

Role of MGNREGA on Women Empowerment: A Socio-economic Study in Medinipur District, West Bengal

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Abstract

One of the most pressing concerns on a global scale is getting more power into the hands of women. In India, there is an illustrious history of realising the significance of giving women more agency over the course of several centuries. One of the primary goals of India's 9th Five Year Plan is to advance women's rights, which the Indian government has declared a priority. The process of enabling women to realise their identities, individualities, and strengths throughout all aspects of life is referred to as empowering women. The government has developed a number of different plans and programmes in the hope of rescuing more women from impoverishment and the dangers of everyday life. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was passed into law in 2005, is an example of one of these programmes. The MGNREGA is an extremely important institution that helps fulfil both the tactical and the strategic requirements for women's participation. It has been a ray of hope for rural women's empowerment and contributed significantly to the improved living standards and economic situations by establishing equal remuneration for male and female workers. Additionally, it has become a glimmer of hope for rural women's empowerment. In the current study, an attempt was made to investigate women's empowerment in a hamlet located in the Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal by using the MGNREGA programme.

Keywords: MGNREGA; Women Empowerment; SHG; Panchayat; Rural Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has indeed said that "the women of India should play a vital role in building a strong nation." Further, Mahatma Gandhi, The Father of the Nation, has said, "The development of every village is nothing but the development of a nation." In general, it is a well established fact

that women's growth, in turn, develops her family, village, and the Nation. Women constitute almost 50 percent of the world's total population; India has shown a disproportionate sex ratio where female populations have been comparatively lower than males and are not even given equal rights with males. As per the 2011 census report² of the Government of India, women constitute 48.46 percent of India's total population. So it is essential to employ these

resources most favourably in the nation's interest in general and her family in particular. In the past, women were not ready to undertake any type of work, business, job due to shyness, fear, and male dominance. In India, women seem to be in a paradoxical situation; sometimes she is a goddess and merely a slave.

The Government has framed various schemes/programmes to encourage women from poverty and the vulnerability of life. One such programme is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005. MGNREGA plays an essential role in meeting the strategic and practical needs of women's participation. It has become a signal of light in rural women's empowerment and contributed substantially to the increased living conditions and economic conditions by creating equal wages for male and female workers.

In India, MGNREGS begins to create a greater degree of economic independence among women by putting cash incomes into her hands. One of MGNREGS's main aims are the increased participation of women in household income generation; a productive contribution to gender relations can be made. The considerable contribution of MGNREGS was that it had removed these restraints as the scheme for wage employment was made readily available within or closer proximity to the village. It has provided them with the chance to earn without giving up their other familiar obligations (Singh and Nauriyal, 2009).¹¹

Women empowerment is a process in which women challenge the existing norms and culture to effectively achieve their well being. In India, women empowerment is a buzz word today. As a nation, India is committed to the empowerment of women. Though women are regarded as "the unsung heroine who works from dawn to dusk," yet it is unfortunate that even the ignorant and worthless men had been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of social development programme. Ethically women as a member of the society should have their equal role. But throughout the world they occupy a subordinate status which is significantly different from that of their male counterparts. The difference is clearly evident in our society, which is patriarchal and tradition-bound with poor socio-economic conditions and low rate of literacy. Efforts have been taken to empower women by launching various schemes and providing extra benefits for

them. But in spite of considerable improvement in the status of women, they still comprise the largest section of deprived population. It is widely recognised that the process of growth, economic transformation and development in particular has adversely affected women as a group.

In many western countries, from the development viewpoint, it was found that there is a correlation between women empowerment through education, poverty entitlement, and dismantling of gender discrimination in employment and in the holding of public and political offices and those in the professions in its totality encompassing capital formation, human resources development, technology improvement, etc. Thus, women have been recognized as significant to the development process's success, pointing out that the Government's major thrust has been on providing women with access to production factors (Beijing conference, U.N. Report, 1995).¹⁴

"Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society including participation in the decision making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace."

(Paragraph 13, Beijing Declaration)

The role of women's empowerment in decision-making and concluded empowerment as a comprehensive process, involving the pooling of resources to get collective strength and countervailing power and the improvement of manual capacities and analytical, reflective abilities of local women (Marilee, 1995).⁸ There are various explanations for the varying participation of women workers under the MGNREGS. Several aspects that have encouraged women workers' participation include the nature of the job not requiring special knowledge and skill (Krishnaraj et. al., 2004)⁷; outmigration of male family members (Bhatty1, 2006; Mehrotra, 2008⁹; Talukdar, 2008)¹³; the employment opportunity being available at the doorstep (Bhatty1, 2006; Khera and Nayak, 2009)⁶; a tradition of rural women working in others' fields (Narayanan, 2008)¹⁰ the provision of equal, non-discriminatory wages (Khera and Nayak, 2009)⁶; and innovative experiments in implementation like the female mate system in Rajasthan (Khera, 2009)⁶, synergization of MGNREGS with Kudumbashree in Kerala (Vijayakumar and Thomas, 2008)¹⁵, and in Bihar gender differential tasks for uniform (minimum) wages. Duflo (2012)⁵ argues that the relationship between empowerment and development is too weak to be self-sustaining.

Continuous endeavor is needed to conglomerate both of these to bring equality between men and women.

MGNREGA Act and Women

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed on 25th August 2005. Still, it was fully implemented on 2nd February 2006 in all the country's rural districts by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. But in 2009, it was renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The MGNREGA provides a legal Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), with its guarantee of a hundred days of unskilled work for every household, has been predicted as a gender sensitive scheme. The features of this scheme make this gender sensitive. The involvement of women in the workforce has transcended the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent. Through this, it has secured the women from facilitating their full participation in the nature of work. These include equal wages for all men and women, participation in management and monitoring of the programme, participation in social audit, providing support for child care and convenience to households, and ensuring that single women are eligible (Devee and Bhuyan, 2017).⁴

MGNREGA has influenced women's life towards great enlightenment (Ananta, 2016). The act provided the work within five kilometers of the village. Before the act, women had to suffer too much in search of work, but MGNREGA gave them relief, and they were able to work within their villages and were also able to work and look after their children. MGNREGA allowed them to gain economic power and made them self-dependent because the wages they get from the MGNREGA helped them look after their health and fulfill their demands. The act also protects them from exploitation because, in other places, women had to suffer too much. They were used to travel so many kilometers in search of work which was also an important issue for them but under this act, they can work with their life partners in their locality and earn equally for their family.

Concept about Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a comprehensive concept. Empowerment may be described as a process that helps people assert their control over the factors

that affect their lives. According to the World Bank, Empowerment is the process of enhancing individuals or groups' capacity to make choices and transform them into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process to enable women to realize their position, identity, and power in all spheres of life. It provides greater access to resources and knowledge, more independence in decision making, more control over the circumstances which influence lives, more remarkable ability to plan lives, freedom from customs, beliefs, and practices. Empowerment demands an essential and radical change in the system of marriage and family, husband and wife relationship, and attitude towards socialization. In a general sense, empowerment is a process that gives a person freedom in decision making.

Women empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International women's conference in 1985 in Nairobi. Empowerment of women means the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. In the process, they increase their capacity and enable them to face new challenges in the household's overall development and contribute to the local community development (Chandra, 1997).³ Empowerment of women means developing them as more aware individuals who are politically active, economically productive and independent, and able to make intelligent discussions in matters that affect them (Srinivasa and Siddegowda, 2015).¹²

Thus, we can say that the Empowerment of women is essentially the process of uplifting women's economic, social and political status, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves building up a society, a political environment wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and the general feeling of persecution.

Objectives of the Study

Even while the broad objective of the study is to assess the effect of MGNREGA in increasing women's empowerment, the study has several specific objectives as well. The following are the objectives:

- To find out the women's participation and their awareness about the MGNREGA.
- To study women's status in their family and society through MGNREGA.
- To study the power of bargaining in their

family and decision regarding the selection of work.

- To determine the issues faced by women in the matter of MGNREGA work.
- To find out the role of women in social audit.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was based on the fieldwork carried out at village Madhya bar, Block Pingla, and P.S. Pingla local of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The research methods adopted for this work are observation and interview methods, a structured schedule with open and closed-ended questions, group discussions, and case studies taken on various aspects. Secondary data regarding the population, welfare measures, and developmental programmes are collected from the Social Welfare Department and Block Development Offices records. Besides, documents, census reports, various books, and journals were referred to complete this study.

Findings

Women's participation

As seen earlier, women's empowerment essentially refers to changing power relations between men and women in favour of women. The unequal power relations are reflected in various spheres of life such as health and nutrition, labour and employment, education and skills, asset ownership, political and social participation, etc. Unequal power relations denote that women enjoy limited decision making in multiple spheres of life compared to men. MGNREGA has facilitated an increase in women's participation in the labour force. In this context, it is vital to assess whether women's participation in MGNREGA has instrumentalized change in men and women's power relations, thereby increasing women's empowerment.

MGNREGA is a kind of scheme that creates a source of income in rural areas. Most of the aged people (up to 60) of the studied village was benefited from the MGNREGA scheme. Madhyabar is in the backward direction in terms of its economic condition. In this village, the works of the MGNREGA scheme center around rural area connectivity and water conservation. Such results are mainly performed or done by the unskilled young male of the studied village, but women's

role in the same work is appreciable.

By studying the work performance, we can see that water conservation, rural connectivity, draught proofing, land development live works affect a large scale. Among these, water conservation works are very significant within the studied village under the schemes most of the ponds are made by digging the suitable lands. Over the years, there are altogether 22 works that relate to the MGNREGA scheme in which water conservation and water harvesting live works are done 7 in number, renovation of traditional water bodies 5 in number, and the results of land development is 5, and rural connectivity is 5 in number.

Table 1: Women's Participation under MGNREGA Scheme

Nature of Work	Male	Female
Improvement of Play		
Ground	82	59
Excavation of Private water tank	82	25
Improvement of rural road	82	56
Plantation of tress	57	43
Re-excavation of water tank	79	34

In Selection of Works

In the village, Gram Sabha selects how and where the work will be done in the presence of local panchayat. Before women empowerment, mainly the village's male members used to take all the decisions related to MGNREGA and other development programmes. At that time, women have no access to make decisions and express their opinion in any work relating to MGNREGA. After the women empowerment through MGNREGA, now they can participate and express their opinion about the selection of job, which is decided in the gram sabha. Women now attend Gram Sabha in large numbers, and Gram Sabhas are also called more frequently now. The first Gram Sabha on MGNREGA in Madhyabar was held in July 2008, where 35 percent of MGNREGA participants attended. At present, 80 percent of MGNREGA participants attend the Gram Sabha, which is now called after every year; if necessary, the Gram Sabhas are called more than one time in a year. As the Panchayat pointed out, "Gram Sabhas are frequently demanded by MGNREGA workers. When the work started at first, women's

participation in the Gram Sabhas was meager in the study area. But in recent times, women not only attend it, but also ask questions and demand works through MGNREGA".

In Social Audits

An ingenious feature of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is that it gives a central rule to 'social audits' as a means of continuous public vigilance (MGNREGA, Section 17). A social audit's basic objective is to ensure public accountability in implementing projects, laws, and policies. The social audit aimed to empower people to fight corruption and defend their rights under the Act.

Social Audit is done by a group of people, including some members from SHG groups. Many women were engaged in Social Audit to evaluate the progress, and the future of the MGNREGA works a day.

In the village Madhyabar the women from SHG groups were the majority in the team of Social Audit. In Social Audit, they perform many functions to ensure that the people must get the advantages of MGNREGA.

They distribute blank application forms for the demand of jobs among Households, help them fill up forms, collect those to deposit at the G.P. office. The women members from the Social Audit team receive the Muster Rolls, then they fill and check those and allocate the job form from the Programme Implementing Agencies (PIA) as per instruction. Before assigning the job, the Social Audit members arrange a meeting with the Gram Unnayan Samiti (beneficiary committee), then they campaign about the work in the village.

Table.2: Involvement of women's in social Audits

Types of involvement	No. of Women	
	No.	%
Muster roll fill up	20	28.57
Job card checking at work site	29	41.42
Supervise of work	12	17.14
Inform villagers about work	33	47.14
Inform villagers about wage payment	27	38.57

*Percentage against the total women who involve in MGNREGA.

To ensure the women's participation in the project, the Social audit women convince them and allocate some light work to them under MGNREGA. They examine the workers' Job cards and write their names, job card Nos, payment A/c Numbers in the Muster Rolls, and sometimes investigate their payment. With Gram Unnayan Samiti's help, the social Audit team decided the working area or place and marked the area. They invite the specialized persons from the Panchayat office to take the working place measurements and help the officials/staff measure the area. They inform the Gram Unnayan Samity and the workers along with the G.P. office about the date measurements. After the differentiation of the site, work under the MGNREGA starts.

The works under the MGNREGA were supervised by a group of women from SHG groups, which helps Social Audit. In this way, the women of the studied village get respect from the villagers, have a chance to make decisions, and become more confident in their social lives.

Women's Role in Management of Resources Created Under MGNREGA

The women have reportedly no specific role in the management of the resources created under MGNREGA at Madhyabar.

Awareness Increase

Women of this village are aware and conscious about the 100 days work. Nearly 48% of women workers in the study area were aware of minimum wage levels in their respective states. Most women were aware that under the Act, each household is guaranteed 100 days of work in a year. But awareness regarding operational guidelines, household registration, the job card distribution process, work applications, and entitlements such as worksite facilities and unemployment allowance was inadequate. Only 23% of women workers reported having made a formal application for a job card. The situation was even worse concerning work applications. Only 18% of the women surveyed were aware of the work application process and had applied for work themselves.

During focus group discussion and case study, female members of SHGs are more aware of the non SHGs members. It was also found that few female members of MGNREGA are unaware of the aim of MGNREGA. They go over there to earn money ultimately; the whole theme is wrapped in darkness to them. Women of MGNREGA of

my studied area participate almost in every work of MGNREGA, but they face problems in their working place due to their unawareness, which they cannot solve by themselves. I know by group discussion and interview method that they do not fill up the muster roll most of the time during work. Attendance is taken into a small notebook during their work, but it is not fill up in front of everyone. That's why they never come to know about their attendance in a month. It is mentioned that the members in front of everyone must fill up muster roll to the rule.

A new opportunity is added in MGNREGA. The female members who come with their child in their workplace, MGNREGA has appointed few members (governess) to look after their child most of the cases, this governess is the member of SHGs. The chances of getting this opportunity are significantly less to the outsider of SHGs; for this reason, they never raise their voice. The requirement of MGNREGA oriented awareness among outsiders (other workers of MGNREGA) of SHGs is often significantly less. If any women protest this kind of problem, then it is suppressed by the running political party.

Bargaining Power

In our society, we found earlier that a woman's role starts with household cleaning to the kitchen. They have to cook food for the family members, give birth and take care of children, clean clothes, maintain the household, take care of the old age people, etc., but at the time, household matter, none of the members asks her opinion. They had not any right to decide the family's socio-economic case.

Status in Family

In the studied village Madhyabar, changes in intra-household relationships between men and women usually reflect changing power structures within the household. The study, therefore, attempts to assess these changes through direct questioning in the household schedules, focus group discussions, and a thorough analysis of changes in the time use patterns of men and women.

Most women workers of the village are now saying that they are respected more in the household than before. For example, they get a cup of tea when they reach home after work, or they are asked to rest for a while after they reach home. A woman worker pointed out, "my mother-in-law receives me with a smile when I go back home." There are also fewer quarrels now than

before. Since additional income from MGNREGA has made essential commodities such as good food, some clothes, and other household goods within the household's reach, financial tension within the household has decreased. Inter-relationship of women with their mothers-in-law changed into visibly well. The mother-in-laws started to co-operate with their daughters-in-law in household work without exerting physical and mental agony. For example, Mothers-in-law or senior members at home also now help in household chores (cooking, washing clothes, fetching and carrying water, etc.) and child care which has become possible through the income from MGNREGA. As far as household work sharing is concerned, as seen above, some help is now extended by male members in child care or shopping of household goods. Women also now have greater freedom of movement. However, some barriers remain intact: Men do not cook or participate in certain household chores, including fetching water from outside or washing clothes.

According to informants (using the focus group discussion method), all women of the study area now have a say in household matters. The husband/men members of the household ask women for their opinions while making decisions is a dramatic contrast to the scene before women working under MGNREGA.

Table 3: Income use pattern of women's.

Types of pattern	No. of women's	
	No.	%
Child education	25	35.71
Child health	19	27.14
Household utensil	29	41.42
Ceremony	12	17.14
Savings	57	81.42

*Percentage against the total women who involve in MGNREGA.

In respect of women's movement and mobility, men do not say no if they wish to travel for social functions or family reasons, and they are permitted to travel alone also. On this note, the requirement of having to obtain permission from men and the elderly of the household still exists, i.e., women cannot travel out without men's consent, and therefore restrictions on mobility persist. While MGNREGA has facilitated the positive granting of permission for the women's movement, it has

not extended to demolish the requirement of permission. Women, therefore, continue to be treated as subordinate to men.

Status in Society

The introduction of MGNREGA has promoted the collective strength of women in several spheres of village life. The first significant impact is that women from various communities now know each other, interact with each other and help each other. One Hindu woman worker expressed that she never knew people of the santal and Muslim community before MGNREGA, but now she has made friends with them. Women now also know the village's geography, which they did not realize earlier, and are more aware of its problems. They now discuss MGNREGA related issues and village level problems among themselves something they never did before.

Political Status in Society

Before the enactment of MGNREGA, rural women participated in political events forcefully. They have to attend various meetings, processions, etc., without their willingness. Members from the low-income family, those who earn daily, prioritize their work than the involved in political affairs.

Now a day, due to MGNREGA, the low-income family can get work in their village, and their economic condition developed than their earlier situation. People are getting involved in political events well without any force. They now have some financial stability, which led them to mental peace to decide political involvement.

Women of the village Madhyabar take part in 100 days work. They also supervise the whole work and help the people fight against corruption as a Social Audit form. For that purpose, they are visiting the workplace, campaigning about the work, and arranging meetings in the village. On a large scale, women are getting in touch with each other, sharing their views, protesting for violation of laws regarding women, and taking part in political affairs and men, broadening their eyes from the kitchen to society unimaginable fact in few years back.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that the MGNREGA has resulted in the empowerment of women, which was not the program's original intention. Women

have benefitted more individually as employees than collectively as a community. The ability of women to earn an independent living, which was made possible by the paid work opportunity provided by MGNREGA, has resulted in an increase in the respect that is accorded to women as persons. Earnings from independent sources have expanded consumers' options and decreased their reliance on the economy, both of which have enabled women to more clearly demonstrate their contribution to their households' bottom lines. New developments include their greater participation in gramme sabhas, an increase in the number of women speaking up in gramme sabhas, frequent interactions with PRI politicians and government officials, and access to post offices and banks.

Women's empowerment and poverty alleviation are two of the goals that MGNREGA have set out to achieve. They have made a contribution by improving both their social and economic standing. They also provide women more control over their lives by improving the ways in which they spend and save money. The most important factor in the organization's success is its connection to low-income people, as well as its innovative techniques, its ability to facilitate people's participation in development, and its capacity to create trust on a variety of different levels. In addition to this, it helps improve the households' financial situations. They have helped rural women gain self-assurance and independence, which has led to an increase in the rural population's ability to support themselves financially.

A further point to consider is that the female mate system has somewhat, if to a limited extent, inverted the traditional gender roles. It has been observed that some adolescents females have given up their academic pursuits in order to take advantage of the job opportunities provided by the NREGS. The difficulties come in the extension, both horizontally and vertically, of the advantages first. The horizontal dispersion of services is ensured when there is a significant participation rate of women. Aside from problems with implementation, the social and cultural conditions of certain locations put restrictions on women's participation. For instance, women cannot engage in grave reformation because to these contexts. Their participation in the social audits is important. The formation of SHGs was the initial step in the betterment of the position of women in society; the MGNREGA programme was the factor that brought the circle full circle. The importance of women in society as well as in their own families

has grown as a direct result of MGNREGA; nevertheless, in some cases, it has been seen that the term "women empowerment" is nothing more than a term. Some people with little minds are unwilling to acknowledge the contribution they have made to the development of modern society, despite the fact that they are members of society.

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