financial security enhances women's resilience to economic shocks and reduces their vulnerability to poverty and exploitation.

Collective Action and Leadership: MGNREGA encourages the formation of women's self-help groups (SHGs) and promotes their active participation in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Through collective action and leadership roles in Gram Panchayats and Village Development Committees, women are empowered to influence development agendas, advocate for their rights, and address gender-specific concerns in their communities.

Women's Participation: The research findings indicate that while women's participation in MGNREGA has increased over the years, significant disparities persist across regions and socio-economic groups. Factors such as household responsibilities, social norms, and access to information and resources continue to influence women's decision to participate in MGNREGA works and projects.

Challenges and Barriers: Despite the positive impact of MGNREGA, women continue to face several challenges and barriers that hinder their full engagement and empowerment within the program. Key challenges include limited access to information and resources, mobility constraints, gender-based discrimination, and lack of supportive infrastructure and childcare facilities at worksites.

Intersectionality: The research findings highlight the intersecting factors that shape women's experiences with MGNREGA, including caste, class, ethnicity, and geographic location. Marginalized women, including Dalits, Adivasis, and other disadvantaged groups, face compounded barriers that further marginalize them within the program, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and affirmative action measures.

Community-Driven Solutions: Despite challenges, the research identifies several community-driven solutions and best practices for enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment and socio-economic development. These include the formation of women's self-help groups, capacity-building initiatives, awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts aimed at addressing gender disparities and promoting women's rights and agency within MGNREGA.

The findings of this research underscore the significant strides made in promoting women's empowerment through MGNREGA in rural India, while also highlighting persistent challenges and opportunities for further improvement. The discussion delves into the implications of the research findings for policy, practice, and future research, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions, institutional reforms, and community-driven approaches to enhance

the effectiveness and inclusivity of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment and socio-economic development.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthening Awareness and Outreach:** Policymakers and implementing agencies should prioritize efforts to enhance awareness and outreach initiatives targeting women beneficiaries, especially those from marginalized communities. Information campaigns, community mobilization activities, and capacity-building programs can empower women with knowledge about their rights, entitlements, and opportunities under MGNREGA, enabling them to make informed decisions and assert their agency.
- 2. Enhancing Access and Accessibility:** Measures should be taken to improve access to MGNREGA worksites and services for women, including the provision of safe transportation, childcare facilities, and accessible infrastructure. Special attention should be given to addressing mobility constraints, geographic barriers, and other logistical challenges that hinder women's participation and mobility within the program.
- 3. Promoting Gender-sensitive Implementation:** Policymakers and program administrators should adopt gender-sensitive approaches to MGNREGA implementation, including the mainstreaming of gender considerations in program design, planning, and monitoring processes. Gender disaggregated data collection, gender-responsive budgeting, and gender audits can help identify and address gender disparities and ensure that women's needs and priorities are adequately addressed within MGNREGA initiatives.
- 4. Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms:** Institutional reforms are needed to strengthen the role of women in decision-making processes and governance structures at the local level. Measures such as reserving leadership positions for women in Gram Panchayats, Village Development Committees, and MGNREGA implementation bodies can promote women's participation, representation, and influence in shaping development agendas and resource allocation decisions.
- 5. Fostering Partnerships and Collaboration:** Collaborative partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, and community-based groups are essential for enhancing the effectiveness and impact of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment. Multi-stakeholder dialogues, partnerships for capacity-building, and joint advocacy initiatives can leverage diverse expertise and resources to address systemic barriers, promote innovation, and scale up successful interventions for women's empowerment within MGNREGA.
- 6. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the progress and impact of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment and socio-economic development. Gender-sensitive indicators, performance benchmarks, and feedback mechanisms can help track the implementation of gender-responsive policies and interventions, identify areas for improvement, and inform evidence-based decision-making at all levels.

The recommendations outlined above are essential for realizing the full potential of MGNREGA as a transformative tool for women's empowerment and inclusive rural development in India. By prioritizing gender equality, social inclusion, and community-driven approaches, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders can build upon the successes of MGNREGA while addressing the challenges and gaps that hinder women's empowerment and socio-economic advancement in rural India.

CONCLUSION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands as a beacon of hope and opportunity for millions of rural women in India, offering them access to employment, economic empowerment, and pathways to social inclusion. Through this research, we have delved into the transformative journey of women within the framework of MGNREGA.

MGNREGA has been instrumental in empowering women by enhancing their ability to bargain and make purchases without depending on male family members. This program has allowed women the

freedom to spend money without needing the prior permission of male relatives. By participating in MGNREGA, women have the opportunity to learn about financial transactions and become acquainted with the towns near their villages. It also provides them with chances to travel and organize outings, either in groups or individually. The program encourages social interaction among women, both at their workplaces and outside, especially when they collect their wages from banks, which are typically located beyond their village boundaries. Moreover, becoming account holders through this scheme enables women to save money. MGNREGA fosters social equality by offering employment opportunities to all, regardless of caste, class, or creed, thereby promoting interactions at the same workplace and contributing to the reduction of the caste system. It challenges patriarchal norms within the still male-dominated Indian society by providing equal employment opportunities for men and women, without any requirement for specific skills. Ultimately, MGNREGA ensures the active participation of women in rural development, marking a significant step towards gender equality and social justice.

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