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MGNREGA, Women's Empowerment, and Food Security: Exploring Potential, Realities and Challenges

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Abstract:

Food security and women's empowerment are two interconnected challenges that continue to shape socio-economic landscapes in rural India. While food insecurity stems from unstable livelihoods, underemployment, and inadequate resources, gender inequality manifests in limited access to economic opportunities and exclusion from household decision-making processes. Addressing these issues requires systemic interventions that balance inclusivity with sustainability. This paper critically reviews the role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a policy tool aimed at addressing these urgent issues. Through guaranteed rural employment and women's work participation, MGNREGA gives a raise to household food security while promoting gender balance. However, this paper explores a theoretical critique of empowerment, arguing that empowerment initiatives risk reinforcing perceptions of inferiority when framed as remedial measures for marginalized groups. Instead, MGNREGA differentiates itself by offering equal opportunities for economic participation, fostering a sense of autonomy and agency.

The paper examines gaps between the intended policy and actual ground realities with issues of delay in payments, administrative ineffectiveness, and persistence of patriarchal structures limiting women's true empowerment. On the basis of a literature review and empirical study review, the paper argues that despite MGNREGA as being an important intervention towards solving issues of food insecurity and gender-based inequality, societal will remains at the helm for the eventual successful implementation of MGNREGA. The results highlight the need for policy synergy and grassroots-level reforms to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Food Security, Marginalized, Equality.*

Introduction:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was enacted on September 7, 2005 in India with a primary objective of enhancing the livelihood security of rural households by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year (Dandapat & Maity, 2021).

This opportunity is available to every rural household whose adult members are willing to undertake unskilled manual labour**.**

The key highlights of this Act includes:

1. Provision of a legal right to employment for the rural households.
2. Registration for this scheme by any rural household, irrespective of caste, gender, or income status.
3. Direct payment of wages into the workers' bank or post office accounts to ensure transparency.
4. Promotion of women's participation in the workforce, with women constituting at least one-third of the workforce under the scheme.
5. Utilization of labour to create durable assets like roads, water conservation structures, and irrigation facilities that contribute to rural infrastructure development.

Salient Features of MGNREGA includes:

1. **Legal Guarantee of Employment**:
    - Provides legal guarantee of wage employment to adult members of rural households willing to do unskilled manual labour, up to 100 days per household per year.
2. **Universal Applicability**:
    - Applicable to all villages in the district.
    - Every rural household has the right to register under the scheme.
3. **Job Cards**:
    - Issued to all registered households.
    - Issued within 15 days of the application for registration.
4. **Seeking Employment**:
    - Registered job card holders can apply for work individually or as a group.
    - A minimum of 10 job seekers must apply to initiate new work under the scheme.
5. **Employment Provision**:
    - Employment must be provided within 15 days of the application.
    - Work is allocated from the "Shelf of Works", identified and prioritized by the village community.
    - Work should be within 5 km of the applicant's village; if farther, an additional 10% of the wage is paid as compensation.
6. **Village Community Participation**:
    - The community has the right to choose works under 8 permissible categories.

- A 5-year plan of works is created by the community.
- Proposed works cannot be altered unless they violate scheme guidelines.

7. **Unemployment Allowance**:
    - If employment is not provided, the state government must pay:
        - 25% of the wage rate for the first 30 days.
        - 50% of the wage rate for the remainder of the year.
8. **Wage Provisions**:
    - Wages paid according to the State Minimum Wage rate under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
    - Equal wages for men and women.
    - Wages must be paid within 14 days.
9. **Inclusivity and Facilities**:
    - At least 1/3 of the beneficiaries must be women.
    - Worksite facilities like creches, drinking water, and **shade** are mandatory.
10. **Resource Use and Restrictions**:
    - 60:40 wage-material ratio must be maintained.
    - No contractors or machinery are allowed.
11. **Grievance Redressal and Social Audit**:
    - A grievance redressal mechanism ensures a responsive implementation process.
    - Social audits are mandatory for all works to ensure transparency.
12. **Transparency and Accountability**:
    - The provisions of the RTI Act are applicable to ensure public accountability.

From the above mentioned features it is clear that MGNREGA was introduced with the primary objective of providing a source of income for rural families so as to reduce their economic instability. The key highlights of this programme was ensuring employment to almost all households of rural areas thereby providing economic security which would reduce the rural urban migration. The various work that have been included in the 100 Days work, for example, creation of roads, development of irrigation facilities, etc. would also help in the development of rural areas. Since agriculture is and has been a very important source of income for the people residing in villages creation of proper irrigation facilities, which is a part of MGNREGA would reduce the uncertainties related to agricultural production (Biswas, Santanu 2015).

However, it has been observed that although creation of employment has taken place through this program it has somewhere lacked to provide food availability and accessibility to all residing in rural areas.

Ghosh. J. K, conducted a survey on food security during 2009 reflected that approximately 29.50% of households reported insufficient food throughout the year. Primary reasons being lack of job opportunities as claimed by 80% of the respondents and low income or purchasing power as mentioned by 20% of the respondents. 8% of households experienced additional deprivations, mainly lack of government assistance, inadequate infrastructure, including safe drinking water and sanitation. Difficulties faced by the people in the previous year includes mismatch between income and expenditure due to rising food prices as claimed by 80% of the households and challenges related to unaffordable medical expenses due to illness as stated by 20% of the households. This data underscores the compounded vulnerabilities stemming from economic instability, limited access to infrastructure, and rising costs of essential goods and services.

The responses from beneficiary households highlight critical concerns related to lack of job opportunities and insufficient food.

These findings emphasize the intertwined nature of employment, income, and food security in addressing household vulnerabilities. Somewhere it has been found that though job has been created through NREGA but still employment opportunities for all Or all through the year is lacking as a result of which food availability and accessibility is lacking. Therefore, enhanced job opportunities and affordability of food are seen as key levers for improving living conditions.

Some of the suggestions from beneficiary households for improving the functioning of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) reflect the following key priorities:

1. Need for creating more job opportunities under NREGA.

2. Importance of ensuring timely payment of wages.

3. Better planning for the works undertaken under the scheme.

4. Need for proper monitoring to ensure effective implementation.

A Framework for Inclusion:

The emphasis on gender equity is found in the very design of MGNREGA. The act assures equal wages for men and women, which is the most critical step toward tackling the gender wage gap prevailing in rural areas. At the same time, with the possibility of work availability close to villages, this scheme provides an opportunity to women without compromising their responsibility in households. Additional provisions, such as crèches at workplaces (if available), will help the mother to join the workplace with her infant child. Financial independence gained through MGNREGA has impacted the lives of rural women greatly. Their economic status improves, while financial awareness also increases through regular wages directly credited to their bank accounts. This newly found economic power translates to more influence in household decision-making, allowing the woman to make her presence felt in education, health care, and resource allocation. Beyond economics, the scheme's inclusion has transformed the profile of women's labor in society. The presence of women in public workspaces explodes against the traditional perception of people, bringing the power to more across the table. MGNREGA thus represents how policy intervention does empower marginalized people. It not only uplifts the livelihood in the rural economy but also provides them with a basis for equity in society.

MGNREGA: A Different Approach to Empowerment

MGNREGA, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, is unique in the context of traditional notions of empowerment, especially with regards to women. Most empowerment schemes often

approach the issue of gender inequality by intervening for the marginalized or inferior group, but MGNREGA takes a more egalitarian approach by providing equal opportunities without positioning women as inherently disadvantaged or needing special assistance. Most empowerment programs for women are based on the idea that women are weak or lack power and, therefore, need external help to be "uplifted." These programs generally operate on the model of compensation for weaknesses perceived in women. In contrast, MGNREGA does not view women as passive recipients of aid, nor does it position their participation as an act of "empowerment" in the traditional sense. Instead, it ensures equal access to work opportunities, granting rural women the right to participate in the workforce on an equal footing with men. MGNREGA mandates that at least one-third of the workforce comprises women, but it does not view this participation as a remedial measure for their inferiority. Rather, it recognizes the potential of women to contribute equally to their families and communities without any external validation or reinforcement. In this way, MGNREGA refrains from the stereotypical "empowerment" discourse, where the emphasis is on correcting perceived deficits in women's abilities or status. The human capability approach, as put by Amartya Sen, is a good framework of understanding the difference between MGNREGA and usual empowerment programs. According to Sen, empowerment should expand a person's ability to make choices and act on them, based on their own desires and not on external notions of what they need. This principle is in line with MGNREGA as rural women can earn and contribute to the household income that would improve their financial independence without tagging them as helpless or needing to be empowered. Unlike those schemes that aim to "uplift" women from a position of perceived weakness, MGNREGA respects women's agency, offering opportunities that empower them in a manner in alignment with their pre-existent capabilities and aspirations. This approach ensures women's contribution is valued equally as compared to men, with the understanding of them being part and parcel of economic participation and not people to be "empowered" so as to overcome inferiority.

MGNREGA does not provide a cycle of dependency compared to the traditional empowerment programs. Most empowerment programs are self-sustaining forms of dependency because they believe women will not be able to stand on their own. In contrast, MGNREGA gives women a chance to do work that is meaningful and paid. Therefore, women will achieve economic independence, exercise household decisions, and question conventional gender roles. Women in MGNREGA are not beneficiaries but active agents in their own development. It enhances their skill base and contributes to the economic stability of their families. That is why MGNREGA marks a progressive and transformative policy in compelling times when it conceives the equalities through access to resources and opportunities rather than through compensatory empowerment. It reframes the conversation around gender equality by focusing on equal participation in the workforce, rather than positioning women as "empowered" individuals who were once deemed inferior.

MGNREGA: The Potential and the Reality

Although MGNREGA boasts tremendous potential to change the economic landscape for rural women, reality is often nothing like this idealized fantasy of empowerment. On paper, the scheme promises opportunities for earning wages, bringing financial independence, and increasing the involvement of women with their households in economic activity. Yet numerous studies found a wide gap between that potential of MGNREGA and the real experience of women working under its banner.

Studies have proven that although women in MGNREGA work and thus earn wages to contribute to the family's income, their decision-making power is often limited in the household. Despite their financial contributions to the household, women are always faced with a lot of obstacles in terms of significant household decisions, such as how the money should be spent or in matters related to the children's education and health and even daily house expenditure. This is a crucial disadvantage of MGNREGA; it provides a

source of income for women, but it does not change the dominant patriarchal force that regulates household behavior.

The gendered division of labor within families means that, even with financial autonomy, women are frequently sidelined when it comes to decision-making power. Thus, MGNREGA does not always lead to broader shifts in gender relations within the family or the community. Women may have the ability to earn, but the power to choose how to use that money or influence family decisions remains out of their reach. This points out the gap between the economic potential of the scheme and the existing social norms that continue to confine women's role in the household. Essentially, MGNREGA is an employment guarantee scheme for combating poverty and unemployment. However, it should be understood that while this may provide a route into employment for women, no single initiative can transform the deeply entrenched gender dynamics of rural society. The scheme may offer a route to earning wages, but the social change is one that requires changes in societal attitudes and the traditional gender roles that limit women's autonomy and decision-making power. A policy or scheme can't change society overnight. MGNREGA, for instance, provides work and income opportunities for women, but whether they obtain real empowerment depends on a larger social context in which they are placed. Whether the scheme is utilized, and the patriarchal impediments to women's engagement in decision-making processes overcome, depends on the initiatives of the people and the groups. The choice for the course of equality and empowerment has to be within the realm of society. Moving away from economic participation toward the social and cultural realms will be the communities' responsibility to address the imbalances still limiting women's role in decision-making processes.

Conclusion:

The Pathway, Not the Solution, MGNREGA should not be considered a panacea for gender equality. It is a significant step toward women's economic engagement, but the scheme itself cannot break the shackles of societal norms that have confined women to subordinated roles for centuries. It provides a pathway toward financial independence, but how far this path takes women depends on a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors. As much as MGNREGA can create opportunities, the societal will to empower women fully remains key to translating these opportunities into tangible empowerment.

In *Impact of MGNREGA on Women Empowerment and Their Issues and Challenges: A Review of Literature from 2005 to 2015*, Rajalakshmi V and Selvam V review various studies, documenting the challenges faced by women under the MGNREGA scheme. They discuss the gap between the potential of the scheme and its actual impact, where the scheme mandates at least one-third women in the workforce, but social, cultural, and administrative barriers restrict their full participation. Issues like delayed wage payments, lack of awareness, and limited skill development opportunities hinder women's financial independence and empowerment. The literature also highlights the regional disparities of the success of the scheme, which states like Tripura and Andhra Pradesh are more successful than others like Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. The authors argue that although MGNREGA has provided ample opportunities for women, in practice, its implementation often suffers from poor planning, corruption, and inadequate gender-sensitive policies, thus failing to achieve real empowerment.

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