

“Impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the Life of Women Living under Poverty”- A Study of District Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of India is most progressive legislation enacted by parliament. This is the flagship program introduced by UPA government and implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development with primary objective of providing livelihood security to rural poor of BPL families by providing them at least 100 days guaranteed unskilled manual work in a year. The Act has become the fact of life of rural poor and with the stipulation that 33% of the total work will be given to the women it provides the means to raise the socio-economic status of the rural women from BPL families. In this paper by conducting a survey of rural areas of district Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh) and by the in-depth interview of women beneficiaries it is tried to find out that up to what extent MGNREGA is helpful for women in raising their standard of living through the provision of 100 days guaranteed employment. The paper also highlights the factors influencing the participation of women in this scheme and assess the institutional and governance system related to the implementation of the scheme particularly the ways through which employment opportunities are offered to women. The results suggest that MGNREGA has positive impact on the quality of life of women in rural areas but there is also a need for immediate rectifications of some of the flaws observed during the survey to make MGNREGA more effective.

Key words: Participation, Quality of life, Women Empowerment, MGNREGA

Introduction

MGNREGA

Since India got independence many rural development schemes came into existence with their primary objective of poverty alleviation but due to inadequacies in their implementation, could not achieve the main objective up to satisfactory level. After all these development schemes MGNREGA came into existence in 2006 in the form of not merely a scheme but as an Act passed by parliament with its primary objective of eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as well as promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women from rural areas. Basically MGNREGA is a demand driven scheme, labour

budgets are prepared on the basis of demand for work and accordingly funds are sanctioned and this demand driven nature distinguish MGNREGA from earlier rural development schemes. With its provision to provide 100 days guaranteed employment MGNREGA has been dubbed as a gender sensitive program as it envisages one third of all participants as women, allows for daycare facilities on work sites, non discriminatory wages for men and women. The program attaches priority to women's condition in such a way that at least one third of the beneficiaries must be women who have registered and requested for work under the scheme. (NREGA, Schedule II, Section 6:9)

MGNREGA and Women Empowerment

The factual development of any community or society is only possible when the members of that community or society learn to help themselves or in other words they are being empowered. In this regard it is observed that empowerment given the people of a community; the ability and opportunity to take part in decision making process with regard to socio-economic and political issues are affecting their existence (Roy & Singh, 2010).

In every society women play a very crucial role where women have been given chance, they have not only excelled in all areas, but also have played an important role in the development of country as a whole (Tiwari and Upadhyay 2012). Only through empowerment of women can the nation become strong. (Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam).

Lack of adequate access to work opportunities and hence deprivation in control over income and assets, continuing over the life course of women, engenders inequality. This in turn has an adverse impact on women's lower wages and stunts their economic agency and decision making (Soumyendra Datta & Krishna Singh, 2012). Thus one major objective of introducing the MGNREGA scheme is to ensure economic empowerment of women. The higher the income share of women, the more likely they will have a collective social voice and control over their life events. One of the most distinguishing features of MGNREGA is its approach towards empowering citizen including women citizen to play an active role in the implementation of the scheme through Gram Sabha meetings, social audits, participatory planning and other activities.

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). In this context enhanced household access to NREGA jobs and hence income may not be associated with a corresponding degree of economic empowerment of women members in the household. Household and individual well being is not necessarily synonymous as there may be a differential degree of control over household income and assets across

individuals living in the same family. (Dreze & Das, 2006; Rao, 2006).

Status of MGNREGA and Women Participation in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh is the state which account for 20 percent of the total Below Poverty Line population of India but in terms of employment generation through MGNREGA it accounts only for 15 percent of the total person days of employment generated all over India. Last three year's data of employment generation under MGNREGA shows that Uttar Pradesh is lagging behind in employment generation. Total number of person days generated per rural household decreasing since 2010-11(36 persondays per HH) to 2012-13 (20persondays per HH).

The rate of women participation in MGNREGA works is also poor in Uttar Pradesh and it is far behind the statutory minimum requirement. The recent data shows that percentage of women beneficiaries in MGNREGA projects in U.P. remains near about 20 percent only. Now the question arise in spite of huge BPL population is residing in U.P., why deprived and vulnerable section of society do not approach to MGNREGA works.

Review of Literature

Shubhadeep Roy and Baldeo Singh (2010) conducted a survey regarding impact of NREGA on empowerment of the beneficiaries in two districts of west Bangal with 200 beneficiaries as respondents to assess the impact. Before - after method was used and an empowerment index was developed for the study comparing the components i.e. social participation, level of aspiration, self confidence, self reliance and self esteem. After obtaining mean score by the respondents on the components of empowerment index it was found that 100 percent respondents were in low empowerment category before MGNREGA, and 75 percent were found to be low and 25 percent were found under medium empowerment category after working under MGNREGA. Therefore a positive impact of the program was observed in the study.

Neha Tiwari and Rajshree Upadhyay(2012) conducted a study in faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh to find out constraints faced by the women beneficiaries under MGNREGA. Taking a sample of 100 beneficiaries selected randomly and using personal interview technique for collecting data and Mean Percent Score for analysis it was observed that personal and family problems were major constraints faced by them.

Dinesh Das (2012) suggested that one of the most distinguishing features of MGNREGA is its approach towards empowering citizen including women citizen to play an active role in the implementation of the scheme,

through Gram Sabha, social audits, participatory planning and other activities. The author also examined the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries using parameters i.e. income, consumption, inter household effect and community level effect and find out that MGNREGA has positive impact on employment pattern of women. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the Gram sabha, increased capacity of speaking out and interaction etc.

Utpal Kumar and Polakshi Bhattacharya (2013) examined the level of participation of women in MGNREGA activities vis a vis their male counterpart where special provisions are kept for the increased participation of women. With the help of primary survey in Morigaon(Assam) and analyzing data using probit regression model, find out role of gender along with other factors in the participation level the researcher suggest that participation of women in physical activities and decision making is far from satisfactory except from backward communities who are more involved in physical work . through education, primary occupation and age have inverse impact on participation in physical activities.

Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tankha (2010) reported the empowerment effects of the MGNREGA on rural women using a field survey in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. The authors argue that women workers have gained from the scheme primarily because of the paid employment opportunity, and benefits have been realized through income- consumption effects, intra household effects and the enhancement of choice and capability. Women have also gained to some extent in terms of equal wages under MGNREGA, with long term implications for correcting gender skewness and gender discriminatory wages prevalent in the rural labour market of India.

S. Rajamohan & T. Dhanabalan (2013) discussed about various rural development schemes and their contribution in women empowerment in India. The total number of dwelling units sanctioned during the period 2009-10 in Indra Awas Yojana was 3459211 out of which 2036997 (58.8%) houses were sanctioned in the name of women. The total number of swarozgaries assisted under SGSY during 2009-10 including member of SHGs and individual swarozgaries were 978045 and out of which women swarozgaries were reported as 658519 (67.33%) of the total. Under the MGNREGA total employment in persondays generated was 191.16 Crore (2009-10) and the employment for women were reported as 95.56 Crore persondays which was 50% of the total employment under this program.

Gowhar Ahangar (2014) conducted study in Shahabad block of district Anantnag J & K , aiming at analyzing the women participation on MGNREGA. The researcher found that out of the total sample respondents 79% were female

and 77% were in the age group of (31-50) years. Females prefer the labour work in MGNREGA due to more security in the wage, lower risk and for earning an extra income to maintain their families. In the case of married women (64%) before joining this scheme used to met all expenses with their husband's income only, but now they are able to support their husbands financially.

Vinita Arora & L.R. Kulshreshtha (2013) analyze the relevance of MGNREGS on women empowerment in their study in Rohtak district of Haryana with 250 respondents through a field survey. Significant benefits reported by the study includes success in raising the level of employment and income of the rural household women, thereby enhancing their purchasing power, satisfaction and confidence etc. 95 percent of the beneficiaries believe that the program enhanced their credit worthiness and 78 percent women believe that they could start saving money only because of the MGNREGS. 76 percent respondents said that they spent wages on regular food and consumer goods.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out participation rate of women in MGNREGA and factor affecting their participation in this scheme.
2. To find out whether working in MGNREGA has empowered the women socially as well as economically.

Methodology

Using purposive sampling method, 5 blocks of district Aligarh and two gram panchayats from each block were selected on the basis of maximum number of women beneficiaries enrolled in MGNREGA. Gram panchayats Chaudhana and Arrana from block Khair, Lhosara and Atalpur from block Lodha, Sikanderpur Chherut and Manjoorgarhi from block Jawan Sikanderpur, Alipur and Kamalpur from block Dhanipur and Ahmadpur and Badholi from block Atrauli were selected. Those women beneficiaries were selected who have been enrolled in the scheme since last three years and therefore 10 women beneficiaries were selected from each Gram Panchayat and thus total 100 beneficiaries were selected for survey. The list of total beneficiaries enrolled in MGNREGA from each Gram Panchayat which is available on MGNREGA official website www.nrega.nic.in, was used as sample frame for survey. Personal interview technique was used to collect the data. Simple Regression analysis is used to assess the impact of earnings from MGNREGA on the quality of life of women beneficiaries and to assess the impact of awareness level on their participation in MGNREGA. Logistic Regression Model was used to assess the impact of various socio-economic factors, viz., age, cast, religion, family income and profession etc. on the participation of women in

the scheme.

Women's Awareness and Perception about MGNREGA across the surveyed Blocks

To encash the benefit under the provision of 33 percent female workers in MGNREGA, awareness in rural areas about MGNREGA provisions is pre requisite. To take active part by women in MGNREGA projects they must know about rights and entitlements, special facilities arranged for them at worksites and provision of equal wages for men and women. The field survey reveals that the Gram Panchayats

have been able to generate only very moderate degree of awareness about the scheme among the villagers, especially to women. They could make aware them about some special factors like minimum wage rate, wages payable by 15 days etc. most of the women workers from the minority dominated villages have little knowledge about the procedures protecting their rights. Table (1) depicts the level of awareness of women beneficiaries about provision of women's rights, minimum wage and worksites facilities etc.

Table (1)

Contents of awareness	Block wise percentage of respondents regarding their awareness				
	Block Jawan	Block Lodha	Blok Khair	Block Dhanipur	Block Atrauli
Minimum wage payment	30	40	35	30	40
Wage payment within 15 days	75	80	75	80	70
Unemployment allowances	0	0	0	0	0
Worksite facilities	10	15	20	25	25
One third workers should be women	0	5	5	5	0
Equal wages for men and women	50	50	60	50	50
Provision of 100 days guaranteed employment	10	20	20	10	10
Participatory Planning	15	20	20	10	15

From field data

Out of total surveyed respondents from all five blocks on an average 35 percent women know about minimum wage payment in MGNREGA. Awareness about payment of wages within 15 days is satisfactory with 75 percent level. Among all the respondents from surveyed blocks none is aware about unemployment allowance. The level of awareness about worksite facilities and provision of guaranteed 100 days employment is very poor with 20 percent respondents in favour of positive response. The provision of 33 percent women workers is also at worse level. None of the respondents from Sikanderpur Chherut and Manjoor Garhi Gram panchayats of block Jawan , Alinagar and kamalpur gram panchayats of block Dhanipur and Ahmadpur and Barauli gram panchayats of block Atrauli know about the provision of one third workers should be women. A small percentage of 2% among all surveyed women respondents is aware about their right for work in MGNREGA. Thus it is clear from above data that awareness level of women beneficiaries under MGNREGA in all the surveyed Gram Panchayats is not good and consequently women fail to take benefit of local employment opportunity.

After talking with rural women of surveyed villages it is

found that mostly working women prefer work in agricultural labour and labour works other than MGNREGA. According to them MGNREGA work is rarely available, it is not permanent so they cannot depend on it. Whenever they are provided MGNREGA work they become ready to work whether it is for few days only rather than demanding for more work. Atalpur village of Lodha block and Arrana of block Khair are the gram panchayats in which women are registered with their name in MGNREGA for fulfillment of 33% female workers criteria but actually they do not engage in MGNREGA work and any of the male members of their families participate in MGNREGA work on their job cards.

Impact of awareness level of women beneficiaries on their participation in MGNREGA works

An Index was generated to assess the awareness about various rights and provisions of the scheme, i.e. guarantee of job for one hundred days, Statutory minimum wages, work on demand, unemployment allowance, one third work for female beneficiaries and equal wages for men and women etc., Responses of the beneficiaries regarding awareness about these rights and provisions were collected using five point Likert's scale (1 for very poor awareness and 5 for very

good awareness). Mean value of the responses regarding these provisions gives the value for the Index. Thus Index values corresponding to each respondent were collected. To assess the impact of awareness level of beneficiaries on their participation in the scheme, a Linear Regression model was used and null hypothesis, viz., H_0 : Awareness level of women beneficiaries about MGNREGA has no significant impact on their participation in the scheme, was tested .

$$\text{Workdays} = \alpha + \beta(\text{Awareness}) + \epsilon$$

The index of awareness level about MGNREGA was taken as independent variable and annual average days of employment provided to sample respondents was taken as dependent variable.

Table (2)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	1 (Constant)	-19.056	2.733				-6.974
Awareness	14.267	1.050	.867	13.589	.000	12.167	16.366

Results and Discussion

The value of correlation coefficient between dependent and independent variable is **.867** which represents strong positive linear relationship. The **R square** value (**.752**) reflects that around 75 percent variations in dependent variable are explained by independent variable. The regression coefficient corresponding to awareness level is positive and **p** value of **t** statistic is significant (**p < .05**) and which means that awareness level about MGNREGA has positive and significant impact on participation of beneficiaries in MGNREGA. Thus null hypothesis was rejected and it was concluded that if women are more aware about their rights and provisions of MGNREGA they will increasingly participate in the scheme.

Impact of Socio-economic Factors on Women's Participation in MGNREGA Jobs

From the field survey it is clear that women's participation in MGNREGA jobs and their capacity to earn a sizeable income from such job is likely to be influenced by a number of socio-economic factors. The elimination of social and religious restrictions, especially among minority women, increased level of awareness of the provisions and rights of women in the scheme and regular monitoring of their work facilities are likely to lead to an increased level of women's participation in MGNREGA activities. Higher level of alternative sources of income for women and higher income of family make women less imperative to join MGNREGA work. The impact of these socio-economic factors on women's decision to participate in MGNREGA activities can be explained using a binary response model which is called logistic regression model and can be expressed in the

form of equation given below.

$$\ln \left(\frac{P_i}{1-P_i} \right) = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{AGE})_i + \beta_2(\text{CAST})_i + \beta_3(\text{FINCOME})_i + \beta_4(\text{RELIGION})_i + \beta_5(\text{PROFESSION})_i + \epsilon_i$$

$(P_i/1-P_i)$ is the ratio of the probability that a women would participate in MGNREGA job to the probability that she would not participate in job. The ratio is called odd ratio in favour of women's participation in MGNREGA job and would considered as dependent variable in the binary logistic regression equation given below. FINCOME_i indicates the income of the family of i th respondent, AGE represent the age of respondent, CAST refers the cast characteristics of the respondent with OBC category assigned value ONE and SC/ST assigned value ZERO, RELIGION is a social feature variable with value ONE in case of Hindu respondent and ZERO in case of Muslim respondent. PROFESSION is a variable to represent the profession in which women respondent remains engage and assigned value ONE for labour work and ZERO for other than labour work. The impact of changes in the independent variables (Age, Cast, Fincome, Religion and Profession) on the probability of MGNREGA participation is estimated by assuming a logistic distribution. The coefficients $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$ and β_5 are the logistic values which indicate the impact of change in corresponding independent variable on the natural log of odds of participation in MGNREGA

Table (3)
Results of Logit Regression Analysis using SPSS

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	.064	.039	2.648	.104	1.066
Cast(1)	1.034	.959	1.162	.281	2.812
Religion	-2.034	.921	4.879	.027	.131
Income	-.001	.000	10.811	.001	.999
Profession	-2.468	.850	8.423	.004	.085
Constant	7.486	2.558	8.566	.003	1783.643

Results and Discussion

The beta coefficients values in Table (3) represent the impact of change in independent variables on the probability of respondent to participate in MGNREGA and the exponential values of beta coefficients **Exp(B)** represent magnitude of impact on participation. The value of β_1 is positive means that if other factors are constant then with one percent change in age a respondent is 1.066 times more likely to participate in MGNREGA, but ($p > .05$) therefore we conclude that age of the respondents has no significant impact on their participation. Beta value for Religion, $\beta_2(-2.034)$ is negative and significant ($p < .05$), means that it shows opposite impact on likelihood of female participation. Keeping other factors constant, change in religion shows .131 times more likelihood not to participate or we can say women from Hindu families have higher tendency to participate than Muslim women. Beta value corresponding to Family income, β_4 , is also negative and significant ($p < .05$) means that higher the income of family from other sources lower is the probability of respondent to participate in the scheme or we can say keeping other factors constant if family income change by one percent then a woman is .999 times more likely not to participate in MGNREGA. Similarly the negative and significant value of beta coefficient of Variable Profession shows opposite impact on the likelihood of respondent's participation. A woman engage in profession other than labour work is more likely not to participate in the scheme. The factors like age and caste also show positive impact on the likelihood of respondent's participation but do not give significant results. Thus above analysis shows that religion, income of family from other sources and profession of the respondents has significant impact on their participation.

Empowerment Assessment

As per the Government of India census report 2011, women constitute nearly 50 percent of total Indian population. The country is growing at a very rapid pace and it is believed that India will be the next super power and a developed nation by

2020, but without empowerment of women this development may prove to be an ambiguous one. The life of women in urban India has considerably changed with the overall development of the country but the women in rural India are still deprived of basic amenities of life, like nutrition, healthcare, education and social security etc. the MGNREGA having special provision to ensure 33 percent participation of women without any wage discrimination because of gender, has been considered a useful tool for inclusive growth of rural women. The Act aims to provide the availability of local wage employment at the statutory minimum wage for women. In spite of the loopholes in the implementation of the legislation and low rate of women participation in the surveyed region one of the most important issue is that to what extent women participation leads to their empowerment. A rural woman is to be considered empowered when she has social upliftment and economic development. The **standard of living** of the rural women is the best measure of their social and economic development. An **Index** for standard of living is generated on the basis of responses of beneficiaries regarding the indicators of standard of living, i.e. increase in income, increase in expenditure on food and children, financial independence, expenditure on healthcare and support to the maintenance of house etc. Responses of the beneficiaries are collected through a questionnaire having questions on Likert's five points scale (1-strongly disagree and 5-strongly agree), regarding the indicators mentioned above. The Index of standard of living is used as dependent variable and average annual income of women from MGNREGA works is used as independent variable. A null hypothesis, viz., **H₀**: Earnings of women beneficiaries from MGNREGA have no significant impact on their standard of living, was formulated and tested by using a Linear Regression model.

$$\text{StdLiv} = \alpha + \beta(\text{NREGIncome}) + \epsilon$$

Results and Discussion

The Value of regression coefficient **B** corresponding to

average annual income of beneficiaries in table (4) is positive and significant ($p < .05$) and reflects that earnings of women from MGNREGA have positive impact on their standard of living. If their income increases by one percent then value of index of standard of living is increased by .001 times. The value of coefficient of covariance between independent variable and dependent variable is .968 which represents a strong positive linear relationship. The value of

goodness of fit or R^2 is .937 which means that 93 percent variation in dependent variable is explained by independent variable or we can say that this model has good fit on data. Thus on the basis of above analysis null hypothesis was rejected and it is clear that those women who have earning from MGNREGA work, are living in better condition and have financial independence.

Table (4)

	Constant	NREG income
B	.554	.001
Standard Error	.040	.000
Significance (p-value)	.000	.000
t	13.771	38.066
Goodness of Fit (R^2)	.937	
Coeff. of covariance (R)	.968	

Conclusion

On the basis of forgoing discussion it may be concluded that through MGNREGA though a wave and impact has been created in women empowerment but it was not as high as envisage in the scheme. The relative weakness of the program is largely due to its erratic work pattern and low awareness about its various provisions for women etc. On the demand side it is religious male shawonism, per capita income etc. are some of the barriers that inhabit increasing participation of women in MGNREGA scheme. Since one of the major objectives of the scheme is to ensure enhanced empowerment of poor women, it is more desirable that institutional efficiency to generate employment should be improved and social environment should be promoted accordingly to enable rural women increasingly participate in the program.

A development scheme like MGNREGA is supposed to boost up the Below Poverty Line population in rural areas. There is no fun if a beneficiary remains an unskilled labourer even after working 3 to 5 years in the scheme and expects the same type of work in future. MGNREGA cannot be sustained with the certain set of activities like digging ponds, constructing water harvesting projects and roads, micro irrigation and flood proofing etc. because of a limited land mass and the saturation of such works in specific geographical areas. Therefore it is proposed that provision should be made for sparing women from hard manual work and extend MGNREGA program to skilled or semi skilled work so that women become professionally skilled. If Government of India take favorable steps then the benefit of the provision of one third female workers in MGNREGA can be gained by rural women. There is a need for expansion

of MGNREGA work suitable to the natural instinct of women from the prospective of broadening the scope of women's employment. Provision of MGNREGA work with skill development will create mass number of professionally skilled women and lead to the fulfillment of desired objective of empowerment of vulnerable rural women

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