

CONSTRAINTS IN PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT (MGNREGA): A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was envisaged as a gender sensitive legislation to provide a fair opportunity to women from rural India to earn without any discrimination of gender. In terms of national averages the scheme under the act has achieved its target but there exist a wide variation among the state in the numbers for participation of women workers. This study is an attempt to identify the barriers that have restricted the participation of women. The paper identifies that lack of child care, nature of work, social norms, illegal presence of contractors, delay in payment and lack of involvement of women in the planning stage are the constraints that have limited the participation of women in the Scheme. The involvement of local initiatives likes Kudumbashree and Self Help Groups (SHGs), use of Information Communication Technology (ICT), involvement of NGOs have enabled some states to have a higher participation of women workers than others. The paper concludes with suggestions on policy and implementation measures that could be taken to enhance participation of women in the Scheme and thus, enable the benefits of the Scheme to reach many more rural women.

Keywords

MGNREGA, Women Employment, Constraints.

Introduction

Women can become agents of socio-economic transformation and so efforts are needed to strengthen their participation in household livelihood security and asset management activities. During the last two decades, a number of interventions in the transformative process have been put into place and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one such initiative. The social audits of MGNREGA over the years indicate that the program has had a positive impact on the social and economic well-being of rural women workers. At the same time, however, some significant challenges have emerged which have acted as impediments to participation of women in the program. In India the participation of women is not dependent on her desire to participate but on numerous other factors. This study is an attempt to identify these numerous factors that have restricted participation of women in MGNREGA and suggest measures facilitate the percolation of benefits to the grassroots.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (NREGA) guarantees 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to participate in unskilled manual work. It was formulated with two main objectives namely rural development and employment. The Act targeted to build sustainable infrastructure in the rural areas of the country like farm ponds for water conservation, check dams & earthen dams for flood prevention, afforestation and construction of roads, playgrounds & toilets. It was an attempt to fulfill Gandhiji's dream of 'Gram Swaraj' and so Government of India renamed the scheme as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on 2nd October, 2009 (Ahuja et al). The Scheme under MGNREGA was launched at Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh on 2nd February 2006 and it initially covered 200 of the most backward districts across India. The second phase saw the addition of 130 districts and with effect from 1st April 2008, 274 additional districts were drawn into the ambit of the Act.

MGNREGA did not have women empowerment as its primary objective. However, there were explicit provisions which made it a 'gender sensitive' legislature. The Schedule II (34) of the Act stated that equal wages for men and women were to be paid. This was a completely unheard concept in the rural agricultural sector before this Act. The Schedule II (6) specified that priority should be given to women workers and the number of women workers should be at least one-third of total workers at the worksite. The third relevant provision was the entitlement to at least a hundred days of work at the household level, the allocation of the days of work within the household was left to the household members, thus allowing women a chance to participate at work sites (Khera and Nayak, 2009). Another significant provision was stated in Schedule II (28) of the Act which required that child-care facilities be provided at worksite if children below six years accompanied their working mothers. The provisions like work within a radius of five kilometers, members of the family working at the same work site and absence of contractors were not specifically for women yet they were an added attraction for women to participate in MGNREGA.

The operational guidelines had also incorporated measures sensitive to gender-related issues (Holmes, et al., 2011). In the allocation of work, the guidelines stated that women should be given preference on worksites closest to their place of residence (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, 2013). In addition the guidelines suggested that social audits must be scheduled in such a way that women workers can participate without constraints. The Act itself provided for women's representation in local, state and central committees associated with the implementation of the Act (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, 2013). In the context of wage payments to bank accounts, the Act directed

the local governments to consider individual and joint accounts for payment of wages of women workers instead of crediting income solely to the account of the male head of household.

The provisions of the Act have ensured that participation of women workers has seen a significant rise in the last decade of MGNREGA implementation. However this rise has been uneven with some states witnessing a higher percentage growth of women workers getting registered under the scheme as compared to others states. The studies found that the variation in the number to be associated with several obstructions with regard to implementation of the 'women friendly' provisions of the scheme.

Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the constraints that have acted as roadblocks in the participation of women in MGNREGA. This identification of constraints both in policy and implementation are relevant as they will enable the government to take measures to remove them. This will ensure that the critical gains made by women workers in accessing work, income, food and healthcare for themselves and their families are not lost and are rather available for other women workers in rural India.

Methodology

This study is based on secondary data. The sources of the data are published and unpublished sources like books, journal articles, magazine articles, reports, publications, unpublished doctoral dissertations and the World Wide Web.

Review of Literature

A number of researchers, various institutions and NGOs have conducted several studies on the employment of women in the Scheme under MGNREGA. The findings related to the constraints to women participation and suggestions for removal of these impediments are discussed below:

Khera and Nayak (2008) in their survey of six states observed that the participation of women in MGNREGA was below the required minimum of 33 per cent. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar had women accounting for only 5 and 13 per cent of the MGNREGA workforce respectively. While in Jharkhand it was 18 per cent and in Chhattisgarh it was 25 per cent. The states where women representation was above the stipulated level were Madhya Pradesh (44 per cent) and Rajasthan (71 per cent). On the question of what prevented women from joining the MGNREGA in larger numbers in the other States the answer by Gram Panchayat functionaries was that women were not interested in MGNREGA work. A contrary view emerged when the researchers spoke to women directly. Most women not only expressed a desire to work but also highlighted the barriers that prevented their participation. In many areas there were inflexible social norms which prevented women from working outside the house. The researchers observed that in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar the women were told that program was not for them. The second big hurdle was the lack of child-care facilities. The investigators did not find child-care facilities anywhere (except at two or three worksites, that too possibly as window dressing). The absence of these facilities was crippling for women, especially those with breastfeeding babies. Thirdly, the illegal presence of contractors at many worksites affected the availability of work and its benefits for women. At some worksites in Madhya Pradesh, contractors offered work only to young, able-bodied men. It was observed that worksites where contractors were involved, 35 per cent of women workers faced some harassment, as against only 8 per cent at contractor-free worksites. Fourthly some states had productivity norms which were extremely stringent and the nature of work offered came in the way of participation of rural women. In Jharkhand the standard task for a day's work at the time of the survey was digging 110 cubic feet (in soft soil), which was far beyond the capacity of a women worker. In other similar situations the nature of work offered under MGNREGA acted as a barrier to the participation of women. Fifthly, delayed payments came in the way of participation of poor women particularly in case of single women, who could not afford to wait as they were the sole earners in the family. When the wages did not come on time, women workers were often forced to return to previous, less-preferred forms of employment. Considering the control on wages aspect the authors have suggested that there should be one account per registered MGNREGA worker or at least joint bank accounts instead of men only accounts.

Sudha Narayanan (2008) conducted a survey of crèche facilities under MGNREGA in Viluppuram district of Tamil Nadu with an objective of understanding the MGNREGA and the childcare practices of working women. The study found that childcare was a major problem for many of the women workers. The mothers with children below age three years faced most problems of child care when they worked for MGNREGA. The Scheme under the Act could benefit them more if the provision of shade, food and other basic amenities for young children at MGNREGA worksite could be ensured. The participation of women particularly mothers who have young child would increase significantly, if measures related to crèche were implemented.

Sasi Kumar B. (2012) in his study observed the dilemma of young mothers in Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu who worked under the MGNREGA, even though it played a positive role in their lives. Serious issues in implementation such as lack of availability of crèches for mothers of young children and the continued illegal presence of contractors had acted as deterrents to involvement of women in MGNREGA.

Farooqi and Saleem (2015) in their study on MGNREGA and women empowerment in BPL families in Aligarh district of Uttar Pradesh found that the erratic work pattern and low awareness about MGNREGA provisions made it a weak proposition for women participation. The restrictions from family head because of social and religious taboos, work load on own land and care for cattle, unavailability of guaranteed 100 days of employment and payment of unemployment allowance were the other strong constraints withholding women participation. Low wage rate in MGNREGA, rare availability of work and very short days of employment for women were also the issues that hindered the participation of women in MGNREGA. Some women respondents also reported that working under MGNREGA involved harder manual labor than working in farms in the study area.

Saty Sundaram (2011) in his assessment of MGNREGA identified confusion about the operational requirements of the act, absence of any grievance redress system and lack of independent monitoring system as the constraint to women participation in MGNREGA. The researcher noted that women workers faced problems in the form of verbal abuse, harassment and lack of child care facilities and these had an impact on their participation.

Dinesh Das (2012) in his examination of impact of MGNREGA on women participation through secondary research identified certain barriers to participation of women in MGNREGA. The non-availability of child care facilities, low level of awareness, nature of work, poor worksite facilities, illegal presence of contractors and delay in payments were the shortcomings responsible for the low level of participation of women workers. Poor implementation across the nation mainly in north eastern state had led to further loss of participation of women.

Tiwari and Upadhyay (2012) studied the constraints faced by women in Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The study revealed that women participation was affected by constraints such as non-cooperation of family members, too much workload, domestic work neglect, no extra

work undertaken due to fatigue and children left uncared at home. The worksite constraints faced by women were lack of safe drinking water, lack of crèche facility, ex-gratia payment not given after injury and no shade during rest period. These together with operational constraints had a negative effect on participation rate of women.

Rehman and Gul (2013) found that the highest rate of participation of women in MGNERGA activities during 2011-12 in Kashmir was in Anantanag (i.e. 2.32%), the lowest participation was in Pulwama (i.e. 0.06%) and in other districts women's participation in MGNREGA was low as compared to the national average. Their study found that majority of the women who were interviewed had no job card. The respondents stated that their male family members had the job cards so there was a restriction on their participation in MGNERGA work. Many women explained that religious norms forbade women from working outside the home. Women of the study area were of the opinion that the daily wages they received in MGNERGA work were lower than what they earned in private work. Furthermore, sometimes the daily rate for MGNREGA work came very late and sometimes it was not as per the work done, because of corruption and other factors. The women stated that participation would increase if child care services were provided as most of the women workers had breastfeeding infants. The study suggested that the State Rural Development Department needs to make special provision for households where job cards are in the name of women. This would enable women to participate actively in MGNREGA.

Bishnoi, Rampal and Meena (2015) conducted a comparative study of constraints perceived by the respondents in taking advantage of MGNREGA in Bikaner and Ludhiana district of Rajasthan and Punjab state respectively. The constraints were categorized into six categories namely mate and registration, work, wages, job card, facilities & social constraints. The major constraints observed by the 120 rural women interviewed in both the states were illiteracy, difficulty in filling form and completing complex procedure of registration, laborious nature of work for women, low wage rate, unnecessary delay in wage payment, more job card and less employment, elite group within workers capturing most of job card and lack of child care facility.

Manisha Nair, Proochista Ariana, and Premila Webster (2014) conducted a study to explore the experiences of mothers employed in MGNREGA in Dungarpur district of Rajasthan. The study found that mothers felt that there was a compromise in infant care and feeding due to long hours of work and lack of alternative adequate care arrangements. Furthermore, the low wage rate and delayed payments outweighed the benefits from the scheme to women workers.

Arora et al (2013) in their research found that with the exception of provision for drinking water other worksite facilities like crèche, resting place, first-aid, recreational facility for children and other facilities for the betterment of gender were absent at the worksites. The double load of work inside and outside the house led to increase in working hours and acted as deterrent to participation in MGNREGA. Delay in wage payment was a hindrance particularly for single women, who could afford to wait as they were the only earners in the family. When these single earner women did not get wages in time, they were bound to return to previous, less preferred job. This delay in wages was due to long process of release of money after submission of the completion report of every project by area engineer. Another constraint was the introduction of wage payments through banks. When a single account was opened per job card the account was mostly opened in the name of a male member of the family. This meant that women were dependent on men to withdraw their income. The awareness about MGNREGA entitlements among the women workers was very low. In addition to that since a beneficiary was neither getting 100 days of work nor unemployment allowance so there was no attraction for women to join the work under the Scheme.

Bhattacharyya & Vauquiline (2013) studied the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries in Kamrup and Barpeta district of Assam found that absence of childcare facilities was a hindrance to women's full participation at the worksites. In addition, the absence worksite facilities such as toilets, first aid and work-site-equipment's, illegal presence of contractors and discontinuity of work due to massive corruption were the other deterrents to participation of women in Assam.

Kar (2013) identified that a major shortcomings of the Scheme was the non-availability of proper crèche facilities at the work site even though the Act had a provision for them. The study found that in many states the women participation was low because of low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the program. The study noted that except drinking water facility all other facilities were generally absent. Delays in payments were also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women as they were the main earners in the family. Banks were far from the village so it became difficult for the women to open bank accounts and draw cash which too discouraged women participation.

Borah & Bordoloi (2014) conducted a study which found agreement with the CAG Report, 2007 which had singled out that lack of dedicated administrative and technical staff for MGNREGA as the key constraint responsible for procedural lapses. The other major shortcoming of the Act was the non-availability of child care facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. Women remained worried about their children while they are working at the worksite and some women did not accept the job because of non-availability of proper child care facilities. From the survey it was found that except drinking water facility all other facilities were generally absent. Delay in payments was also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they were the main earners in the family. In Assam women participation was low because of low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the programme. Many of the male folks had withdrawn from agricultural activities and joined work in MGNREGA and the vacant space in agriculture has been taken over by the women.

Smita Nayak (2013) conducted the study with the objective of understanding how MGNREGA impacted the socio economic empowerment of tribal women in Odisha. The study found that in Rajgangpur Block of Sundergarh district of Odisha the involvement of tribal women in MGNREGA program was marginal and where they were involved they were a subject of exploitation. The study highlighted the existence several bottlenecks like lack of tribal women involvement at the planning stage of the work. Lack of creche facilities at worksites, low level of awareness, lack of women's ownership of job cards and bank accounts, wage discrimination between men and women, harassment at the workplace and lack of appropriate gender friendly methods of information dissemination. The researcher was of the view that MGNREGA needed to address governance lapses, sensitized the implementers of the scheme and provide free legal assistance to the beneficiaries who were deprived of their entitlement in order to be effective.

Soumya Mohanty (2012) in her dissertation on MGNREGA and tribal livelihood in Sundargarh district of Orissa noted that norms of religion and biasness in distribution of job card, dominance of elite families, defective leadership and improper coordination among the stakeholders stood as hurdles in the participation of tribal women workers.

Mudliyar and Ghorude (2016) in their study on tribal women empowerment through MGNREGA in South Goa observed that the reasons for the low participation of women were family problems, religious and social restrictions, availability of easier alternate employment opportunities, inefficiency of Panchayat in providing 100 days of employment, higher income from other sources and absence of unemployment allowance.

Measures for improvement

Some states have adopted certain measures which have resulted in increased participation of women. These could be considered for adoption after necessary adaptation has taken place to suit the needs of the women workers.

Puthukkeril & Manoj (2015) study suggested that the model followed in Kerala of using the help of Government-sponsored poverty alleviation projects like 'Kudumbashree', higher wage per day and also direct payment to the workers should be continued and strengthened. Active support and co-operation from the strong machinery of 'Kudumbashree' needs to be ensured and further strengthened. Increased usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and various e-Governance tools would reduce cost, enhance operational efficiency, reduce corruption by middle men and increase participation of women workers. A regular monitoring and follow up of the system, minimizing the bureaucratic interventions, greater participation of the local self-government and women workers was needed to enhance the participation of women workers.

Ahngar (2014) examined the women participation in MGNREGA in Shahabad block of Anantnag district of Jammu & Kashmir and suggested some measures to improve the level of participation of women. The study found that employment provided under this scheme was limited to agricultural sector so expansion is essential. Social audit under MGNREGA should be strengthened by use of more creative use of information technology to plug frauds and leakages. Facility for speedy registration and job card distribution needs to be put in place. Allocation of fund for the purpose of promotion in a campaign made with the support from media and other agencies needs to be streamlined to reduce corruption in fund allocation.

Gundeti Ramesh and T.Krishna Kumar (2009) in their study highlighted that the beneficiaries needed wages to be paid to them on time. Health and life insurance benefits were required not only during the working days but other days also. There should be better lines of communication between beneficiaries and officials and the nature of the work should be amicable to all the workers and beneficial to the community. Effective social audit was necessary to eliminate bogus beneficiaries.

Farooqi and Saleem (2015) noted that the women beneficiary remained an unskilled laborer even after working 3 to 5 years in the scheme. Since MGNREGA cannot be sustained with the certain set of activities like digging ponds, constructing water harvesting projects and road because of a limited land mass and the saturation of such works in specific geographical areas, provisions need to be made for sparing women from hard manual work and extend MGNREGA program to skilled or semiskilled work so that women became professionally skilled and participation numbers improve.

Pankaj and Tankha (2010) in their research noted that participation rate would increase significantly if the working conditions were made more conducive by enforcing and strengthening existing provisions and adding new ones. Examples would be the provisions for breastfeeding breaks for lactating women and flexibility in working hours, provision of Crèche connected with the Anganwadi or Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres, maternity relief for women along the lines of MEGS (Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme), make-shift toilets at the worksite and innovations in work instruments so as to reduce work toil. Increased participation in procedural aspects and greater control over the types and management of assets can increase social and community benefits. The Kerala model of linking MGNREGS with women's groups (Kudumbashree) may be useful for greater process participation. A minimum representation of women among the MGNREGA functionaries like programme officers, rozgar sevaks, ombudsmen, members of vigilance and monitoring committees, mates would be useful. In addition to the implementation issues there are social and cultural contexts that curtail the participation of women in some places. Consistent community mobilisation and a proactive role of the state could compensate for some of these social and cultural constraints.

Results and Discussion on the Literature Review

The analysis of the studies revealed that the single most important constraint to women participation in MGNREGA was the non-availability of crèche facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision (Khera and Nayak, 2008; Narayana, 2018; Das, 2009; Rehman & Gul, 2013). Numerous studies found that women remained worried about their children while they are working at MGNREGA worksite. Some women even refused to accept the facility of getting paid work under MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facilities. The other obstacles for respondents to participate in MGNREGA even though they were willing to work were social norms (Khera and Nayak, 2008; Farooqi and Saleem, 2015; Rehman & Gul, 2013), dual responsibility of work inside and outside the house (Arora et al, 2016; Tiwari and Upadhyaya, 2012), lack of worksite facilities, own agricultural works, wages less than market wages and worksite harassment. Delayed payment (Khera and Nayak, 2008; Dinesh Das, 2012; Kamala Das, 2009), inadequate awareness, corruption, discrimination, illegal presence of contractors, inability to get guaranteed work further reduced the scope of participation of women in MGNREGA.

The studies revealed that nature of work was also not helpful for women workers. Most of the projects selected were related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies. These involved application of physical force and male workers were preferred to women workers (Hazarika, 2009).

Since the success of MGNREGA depends upon its proper implementation most of the pitfalls of implementation need to be taken care off. This can happen only if proper processes and procedures were put into place. There needs to be continuous efforts towards creating adequate awareness on different provisions of MGNREGA among the people. Creating awareness is necessary not only to motivate the people to work under the scheme but also to encourage them to participate in its planning and implementation.

The first step in the direction of an effective implementation would be provision of various worksite facilities like shade, safe drinking water and especially child care facilities as per the provisions of the Act. The functionaries of Anganwadis may also be reviewed so that MGNREGA women workers are ensured of the safety of children. Widowed women, deserted women and destitute women, who qualify as a household under the Act, have to be identified to ensure that they are provided Job Cards and are given 100 days of work.

MGNREGA provides unskilled manual work to the job seeking people. The fact that women in rural India are the worst sufferers of malnourishment and inadequate access to health facilities so it would be unjust to subject them to stress of hard manual work year on year. Secondly the women reporting at worksites are in various age brackets. Thus the design of the programme needs to accommodate the variations in life cycle and physical ability to undertake hard manual labour.

The issue of awareness about scheme and the complex paper work involved could be taken care by involvement of NGOs. Female members of Panchayati Raj Institutions can be involved for social mobilisation and guidance to women workers. NGOs can play a significant role in the active participation of women as wage payment under the scheme is better than in other employment avenues in rural India (Sudarshan, 2010)

Special effort needs to be undertaken to educate women about participation in social audit. The non-participation of rural women in the planning stage puts another obstacle for planners in planning work suitable for rural women. The Panchayati Raj Institutions can contribute to planning and running the program effectively. Corruption is another issue which needs to be addressed to ensure that undue delay in payment and undue deduction in payment can be done away with. A proper monitoring mechanism should be developed that will ensure speedy redressal of grievances. Social Audit by an independent agency or educational institutions needs to be undertaken at regular interval. The Act considers a single member family as a household. This description does not consider the single women residing with her brother's family or with the family of the any relative having own earning from any source in the absence of her father and mother as a household. In the event of a women having a marital status as unmarried, widow or divorcee, an independent earning status and if she resides with her brother's family she loses the chance of getting her name on the job card and an opportunity for employment under MGNREGA. This is an important consideration as social norms in rural India do not allow a single woman to reside on her own. Self-employment is the only option for rural women, who do not have any other options of work and it in most of the cases is not very remunerative. Poor single women, if employed by an employer in most of the cases are exploited and under-paid.

An 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. It should be ensured that at least 50% of the worksite supervisors (Mates) at all worksites are women. These measures may not be sufficient to make the implementation and policy associated with MGNREGA water tight but they do reflect the intent and direction the Scheme under the Act will take in the future. In the current scenario of the pandemic when migration from urban to rural areas has taken place then implementation of these measures acquires even more significance as a boost to rural economy is the need of the hour.

Conclusion

This study concludes by suggestions on the observations made through literature review on constraints faced by women in participation in MGNREGA. The constraints if removed can make MGNREGA empower women workers economically and socially. Some measures like increase in the number of women participating in the planning and social audits of MGNREGA, better implementation of provisions related to worksite facilities, timely and commensurate to work payment of wages, planning of works in a phased manner and prompt grievance redressed if implemented will encourage women to demand more work under this scheme.

Limitations of this study and scope for future research

The limitations for the study are that, it is based on secondary data only. Since the reviews have been taken from the various articles published in reputed national and international journals the outlook given in them may not help to take important managerial decision as the studies have been done only in select areas of the country and we cannot generalize the study. The scope for future study is that the researcher need to conduct a dis-aggregate level of investigation to understand the level of awareness about the provisions, areas of problems during implementation of the scheme and finally an evaluation of measures undertaken to understand whether the roadblocks of the past have been removed and new ones are not been allowed to take roots.

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