

Is MGNREGA Programme Really Meant for Women Empowerment? – A Study in Murarai-II Block of Birbhum District of West Bengal

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has become one of the major issues on the global agenda in twenty-first century. The UN Decade for Women, which ended in 1985, initiated the integration of women into development, triggering the formation of thousands of women's organization and networking them across the world. The trend accelerated during the next decade. In 1993, the Vienna World Conference proclaimed that women's rights were human rights. The 1994 Cairo International Conference on population and Development placed women's empowerment and health at the centre of sustainable development programmes. Two years later, The Beijing Fourth World Conference on women adopted a platform seeking to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women. Although there has been substantial progress towards gender equality in much of the world, great disparities persist, as systematic indicators of demonstrate.

India is one of the first countries in the world to give the right to vote. The Indian Constitution is one of the most progressive in the world, and guarantees equal rights for men and women. Commitment to freedoms, equality and social justice lie at the core of India's nationhood. The Constitution of India pledges 'to secure to all the people- justice, social, economical and political; equality of status , opportunity and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public mortality.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution have incorporated 33% reservation for women in the local bodies. Currently, the 84th Constitution Amendment Bill has been introduced in the Lower House for reservation of one third of the seats in the House of the People and State Legislatures for women. Although the Constitution provides legal equality and women social and economic equality is yet to be achieved. This is the fact why Indian women continue to be recipients of welfare remain at a lower status with low literacy and poor access to resource and facilities. (*Mishra, 2009, pp 1-5*).

The present survey is carried out in Murarai-II block of Birbhum district. The present study wants to evaluate and assess how the women are getting empowered through MGNREGA both financially and socially and the present status of women workforce in general and women labourers of Birbhum district in particular. The study reveals if the program is really able to provide the opportunities of work to women, and create a social environment in which women can live with respect and dignity and can play a role in nation building. The paper also points out the deficiencies in proper implementation of the Act in the district and offers some suggestive measures of what exactly being done to overcome these problems.

Objectives of the Present Study

Primary Objective

To study the impact of MGNREGA on livelihood of women labourers with special reference to selected two Gram Panchayats under Murarai-II block of Birbhum district in West Bengal.

Secondary objectives:

1. To assess present status of women workers engaged in MGNREGA in general and in selected block of Birbhum in particular
2. To understand the changing status of women labourers prior and after the intervention of MGNREGA
3. To assess how the women are getting empowered through MGNREGA both financially and socially in selected block of Birbhum district.
4. To offer suggestive measures for the overall improvement of the programme on one hand and overcoming the problems of women workers on the other.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling Method

The present study is based entirely on the primary survey in Murarai-II block of Birbhum district. Data is collected through structured interview schedule.

Selection of Gram Panchayats

At first the Gram Panchayats under Murarai-II block are arranged in descending order on the basis of percentage of women persondays (FY 2014-15). The details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1**List of Gram Panchayatss under Murarai II Block**

Name of Gram Panchayat	Percentage of Women Persondays (FY 2014-15)
Rudranagar	34.07
Mitrapur	32.79
Kushmore-II	30.2
Nandigram	28.91
Andole	28.7
Jajigram	23.41
Paikar-I	20.81
Kushmore-I	18.99
Paikar-II	11.72

Source : <http://www.nrega.nic.in> as on 10.11.2015

From Murarai-II block the Gram Panchayat with highest percentage of women persondays and the G.P. with lowest percentage of women persondays have been selected. Thus from Murarai-II block Rudranagar and Paikar-II have been selected.

Selection of Gram Sansads

Two Gram Sansads have been chosen from each of the GPs on the basis of random sampling. In Rudranagar Gram Panchayat Rudranagar-IX and Rudranagar-XI are the sansads selected through random sampling. Similarly from Paikar-II G.P., Bilaspur and Hiyatnagar gram sansads are selected through random sampling.

Selection of Respondents

For selecting the sample respondents who have substantially worked in MGNREGA projects during 2014-15, purposive sampling method is adopted. In each Gram Sansad forty (40) women labourers are selected. Hence sample size is $40 \times 4 = 160$.

Data Collection Method

Data have been collected entirely from primary source. A structured questionnaire has been prepared as the data collection tool to collect data from the stakeholders of MGNREGA. The field survey is carried out during November 2017 to December 2017 in Murarai-II block of Birbhum district.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation of women belonging to different class and caste engaged in MGNREGA

In Murarai-II block most of the women labourers belong to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (36.25%) followed by Females from households with children (0-5 years) (17.5%), Females from Muslim community (12.5%), Widows (11.88 %) etc. The least percentage of women labourers belong to female headed households with no adult males (6.25 %). Table 2 depicts there are a lot of variation of women participation in MGNREGA.

Table 2
Participation of women in MGNREGA

Variation of women participation	In Number	In Percentage
Female headed households	13	8.12
Female headed households with no adult males	10	6.25
Widows	19	11.88
Unmarried women	12	7.5
Females from households belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes	58	36.25
Females from households belonging to the Muslim Community	20	12.5
Females from households with children (0-5 years)	28	17.5
Total	160 (sample size)	100.00

Source: Field Survey

Present Status of Participation of women

Table 3 depicts that in case of female headed household 76.92% women labourers possess job card and actually participate in MGNREGA as well. Only 23.08 percent women are not engaged in MGNREGA anymore. In case of female headed households with no adult males 60 % women labourers possess job card and actually participate in MGNREGA as well. Only 40 percent women labourers engaged in MGNREGA in past but they have to give up because as there are no adult male members in the family, they have to take

care of their family first. According to these labourers it is hard to take care of family members while they engaged in MGNREGA. It is found that mainly in these households child labourers exist most in number.

Table 3

Present Status of Participation of women

Variation of participation of women in MGNREGA	Total number of sampled households	Possessing a job card		Actual participation		Previously worked in MGNREGA	
		In Number	In Percentage	In Number	In Percentage	In Number	In Percentage
Female headed households	13	10	76.92	10	76.92	3	23.08
Female headed households with no adult males	10	6	60	6	60	4	40
Widows	19	13	68.42	9	47.37	6	31.58
Unmarried women	12	12	100	12	100	Nil	Nil
Females from households belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes	58	55	94.38	50	86.21	3	5.17
Females from households belonging to the Muslim Community	20	20	100	9	45	Nil	Nil
Females from households with children (0-5 years)	28	24	85.71	24	85.71	4	14.29

Source: Field Survey

In case of widows 68.42 percent possess job card but 47.37 percent actually participate in MGNREGA. 31.58 percent widows previously engaged in MGNREGA and now they are not able to continue their work anymore mainly due to old age.

In case of unmarried women all of them possess job card and actively engage in MGNREGA. Nobody quits work because they are young and energetic as well. Their contribution to family income means a lot in their family.

Most of the women labourers belonging to SC/ST possess job card as well as participate in MGNREGA. While 94.38 percent women are having job card but 86.21 percent women are actively participating. Only 5.17 percent women do not engage in MGNREGA anymore. The reason behind this huge participation of SC/ST women in MGNREGA is that there are no barriers or taboos among these SC/ST households to allow women working outside. Besides most of them belong to BPL category. Hence they believe that for having a good life and for betterment of their family both men and women should always engage in work. Even where there is no provision for MGNREGA work, these women still work as agricultural labourers. Thus they can engage themselves in work throughout the year and are able to contribute to family income besides the male members.

In case of women belonging to Muslim community a strange picture is revealed. All of the women labourers in the study area are job card holders but only 45 percent of them actually participate in MGNREGA. Here mainly male members work on behalf of women. The male members of the family work by using the job cards of female members. Women labourers are not generally allowed to go outside in search of work due to some prejudice. It proves that in Muslim community there is still lack of awareness about importance of women working outside.

In case of females from households with children (0-5 years), 85.71% women labourers of having job cards is 85.71% and all of them actively participate in MGNREGA. Only 14.29 percent women labourers do not engage in MGNREGA anymore. These women mainly give up their work in order to take care of their children. In these cases the male members generally migrate to other districts or states to earn money. Hence, the women are compelled to sacrifice their job.

Status of Women Prior and After the Intervention of Mgnrega in Rudranagar Gram Panchayat

Intervention of MGNREGA in lives of women labourers makes a huge difference in various aspects of life. Getting respect is always regarded as an important parameter for women empowerment. As women earn money through MGNREGA, they can contribute to increase family income and can gain more respect from family members. Table 4 depicts that in Rudranagar GP while 25% of women labourers said that they acquired respect prior to joining MGNREGA programme, 85 percent women have confessed that they have more respect than before in intra-household after joining MGNREGA. In Paikar-II GP while 20% of women labourers had gained respect prior to joining MGNREGA programme, 75 percent women get more respect than before in intra-household after joining MGNREGA.

Table 4

Status of Women Prior and After the Intervention of MGNREGA in Rudranagar Gram Panchayat

Problems	Rudranagar Gram Panchayat		Paikar-II Gram Panchayat	
	Status of women labourers before joining MGNREGA	Status of women labourers after joining MGNREGA	Status of women labourers before joining MGNREGA	Status of women labourers after joining MGNREGA
Raising Respect in HH	25%	85%	20%	75%
Decreasing Financial Tension	20%	90%	30%	87%
Increasing social security to some extent	25%	60%	15%	46%
Frequency of visiting bank	9%	80.25%	5%	85.29%
Expense on own consumables	20%	33%	23%	35.50%
Enhancement of Acquaintance	32%	96%	38%	90%
Enhancement of Awareness Level	15%	65%	13%	70%

Source : Field Survey

After joining MGNREGA women are able to pay debt, bear cost of education of their own children and can purchase daily household commodities. Thus the women are able to contribute to a great extent in sharing the burden of family expenditure with the male members. Table 4 reveals that in Rudranagar Gram Panchayat the percentage financial tension has been decreased upto 70 percent after joining MGNREGA while in Paikar-II GP it is upto 57 percent.

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_security). MGNREGA provides this social security to some extent. In Rudranagar GP 60% of women labourers have confessed that MGNREGA ensures social security to some extent in their lives, in Paikar –II GP 46 percent women have the same. It is clear that social security has been raised to 35 percent and 31 percent respectively in the two Gram Panchayats.

After joining MGNREGA women have the idea about formal financial institution like bank. Before joining MGNREGA only 9 percent women from Rudranagar GP and 5 percent women from Paikar-II GP had visited bank. But after joining MGNREGA a huge transformation is found in both the GPs where 80.25 percent of Rudranagar GP and 85.29 percent women of Paikar-II GP visit banks personally and maintain their bank accounts in their own name. Although some women particularly illiterate still depend on their husbands or other family members for maintaining banking transactions.

Whether employed women can purchase any asset or not is always an important criterion to judge their economic empowerment. Unfortunately little percentage of women is able to spend on their own consumables. Among them some spend their money to buy livestock. Some are able to repair their home by purchasing asbestos and other materials. In this case, the percentage rises only 13 percent and 12.5 percent in Rudranagar and Paikar-II GP respectively.

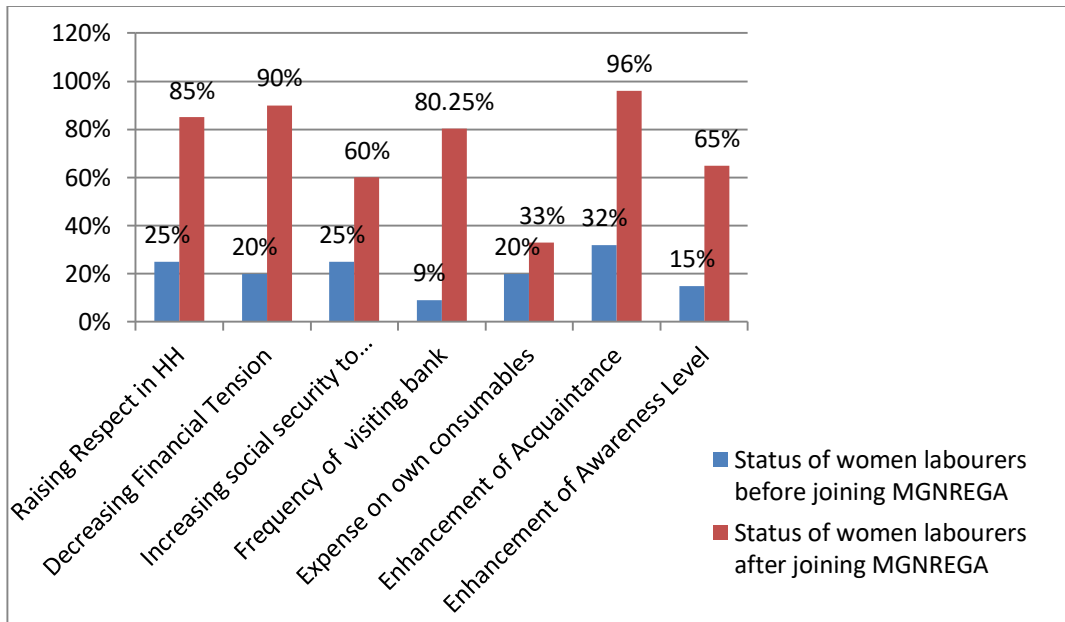
MGNREGA brings the opportunity to the women labourers to enhance their acquaintance and association with each other through work. They can attend Gram Sabha meetings, talk to panchayat members, raise their voices against discrepancies. In Rudranagar GP 96 percent women agree with the fact while the percentage was only 32 prior to joining MGNREGA. In Paikar-II GP the percentage is 90 % and 32 % respectively.

65 percent and 70 percent of women labourers from Rudranagar GP and Paikar-II GP respectively have confessed that they have become more aware about different problems of their villages through MGNREGA while the percentage was only 15% and 13% respectively before joining MGNREGA. The women labourers of both the gram panchayats agree that they are able to know necessary demands or needs for development of their village as well as the villagers.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the graphical representation of status of women prior and after the intervention of MGNREGA in Rudranagar Gram Panchayat and in Paikar-II GP respectively.

Figure 1

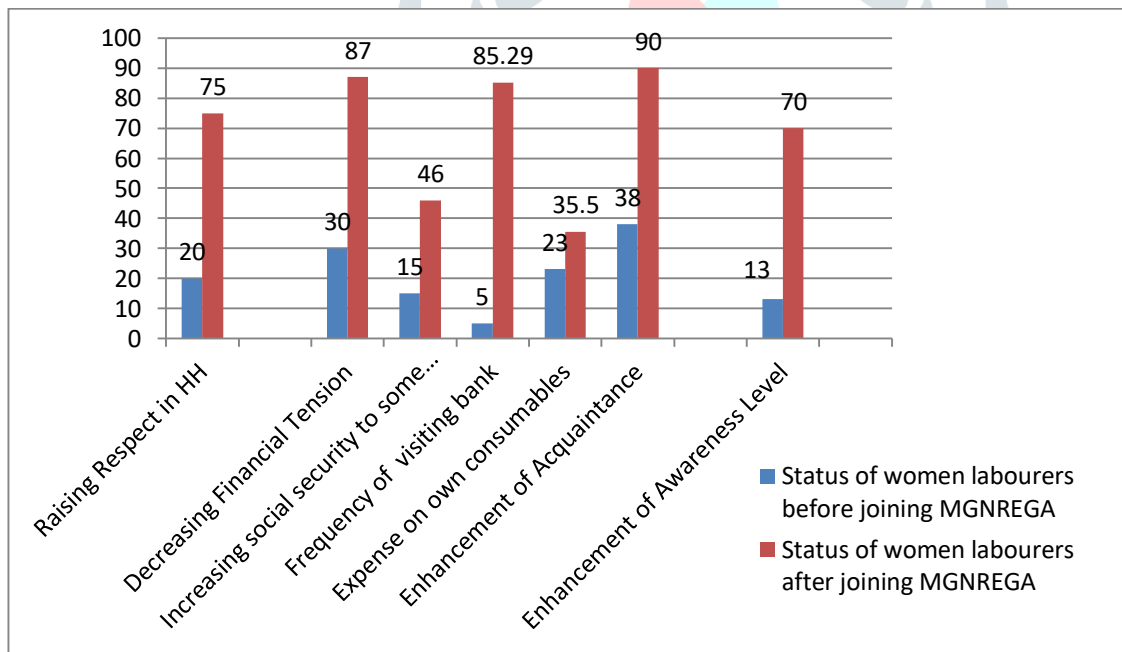
Status of Women Prior and After the Intervention of MGNREGA in Rudranagar Gram Panchayat



Source: Field Survey

Figure 2

Status of Women Prior and After the Intervention of MGNREGA in Paikar-II Gram Panchayat



Source : Field Survey

Ranking On Status of Women Labourers Prior And After The Intervention of MGNREGA

Table 5 depicts ranking on status of women labourers prior and after the intervention of MGNREGA. Fifteen items are selected to provide ranking to judge / assess how intervention of MGNREGA affects the lives of women labourers. For this purpose each item is given ranking from 1 to 5 where rank 1, rank 2, rank 3, rank 4 and rank 5 indicate very low status, low status, medium status, good status and very good status of women labourers respectively regarding effects of MGNREGA in different aspects of lives.

After involving in MGNREGA, women are able to contribute to family income which is not possible prior to the introduction of MGNREGA. Some women used to work as agricultural labourers prior to MGNREGA. Women still work as the agricultural labourers when there is no provision for work under MGNREGA. Hence, in case of increasing income, status of women labourers is given rank 2 prior to the intervention of MGNREGA and after intervention of MGNREGA the status of women labourers is given rank 4.

Increasing income and consumption smoothing come hand-in –hand. If family income increases, automatically availability of various services also increases. Hence, in case of consumption smoothing also status of women labourers is given rank 2 prior to the intervention of MGNREGA and after intervention of MGNREGA the status of women labourers is given rank 4.

Table 5

Ranking on Status of Women Labourers Prior and After the intervention of MGNREGA

Problems	Status of women labourers before joining MGNREGA					Status of women labourers after joining MGNREGA				
	Ranking					Ranking				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Increasing income		✓							✓	
Consumption Smoothing		✓							✓	
Women health related problems	✓						✓			
Lower Indebtedness		✓								✓
Improving Literacy Rate		✓							✓	
Poverty neutralization		✓							✓	
Community-Level Effects	✓									✓
Intra-Household Effects	✓									✓
Enhancement of quality of life		✓								✓
Frequency of visiting bank	✓									✓
Expense on own consumables	✓					✓				
Savings from earning	✓						✓			
Raising respect in HH	✓								✓	
Partly removal of financial tension	✓								✓	
Enhancement of acquaintance		✓								✓
Enhancement of awareness level	✓								✓	

Source: Field survey, 2015

Code: Very low-1, Low-2, Medium-3, Good-4, Very good-5

Table 5 depicts that in case of betterment of women health related problem, no big difference has been seen. The works under MGNREGA, like digging/ deepening of pond, construction of road, renovation of village sewage, social forestry etc. are often found laborious for the women labourers. Hence, in case of betterment of women health related problems where rank 1 is given prior to the introduction of MGNREGA, rank 2 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Literally debt means an amount of money borrowed by one party from another. In villages till today people borrow money from informal sources in high rate of interest. After joining MGNREGA women labourers are able to repay debt to a great extent. Hence, in case of lower indebtedness, it is found through the present study that prior to intervention of MGNREGA only rank 2 has been given, after intervention of MGNREGA it is raised upto rank 5.

After intervention of MGNREGA, women are able to spend money on their children's education. It has been found in the study area that after intervention of MGNREGA number of drop out students has been decreased. Hence in case of improving literacy rate, rank 2 is given prior to the intervention of MGNREGA and rank 4 is given after the introduction of MGNREGA.

MGNREGA programme is one of the most important ongoing employment generation programmes in India at present. It is a demand driven programme. Poverty neutralization is one of the most important goals of any employment generating programme. MGNREGA is not an exception. In case of poverty neutralization rank 2 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 4 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Through MGNREGA the level of community participation has been increased. Women from different caste, religion, socio-economic strata have been working together in MGNREGA. They attend Gram Sabha meetings, raise their voices for harmonious development of the villagers as well as the villages. But before involving with MGNREGA they are not at all aware about benefits of community participation. Hence in case of level of community participation, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 5 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Women working in MGNREGA are able to acquire more respect in their households than before. They are now earning members of family. Hence automatically the other family members respect them more than before introduction of MGNREGA. Even through the present study it has been found that the male members also encourage the women labourers by extending their help and support. But the situation was not the same prior to the introduction of MGNREGA. Hence, in case of intra-household effects, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 5 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Quality of life is the general well-being of individuals and societies. Quality of life is often referred to in discussion about the economic and social well-being of villagers. The general well-being of a person or society, defined in terms of health and happiness, rather than wealth. As discussed earlier, after joining MGNREGA women are able to spend their money for well-being of themselves as well as their family members. But prior to the intervention of MGNREGA it had not been prevailed. Hence, in case of enhancement of quality of life, rank 2 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 5 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

In the study area, all the women labourers have their account in bank. The women have confessed that they never went to bank prior to the intervention of MGNREGA. But after joining MGNREGA they are able to know how to maintain banking transactions. Hence, in case of frequency of visiting bank, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 5 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

In case of expenses on own consumables it has been seen that there is no change prior and after the intervention of MGNREGA. The women do not expend their earned money for fulfilling their own needs like purchase of assets in their names. They mainly expend their earned money to fulfil the needs of their family and for betterment of their family members. Hence, in case of expense on own consumables, rank 1 has been given both prior and after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Though women become financially self-sufficient through MGNREGA, their savings from earning is very poor. The main reason is that there is delay in wage payment. When they don't get wages they are compelled to borrow money to meet their daily needs i.e. purchase of rice, vegetables etc. Ultimately either they cannot save at all or they can save a meagre amount of money. Hence, in case of savings from earning, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and only rank 2 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Through working in MGNREGA women being an earning member of family are able to get respect from male members of family as well as from other family members. Hence, in case of raising respect in household, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 4 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

It is naturally expected that financial tension of HH decreased to some extent due to the additional income through MGNREGA. Hence, in case of partly removal of financial tension, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 4 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Through MGNREGA, women labourers confess that they get the opportunity to enhance their acquaintance and association with each other through MGNREGA which is not possible prior to introduction of MGNREGA. Hence, in case of enhancement of acquaintance, rank 2 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 5 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

The women labourers of the study area confess that they become more aware about different problems of their villages through MGNREGA. Now they have also found out how to utilize their hard-earned money in a proper way. This study explores the awareness, perception and practice of women labourers regarding MGNREGA. Hence, in case of enhancement of awareness level, rank 1 is given prior to intervention of MGNREGA and rank 4 is given after the intervention of MGNREGA.

Social Changes in women's lives through MGNREGA

From Table 5 only factors relating to social change in women's lives are chosen for pre paring Table 6. Table 6 depicts the actual numerical ranking of different factors regarding social changes in women's lives which are brought by MGNREGA. The graphical representation of this table is shown in Figure 3. In case of women health related problem though there is a positive change after intervention of MGNREGA, but the change is very meagre. Despite this factor, all the other factors have been changed truly in a positive way after intervention of MGNREGA.

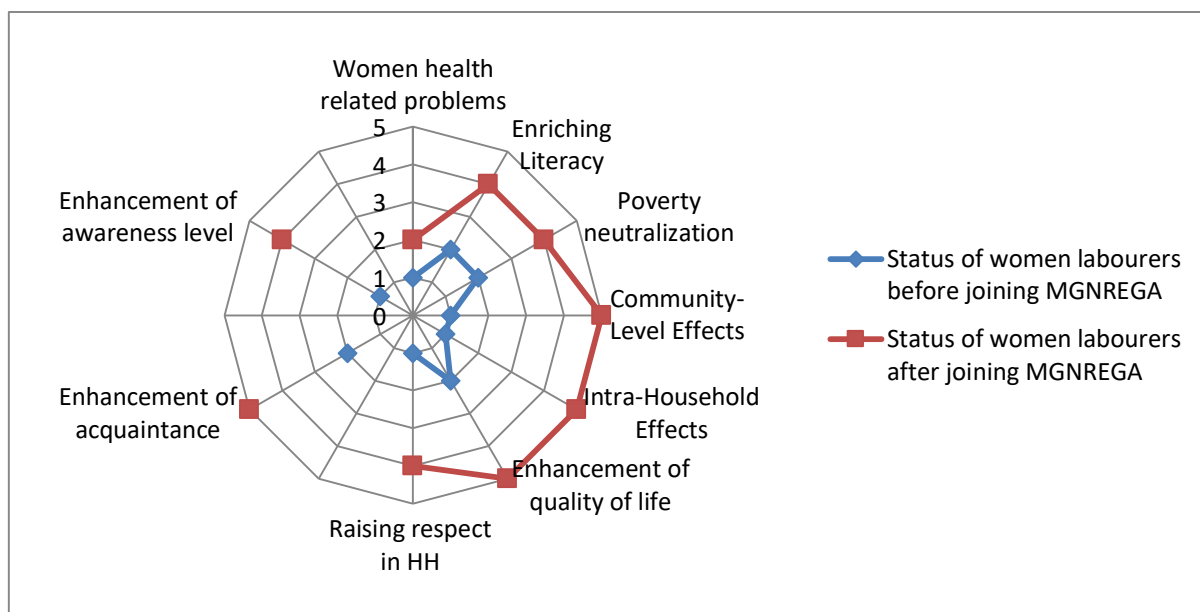
Table 6
Social Changes in women's lives through MGNREGA

Particulars	Status of women labourers before joining MGNREGA	Status of women labourers after joining MGNREGA
Women health related problems	1	2
Enriching Literacy	2	4
Poverty neutralization	2	4
Community-Level Effects	1	5
Intra-Household Effects	1	5
Enhancement of quality of life	2	5
Raising respect in HH	1	4
Enhancement of acquaintance	2	5
Enhancement of awareness level	1	4

Source : Field Survey

Figure 3

Social Change in women’s lives through MGNREGA



Source : Field Survey

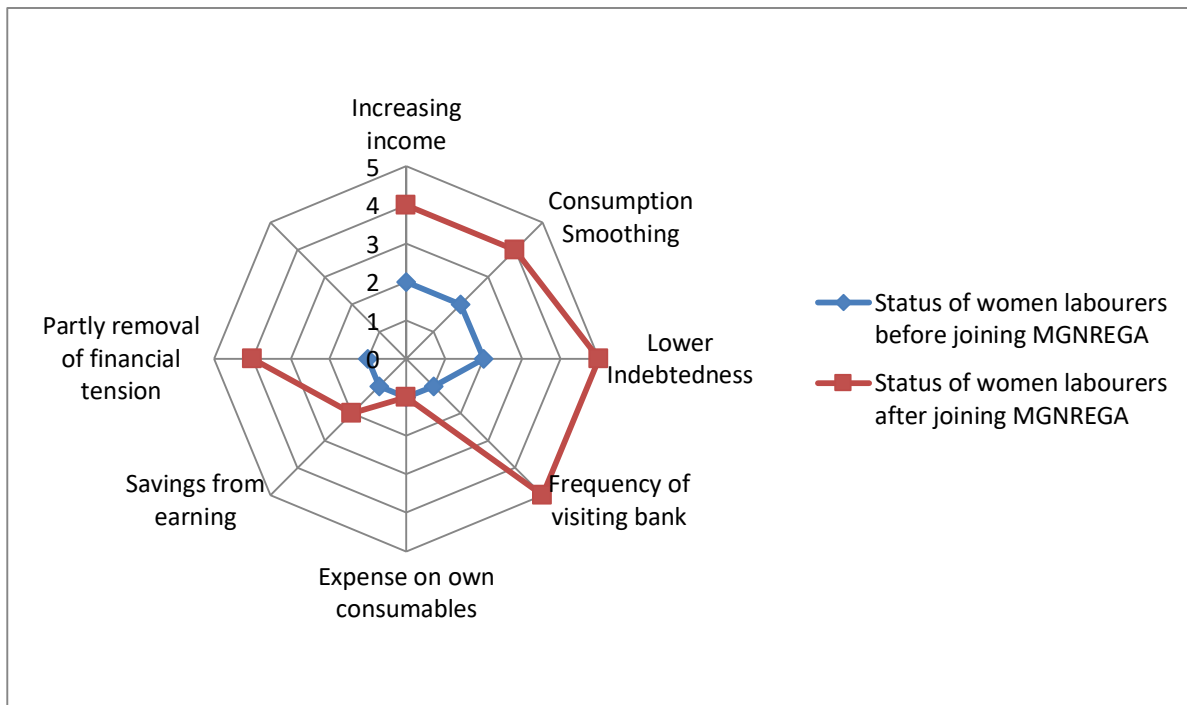
Economic Changes in women’s lives through MGNREGA

From Table 5 only factors relating to economic change in women’s lives are chosen for preparing Table 7. Table 7 depicts the actual numerical ranking of different factors regarding economic changes in women’s lives which are brought by MGNREGA. Here except the expenses on own consumables, every factor is changed in positive way after intervention of MGNREGA in women labourers’ lives. Though in case of savings from earning the change is very meagre. The graphical representation of Table 7 is shown in Figure 4.

Table 7

Economic Changes in women’s lives through MGNREGA

Particulars	Status of women labourers before joining MGNREGA	Status of women labourers after joining MGNREGA
Increasing income	2	4
Consumption Smoothing	2	4
Lower Indebtedness	2	5
Frequency of visiting bank	1	5
Expense on own consumables	1	1
Savings from earning	1	2
Partly removal of financial tension	1	4

Figure 4**Economic Changes in women's lives through MGNREGA****SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The present study shows if the MGNREGA is undertaken on a scale and implemented well, it can reduce poverty at the bottom level as well as it can empower the poor in the short run. The present study has demonstrated the positive impact of MGNREGA on incomes, education and economic upliftment in the lives of women labourers engaged in MGNREGA. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the gram-sabha meetings, increasing number of women in speaking out in the meetings, increasing capacity of interaction, increasing frequency of visiting bank, lower indebtedness, enhancement in quality of life, enhancement of awareness level etc.

Assessments on women's access to the direct and indirect benefits associated with MGNREGA like variation of participation of women in Murarai-II block, analysis of present status of participation of women like female headed households, widows, unmarried women, females belonging to SC/ST in Rudranagar and Paikar-II Gram Panchayat of Murarai-II block of Birbhum district and social and economic changes brought by MGNREGA in the lives of women labourers engaged in MGNREGA.

It has been found out through the study that women belonging to General and OBC caste are least interested to do work under MGNREGA. But on the other hand women belonging to SC and ST are very much interested to do work. Awareness about participation in MGNREGA and importance of women empowerment etc. should be generated in this area as early as possible.

Though the MGNREGA work is continuing on an upward scale, at ground level this scheme does not have desired effect. Hence the considerable gap between ground level reality and written Act should be reduced by proper implementation of the Act. If these problems are kept in mind in future regarding upliftment of

villagers in general and women in particular, the Act will bring women empowerment to a greater extent in comparison to earlier schemes and programmes introduced by the central and state governments in India.

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