

IMPACT OF MGNREGA ON SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD OF WOMEN

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Visualising MGNREGA within the context where women's labour is being casualised and in feminization of poverty is getting entrenched and contextualizing the programme within the broader social protection discourse; it is noteworthy that there are some women-centric approaches in the rural employment guaranteed programme. One-third of all participants are women, convergence of women and child development schemes, gender parity in wage, representation of women on decision making body and so on. Increasing rate of participation of women workers is one indicator of success of this programme. Together with favourable social status, holistic increase in the standard of living of women workers is perceptible.

MGNREGA is undoubtedly linked with stimulation of local development in relation to proper management. This is associated with uplift the position of women in labour market by equitable and easy access to work. This Act can be applied within the broader social protection discourse. Considering this socio-economic context MGNREGA deserves significant emphasis in contemporary society. The MGNREGA is the first recognized programme to provide secured livelihood security to India's rural poor. As an innovative programme,

it is linked with rural economy, Stabilization of agricultural production and providing livelihood security to the poor. Thus, the it acts as a tool of transformation of the scenario of poverty. The MGNREGA marks a paradigm shift from earlier wage employment programmes. It is an inclusive programme covering all the disadvantaged sections of the society. The programme plays a vital role for the uplift of the women in the rural areas. The hope is that “NREG would have put forwards a labor-intensive growth path, especially in the light of the low and declining growth rate of productive employment...” (NCEUS, 2006, cited Reddy). Therefore, the programme needs to be seen from a long-term perspective. It should be linked with ongoing development efforts, incorporating decentralized planning and implementation, skill training and maintenance of public assets. Eventually wage-earners are absorbed into mainstream employment with this programme.

Globalisation has ensured that women’s labour is further casualised – with the emphasis on lesser means, education and skills, and fewer productive assets than men. Given their additional responsibilities within the household, their range of employment option is severely limited. (Grown 2006; Chari 2006, cited in Poonia). This feminization of poverty is associated with a concentration of women in the informal sector and in agriculture, putting them beyond the reach of traditional social security measures. Women thus find themselves vulnerable, are caught in between unorganized work and household responsibilities, and lack access to support in the event of seasonal or life cycle

contingencies. In this background MGNREGA can be treated as a potential tool for development.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are: i] to define the process of operating MGNREGA in aspects of sustainable livelihood of women; ii] to mention the aims of MGNREGA with respect to women; iii] to discuss the nature of participation of women in MGNREGA; iv] to analyse gender aspects; v] to focus on reasons of participation of women in MGNREGA; vi] to elaborate governmental efforts with respect to women; vii] to highlight major limitations in application of MGNREGA, viii] to find out factors in relation to MGNREGA, xi] to offer some suggestions for better application of MGNREGA and xi] to determine uniqueness of MGNREGA for women.

The Act was initially implemented in 200 poorest and least developed districts of India. Then it has been extended to the entire country. The Employment Guarantee Act 2005 guarantees 100 days' paid work each year for every rural household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work. In this way, it envisages improving the livelihood security of rural households. The Act works through the decentralized system of governance. Local community can create projects to meet local needs through the Gram Sabha (a permanent body of people on the local electoral roll that monitors panchayat plans). Each panchayat is expected to prepare a list of projects

technically approved and economically viable) so that the NREGA works reflect village priorities.

The NREGA has a multiplicity of aims. This is seen as an intervention to stimulate local development as much as a means of social protection. Expected outcomes include: an increase in employment and purchasing power; women's participation in the workforce; the strengthening of rural infrastructure through the creation of durable assets; regeneration of natural resources that provide the livelihood resource base of the local rural economy; an increase in productivity and reduction in distress migration.

Participation of Women

The Act requires that one third of beneficiaries of the program be women. Women cannot be excluded from MGNREGA work. In theory, the "1/3 provision" ensures women's inclusion in the labor market in areas where women have historically not had access to remunerative employment. The Act not only reflects the spirit, but constitutes quantifiable components of MGNREGA implementation. The number of days worked helps to measure the success of MGNREGA as an employment guarantee scheme. The wage rate acts as measure the success of MGNREGA as a poverty alleviation tool. The participation of women in the MGNREGA program can be treated as measurement of the success of MGNREGA as an empowerment tool. However, caste and religion play a significant role in limiting the

participation of women in MGNREGA (as in Uttar Pradesh). Certain caste and religious practices forbid women from working outside the home, particularly in agricultural work. Women are too malnourished to complete the labor-intensive work required for most agricultural projects under MGNREGA.

MGNREGA has been envisaged as a gender sensitive scheme. However, a gendered analysis of the programme is necessary for viewing this as an inclusive process. This is related with the crises underlying an increasing feminization of poverty in India. There are some female centric focuses in MGNREGA. These include following features: i) Equal wages for men and women. The guidelines spell out clear instruction for equal payment of wages for men and women in MGNREGA. 'Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers and the provision of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with.' ii) Participation in management and monitoring of the programme. As per the guidelines, a local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee is to be appointed with members from the immediate locality or village where the work is undertaken, to monitor the progress and quality of work. The Gram Sabha will elect the members of this Committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it. iii) Participation in Social Audit. The guidelines mention a social audit forum with active control of Gram Sabha. Emphasis is given to the formation of quorum of those meeting maintaining female participants alongside those from other

disadvantage groups. The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient in particular for REGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalized communities. iv) Providing support for child care, and convenience to households- The need for a crèche at the work site is recognized and the works must be convenient for families: 'if some applicants have to be directed to report for work beyond 5 km of their residence, women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work on the work sites nearer to their residence.' v) Ensuring that single women are eligible. The act recognizes a single person as a 'household'. So it becomes possible for widows and other single women to access this work.

Certain other aspects are linked with MGNREGA in relation to women. Consumption smoothing is related with women's earning from this project: Inevitably, women's earnings from MGNREGA are increasing their contribution to household income. From the survey it has been found, a large majority (72 per cent) of the respondents said that they spent the wages on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day. It could reduce infant malnutrition through positive effects on household's food security and infant feeding [cited in Borah et al]. Another aspect focuses on lower indebtedness. MGNREGA helps to reduce the burden of debt of the women worker to some extent. From the survey, 30 per cent of the respondents said that they

had spent their wages on repaying small debts. It also helps to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders.

Enriching literacy is associated with the improvement of the education level of the women. The percentage of literacy rate increases gradually through the MGNREGA act. A significant percentage of workers – almost 34 per cent spent their MGNREGA wages on their children’s education. Improved healthcare is another noticeable function of MGNREGA. The health condition of the poor people in both rural and urban areas is improving after being involved in this programme. A large expenditure regularly met through MGNREGA wages is on health care, with around 40 per cent of the respondents having spent earnings on this. Poverty neutralization is somehow associated with this act. After the implementation of the act the condition of rural people has improved. This ultimately increased the income of the people and helps to reduce the poverty level. As a result, the living condition is also improving. Community-level effect is an extended effect of MGNREGA. Women’s participation at the local or district level of governance process is usually low in rural areas. But the number has increased after the implementation of MGNREGA in many areas. Many women workers attended the Gram-Sabha meeting held in connection with MGNREGA.

Community level empowerment of women is one of the great achievements of this Act. MGNREGA is linked with intra-household

effects. Women play a major role in raising the economic resources for their family but their contribution remains uncounted because of their performance is not considered monetarily. MGNREGA has significant impact in converting such unpaid work of women into paid work. The act has widened the scope of decision making role of women in household matters. As the wages are paid through formal institutions, so the intra-household status of women increases with their participation. They can control cash resources because withdrawn can be made only as per her own decision. Hence the pivotal aspects of gender sensitive focus of MGNREGA are related with following features. Individual bank/post office accounts must be compulsorily opened in the name of all women MGNREGA workers. Their wages are directly credited to their own accounts for the number of days worked by them. Identification of widowed women, deserted women and destitute women is done in this context. Act ensures that they are provided 100 days of work. MGNREGA ensures that pregnant women and lactating mothers (at least up to 8 months before delivery and 10 months after delivery) are given work which require less effort and are close to their houses. At least 50% of the worksite supervisors (mates) at all worksites are women according to this act.

The programme ensures that worksite facilities such as crèches, drinking water, shade etc. are provided through convergence with Women and Child Development Schemes like ICDS. The Act encourages participation of women groups. The activities of Self- Help

Groups in awareness generation, capturing demand, planning, implementation, monitoring and maintenance of works should be linked with the proper implementation of the act. Challenges are dealt with the diverse socio-cultural and demographic contexts in which workers, particularly women, work for wages as provided under MGNREGA. This is accentuated by prevailing structural hierarchies, traditional mindsets and rigid procedures, all of which dominate the participation of rural women. Predominance of male members of the society is also worth mentioning in participation process. According to C. Dheeraja, N.V. Madhuri and A. Daimari (2013), it is observed that gender sensitivity of the delivery system has large influence on quality of participation of women in MGNREGS. Special focus should be laid by addressing the attitudinal changes of the officials and making them more gender-sensitive.

Women like MGNREGA for several reasons. Firstly, it is locally available. The Act provides that work is to be provided within five kilometers of the residence of a worker. Therefore, women's participation in the work has been feasible. Working at a distant place is difficult for women who happen to take the main responsibility of household chores. Secondly, there is less chance of exploitation. There is a statutory minimum wage, and hence wage earned in NREGA work is much more than the works under a private employer, more so in backward areas. The piece rate wages and formation of small and mixed / solely women groups, have given leverage to evolve their

working norms to suit to their conditions. Thirdly, there are regularity and predictability of working hours. As such, not only the members of the existing workers group prefer NREGA work, but there is also the possibility of new entrants into the women workers group. Again, work is limited to eight hours a day, which is seldom expected in other works. NREGA work can also protect women against migration in search of work. This leads to an improvement in the quality of their life through avoidance of costs and risks associated with migration. It also helps women who are to look after their kith and kin suffering from severe ills. Moreover, women can avoid harsh working conditions and hazardous works at private work place. Since men want more access to the highly paid NREGA work (in backward regions), they very often put resistance to women's participation [cited in Dheeraja et al].

Trishna Kalita in her article "Women's Participation in NREGA" [cited in Dheeraja et al] argues that women like NREGA work for various reasons. Firstly, it is locally available. Secondly, there is less chance of exploitation. Thirdly, there are regularity and predictability of working hours. Fourthly, such works are socially acceptable and dignified. And finally, they are better paid in comparison to other works. In spite of better possibilities of women's participation in NREGA work, there are certain problems associated with it.

To increase participation rates of women workers in MGNREGA, the Ministry has suggested that individual bank/post office accounts must

compulsorily be opened in the name of all women MGNREGA workers and their wages directly credited to their own account for the number of days worked by them. This Ministry has also advised the States:

- To identify widowed women, deserted women and destitute women who qualify as a household under the Act, to ensure that they are provided 100 days of work.
- To ensure that pregnant women and lactating mothers (at least up to 8 months before delivery and 10 months after delivery) are given works which require less effort and are close to their houses.
- To conduct time and motion studies to formulate gender, age, level of disability, terrain and climate sensitive Schedule of Rates (SoRs) and to ensure accurate capturing of work done by women at worksites.
- To ensure that at least 50% of the worksite supervisors (mates) at all worksites are women.
- To ensure that worksite facilities such as crèches, drinking water, shade etc. are provided through convergence with Women and Child Development Schemes like ICDS.
- To encourage participation of women groups, including Self Help Groups in awareness generation, capturing demand, planning, implementation, monitoring and maintenance of works.

The survey data (both qualitative and quantitative) suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere. It has been found that in Sonitpur district the total number of women employment increases from 4.68 lakh in 2010-11 to 5.22 lakh in 2011-12. This indicates that the purchasing power capacities of the women workers have increased [cited in Borah et al].

66.4% women asserted that MNREGS contributed much to the improvement of their social contact. In other words, the new wage employment programme succeeded ensuring freedom and equality for women in civil, economic and social areas of activity (Thomas, 2010, cited in Arora et al). Participation in the scheme has meant that women (65%) are coming out of their homes, not only to work but also to visit banks which they have not done in the past. 'Women can now be seen moving around in places like gram panchayat office, banks, schools, block office without anybody to accompany them.' (Sudarshan 2011 cited in Arora et al)

Power of Utilization of Money: 'What you do with your money?' was one of our questions to the women workers interviewed. Out of 250 women workers interviewed, as many as 78% was found to be confident about use of the money by herself which is great step ahead in terms of women empowerment. By putting cash incomes into their

hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women (Navjyoti, J. 2008 cited in Arora at al). Some kinds of problems are very much commonplace. As regard to other household works, most respondents said, they don't get any support from their husbands and most of the domestic work like cooking, and care related works they used to do after return from work. This means, their working hours has been extended due to MNREGA.

According to Arora at al, there is higher participation in MGNREGA among women in their 20s, when many of them find it difficult to manage other paid work alongside their domestic responsibilities. In their 30s women are generally fit and strong and able to work as agricultural coolie workers for better rates of pay than they can achieve under MGNREGA; while some women in this age group do take up MGNREGA work, few of them complete their 100 days. Among women in their 40s, we again see higher rates of participation in MGNREGA. These include the functionally old: women worn out by years of hard and arduous work in the fields or power looms. For women at this stage in their life course, MGNREGA becomes an important supplementary source of income. Crucially, however, participation rates remain high among women in their 50s and 60s. Thus age can be considered as an important variable in the matter of participation of women in MGNREGA.

Limitations

Like most other programmes, MGNREGA also suffers from some serious limitations according;

- Staff training and administrative set up: In general there is shortage of field staff and proposal for sanction of staff are pending for approval of the state government. CAG Report, 2007 has singled out lack of dedicated administrative and technical staff for NREGA as the key constraint responsible for procedural lapses.
- Non-availability of Child Care Facilities: One of the major shortcomings of the Act is non-availability of child care and raring facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. Different studies show that women remained worried about their children while they are working at MGNREGA worksite even some women do not accept the job facilities of MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facilities.
- Poor worksite facilities: MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place, changing room, first aid, recreational facility for children etc. From the survey it is found that except drinking water facility all other facilities were generally absent. The working women are not satisfied and they said that they had not got any other facility provided by MGNREGA. MGNREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and

laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. Delay in Payments: Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they are the main earners in the family.

- Low level of awareness: In Assam women participation is low because of low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the programme. Many of the male folks have withdrawn from agricultural activities and joined works in MGNREGA. This vacated space in agriculture has been occupied by the womenfolk and this scene is in study areas. Nature of Work: Most of the studies reveal that nature of work is also not helpful for women workers. In most of the projects selected being related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies involving earth work requiring application of physical force, male workers were preferred to women workers (Hazarika, 2009 cited in Kar)

The presence of illegal contractors has sometimes led to the harassment of women workers. Then working conditions have been turned to be exploitative. Normally most of the women are ignorant about the legal entitlements to get work on demand. They are very often turned away by the contractors who think (women) they are less efficient. Although the Act requires that when there are more than five children under the age of six present at a worksite, a female worker (Aaya) should be appointed to take care of them, such a facility is

neglected. This has discouraged participation of women, especially breast-feeding mothers. Again, certain kinds of work which demand more physical ability [such as digging of wells etc.], limit participation of women. There are certain social taboos and preconceived notion about women participation in work. It is said that women are too weak to work outside home. In reality work outside home in their case is socially unacceptable. Social rules are interpreted in that typical way. The hostility of the panchayat functionaries and male relatives of women to female participation in NREGA has resulted in the exclusion of the names of many women from job cards in many places. So hint of nepotism play significant role there. Since men want more access to the highly paid NREGA work, they very often put resistance to women's participation. Further, poor levels of accountability in the implementation of the Act and administrative lapses also act as a major roadblocks resulting in non-compliance to the provisions of the Act. These kinds of activity includes non-issuance of receipts, non-payment of unemployment allowance, delays in providing wages and work, duplication and inaccuracies in record keeping, which were highlighted in the CAG Report on MGNREGA in 2013.[as mentioned in ICT for Women—Creating Gender Sensitive e Spaces for MGNREGA]

A study conducted by the “National Federation of Indian Women(NFIW)” on “Socio-economic empowerment of women under NREGA” in selected districts of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh,

Odisha and Tamil Nadu has found out that there was enhanced women's identity and empowerment as NREGA provided an economic opportunity. Respondents in all the states have been found to be very optimistic about the importance of NREGA in their lives (Dheeraja et al 2010). The study by Sudha Narayanan (cited in Xavier) pointed out that the provision of shade, food and other basic amenities for young children at MGNREGA worksite would ensure effective participation of women particularly mothers who are having young child.

MGNREGA is considered to be an opportunity for rural poor, particularly the women, to earn a specified level of income with a sense of dignity (Dreze, 2008 cited in Farooqi et al). It is observed that NREGA offers the relatively high (compared to the private market) statutory minimum wage and women workers are paid the same as men. Work conditions on NREGA worksites are better. There are perceived dignity in doing NREGA work. The work is recognized by government. Thus social barriers in the case of NREGA employment are lower.

Obstacles

Culture, history, government policy, social, political, economic structures influence participation of women in MGNREGA. All these factors holistically as well as individually influence work of women in this context. Individual and group motivators appear to be context-

specific and locality-bound rather than universally-definable. There are some obstacles which are linked with strict prohibition in participating MGNREGA works. Those factors include institutional, socio-cultural, technical, logistical aspects as barrier. The effects are spread over a seemingly-endless spectrum. Factors facilitating or hindering the rate of participation are also 'external', 'internal', and / or a combination of both. 'External obstacles' refer to those factors outside the end-beneficiary that encourage or inhibit or prevent true participation of women in MGNREGA. External obstacles suggest the role of development professionals, the broader government orientation towards promoting participation, the tendency among development agencies to apply their strategies and approaches to encourage participation. Internal obstacles refer to conflict within a household and a lack of interest in getting involved. There is no 'magic list' of critical factors for participation of women in MGNREGS. So an attempt was made to list out the factors that motivate and hinder women participation. Based upon the responses the factors were identified and divided as vulnerability, motivating and hindering factors. Factors like characteristics of a person (such as lack of skill, literacy), a situation (such as drought), or a person's environment (such as family members' ill-health) that force a person to participate though not really interested are considered as vulnerability factors. It was observed that insufficient agriculture work was one such factor because of which 51.8 percent respondents were compelled to work in MGNREGS. Some

“gender-sensitive measures” such as increase in participation of women in planning, implementation and social audits of NREGA, in turn, will create an opportunity for women’s role in asset management. As it has come out in the study that gender sensitivity of the delivery system has large influence on quality of participation of women in MGNREGS. Special focus should be laid by addressing the attitudinal changes of the officials and making them more gender-sensitive (cited in Dheeraja).

Suggestions

Suggestions for policy and programme design emerging from the study include the following. a. Strengthening active citizenship-- Women’s participation in Gram Sabhas is likely to be increased as they become more aware of their citizenship rights and duties. For proper execution of the process, there are some basic rules. Those include investing in informal groups for this work. Policy has prioritised investment in training of elected leaders for this purpose. It should be a continuous process. Democratic processes require active participation of all. This fact needs to find a place in resource allocations too. b. Broadening the understanding of poverty to include needs of women--The programme could have a greater impact on poverty reduction and development of society. Poverty is understood in this context focusing on women. The reason is that in most of the families especially the constraints faced by women. The programme

needs to find ways of improving its relevance to the daily lives of people (especially women) and addressing ecological poverty, not just income poverty, through suitable modifications to programme design. This will not happen through ad hoc creation of small and isolated tanks or wells. It requires an explicit framing of the development discourse within which MGNREGA is located.

c. Systems of wage payment--Women are employed as unskilled labour on MGNREGS worksites. Over a longer period, enhancement of skills and productivity will be one way of increasing earnings. To overcome the difficulties faced by the women in drawing cash from bank, provision can be made to provide door step delivery of the wages.

d. Complementing the NREGS for different needs of women-- The programme design is perceived to be inclusive, as it is open to all irrespective of age or any other consideration. As a social protection system, NREGS reaches out to the able-bodied; to reach out to meet the needs of women who are at different stages in their lifecycle. A cash transfer or other kind of intervention may be better and more efficient.

e. Improving quality of childcare - The programme design includes a recommendation that mobile crèches need to be available at workplaces. From a policy stand point, the issue of quality needs to be brought to the forefront and not treated as something to be addressed at a later stage after issues of access or infrastructure have been dealt with.

Interestingly economic factors are highly involved in this work. For greater share in economy, competition occurs between men and women for work. There is often competition among MGNREGA workers to obtain work, with gram panchayat presidents left to decide how to “fairly” allocate employment. The ability of women to save the money they earn and to control access to their bank accounts could also affect women’s MGNREGA participation rates. One women’s activist, however, did not believe a separate bank account would help because “even with a separate bank account, the man of the family would still control the money.”[As mentioned in MGNREGA Implementation: A cross state Comparison by K. Bonner, J. Daum, J. Duncan and others] Women at the worksite echoed this sentiment, stating that they did not have a problem with having their bank accounts in their husbands’ names. Instead, women complained that whenever they or their husbands went to the bank to try to collect MGNREGA wages, they faced harassment and delays in payments regardless of whose name was on the bank account. Another structural problem was whether contractor-run sites have influenced the participation of women. In research, it is revealed that people were very reluctant to discuss contractors in anyway, simply stating that contractors were, “against the law under MGNREGA” and that contractors were “hidden” so they did not have any information about them. [As mentioned in MGNREGA Implementation: A cross state Comparison by K. Bonner, J. Daum, J. Duncan and others]

The already “women friendly” stipulations of the scheme are further complemented with state-specific policy decisions. These state-level policy decisions include the imposition of top-down implementation targets, the development of administrative support structures, the issuing of job cards in individual workers’ names, the continuation of weekly payments in cash, the relaxation of workloads over time, and the ban on the use of materials and contractors. Mostly appreciable quality of this act is that no administrative discrimination against women is practiced here. MGNREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. Hence some experts opine that this act has transformative capacity for the path of women empowerment. In developing countries like India, this kind of need based project becomes utmost necessity for achieving all around success in context to women. Women centric bias is ultimately linked with sustainability of them in labour market in those hard days of defeminization of work. This act is undoubtedly a help for attaining self sufficiency of them with the governmental framework. Therefore MGNREGA can be treated as a developmental tool from micro as well as macro level of activities in Indian society especially for women folk.

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