



Empowering Rural Women: Evaluating the Impact and Challenges of MGNREGA in India

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Abstract:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, was a key governmental effort aimed at tackling rural poverty and unemployment in India. MGNREGA provides an essential safety net for people enduring financial difficulties by ensuring that every rural household has at least 100 days of wage employment each year. It is often seen that the socioeconomic landscape in rural India is greatly influenced by patriarchal practices and conventions, which often marginalize women and overlook their contributions to agriculture. Women confront institutional barriers in owning land, obtaining credit, and participating in decision-making processes despite working alongside males in the fields. Unpaid childcare tasks further limit women's economic empowerment, reducing them to inferior roles at home and in society. Gender exclusion stifles the potential for inclusive rural development while also perpetuating poverty cycles.

In this setting, MGNREGA stands out as a source of hope, particularly for rural women. This research investigates the influence of MGNREGA on the socioeconomic condition and position of women in rural India. This study looks at how MGNREGA has helped women achieve economic empowerment, financial independence, and higher social standing. This study also explores ongoing concerns such as salary disparities, increased workload, and limited access to childcare services. Finally, this study intends to illustrate MGNREGA's revolutionary potential in advancing gender equality and aiding the long-term development of rural women in India. The findings will help shape policy suggestions to make MGNREGA more effective in building an inclusive and equitable rural economy.

Keywords: Rural, Employment, Gender, Empowerment, Social, Economic, Women.

Introduction:

The Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights and freedoms to all citizens, regardless of caste, religion, color, place of birth, or gender. However, significant inequality persists in rural India due to socioeconomic disparities and job scarcity. Historically, societal status has been influenced by occupation, financial circumstances, power dynamics, and gender roles. Women, in particular, face discrimination based on gender and social class, leading to severe inequalities, especially for lower caste communities like Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

In the labor market, these biases worsen income inequalities and other socioeconomic indicators for marginalized groups. Despite the global push for equal pay since the 1840s, gender inequality in the workplace persists, with women's unpaid domestic labor often devalued. In 2023, India's population shows a significant gender gap, with 736.85 million men and 691.78 million women. Social disparities are also evident: Other Backward Classes (OBC) make up 40.93% of the population, SCs 19.60%, and other groups 39.47%. Although women constitute over 48% of the population, they are significantly underrepresented in the workforce, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds.

Uniqueness of MGNREGA:

MGNREGA, originally NREGA in 2005, guarantees 100 days of employment annually across India, focusing on decentralized development, inclusivity, transparency, and community participation. It empowers marginalized groups, especially women, through local infrastructure projects. Adults are entitled to work recorded on government-issued job cards, with applications promising employment within 15 days or unemployment benefits. Women's participation has grown significantly, exceeding mandated levels to 56.83% by 2016–17. Wages are paid via bank or post office accounts, with state-specific rates ensuring timely weekly payments. Essential worksite amenities and social audits ensure accountability. The program promotes community involvement through gram sabha meetings, subsidizes wages, and allocates funds based on state-specific job needs, empowering rural economic growth with compensation and unemployment benefits safeguards.

Impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has significantly helped women in rural India secure their livelihoods, especially those reliant on communal resources like fuel and water. Women in households where men have migrated for work face challenges in managing duties alone, with women-led households particularly vulnerable to poverty in arid regions. MGNREGA addresses these issues by promoting water conservation, supporting forestry activities, and developing sustainable rural infrastructure, which benefits the environment and bolsters women's resilience to climate difficulties. However, the lack of defined rights over shared resources restricts women's access and contributes to social isolation.

Women's empowerment under MGNREGA must be approached holistically, with strong community frameworks for equitable participation and resource allocation. MGNREGA has changed gender roles by providing women with more work options, increased income potential, and better access to food and healthcare. However, while women's workforce participation in MGNREGA is high, their involvement in crucial processes like asset management and social audits is less encouraging. Marginalized women, particularly from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in states like Bihar and Jharkhand, are primary beneficiaries, despite facing financial struggles and social obstacles (Ranjan, 2016). MGNREGA empowers women by offering paid work, improving their economic independence, and contributing to the gradual transformation of traditional gender roles in rural areas.

The data from MGNREGA's official website shows a consistent increase in the percentage of women person-days from 53.19% in 2020-2021 to 58.89% in 2023-2024, indicating growing female participation in the program. This increase is attributed to effective policy implementation, increased awareness, and targeted efforts to include more women in the workforce. However, there was a slight decline to 56.08% in 2024-2025, which, despite being a decrease, remains higher than earlier years, suggesting the success of the program.

Throughout the five fiscal years, women's participation has consistently exceeded 50%, highlighting MGNREGA's role in economically empowering women by providing work opportunities. The high and rising percentage of women person-days reflects the program's effectiveness in enhancing women's financial independence. To sustain and improve these participation rates, continuous monitoring, policy enhancement, and addressing administrative challenges are essential. Ensuring timely wage payments and enhancing support services such as childcare, healthcare, and transportation can further encourage women's participation, making MGNREGA a robust platform for women's economic empowerment in rural India.

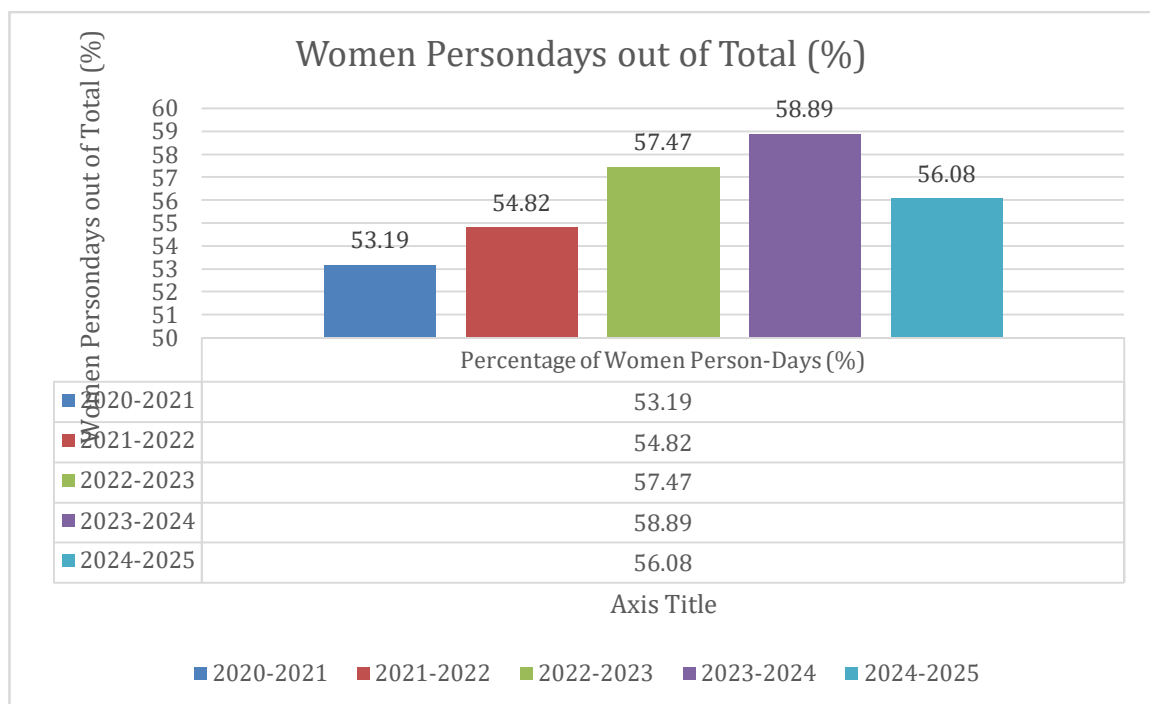


Figure 1 Women Person days out of Total (%)

Women's employment is a significant indicator of their empowerment and development. According to a 2018 NSO study, only 17.5% of rural women and 14.2% of urban women were employed, compared to 51.7% of rural men and 53% of urban men. Interestingly, more urban women had regular, stable incomes compared to their male counterparts. The 2009-10 NSSO study revealed that a substantial number of women were exclusively engaged in household tasks: 465 out of 1,000 women in urban areas and 347 out of 1,000 in rural areas. In contrast, only 5 out of 1,000 rural men and 4 out of 1,000 urban men were similarly engaged in household tasks. While many women working from home contributed financially, their earnings were often managed by male family heads, leading to underrepresentation in labor force statistics. Despite working longer hours than men, women's share of household income was significantly lower, with only 35% of their work time dedicated to income-generating activities compared to men's 61%. This discrepancy highlights that much of women's work, particularly unpaid household duties, is not included in national income statistics, resulting in their smaller share of earned income (Goyal, 2021).

MGNREGA has positively impacted women's lives by increasing opportunities for paid labor. A survey across six states showed that many widows and women rely on MGNREGA for essential income, preventing hunger and improving their authority over finances. Women use their earnings to settle debts, fund their children's education, and cover medical expenses, with many preferring MGNREGA work over migrating to cities (Ranjan, 2016). Women receive their wages directly from the government, enhancing their financial independence and ability to use banks and obtain loans. This direct payment system has facilitated greater access to formal financial services. The act has also promoted women's participation in decision-making

bodies, particularly village employment councils. Recognizing women's unique challenges, MGNREGA has incorporated features such as flexible work schedules and breastfeeding breaks to help women balance work and home responsibilities. These measures reflect a broader societal transformation as women gain control over their lives and finances.

Changing and unchanging circumstances:

Female participants often perceive MGNREGA primarily as a means of income rather than a catalyst for broader socioeconomic empowerment. Despite the program's intent to bolster women's financial independence, systemic barriers often impede this goal. For instance, the practice of depositing women's wages into male household members' bank accounts restricts their financial autonomy. Even when women have personal bank accounts, their control over funds is frequently limited, reinforcing dependency on male relatives. Societal norms further constrain financial autonomy, with women feeling compelled to have male accompaniment for banking transactions, perpetuating their reliance.

These dynamics diminish MGNREGA's potential impact on women's socioeconomic empowerment. Regional disparities also affect program effectiveness, with states like Kerala, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu seeing higher female participation rates (up to 82%), contrasting sharply with lower rates in states such as Assam, Bihar, and West Bengal (as low as 17%). While many women benefit from reduced hunger and increased local job opportunities through MGNREGA, achieving comprehensive gender inclusivity remains a challenge for the program (Mehta, 2019).

Before MGNREGA's implementation, only 44% of women could meet their needs with their wages, which increased to 71% post-implementation, highlighting the program's positive impact. However, even with MGNREGA earnings, women continue to seek financial support from other sources, emphasizing the importance of collaboration within rural families. Despite increased financial independence, men predominantly make household decisions in rural areas. Data from the National Family Health Survey III shows that few married women in rural areas make decisions about household chores, personal healthcare, large purchases, or family visits (Ranjan, 2016).

MGNREGA has increased women's autonomy significantly, with 71% now saving money for personal use, empowering them in decisions about household expenditures, healthcare, family visits, and investments (Ranjan, 2016). The program has introduced new paid work opportunities for rural women, enhancing their financial independence. Despite these gains, women's participation in community development and decision-making remains minimal, highlighting the need for further efforts to bridge the gender gap in rural governance.

However, challenges persist. Women face longer workdays, reduced leisure time, and emotional stress, especially those balancing work with childcare responsibilities. The task-based wage structure, initially designed for healthy male workers, poses additional challenges for women, particularly older or nursing individuals, to meet minimum wage standards. Despite state policies and constitutional mandates for gender equality under Article 15, India continues to grapple with gender inequality in the workforce, evidenced by unequal pay and opportunities. Variations in gender disparity across states are influenced by social norms, political institutions, economic factors, and ongoing efforts to achieve constitutional ideals of gender equality (Nandan & Mallick, 2020).

Conclusion:

Studies on MGNREGA's impact underscore its significant role in enhancing women's economic participation and empowerment in rural India. The program has seen a steady rise in women's involvement

over the years, contributing to their financial independence and ability to support their families. However, challenges such as limited financial autonomy, extended work hours, and socio-economic barriers persist, hindering women from fully benefiting from MGNREGA. Gender disparities in wages and decision-making power at home and in communities further impede women's socio-economic advancement. To address these issues effectively, targeted policies are needed, including improved support for childcare, healthcare, and gender-inclusive interventions. Empowering women in decision-making processes and ensuring direct access to wages can strengthen MGNREGA's impact, fostering a more inclusive environment and advancing women's empowerment and gender equality in rural areas.

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