

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT (MGNREGA) AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY IN EAST MEDINIPUR DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. A large segment of Indian womanhood still suffers deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is necessary to mobilize the vast women power, if the country has top progress in all sphere of development. Empowerment of women is a long and complex process which involves various issues and challenges. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) presently known as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is crucial for women empowerment in our country. The act was enacted by Government of India in September 2005 and brought into force with effect from February 2006. The MGNREGA marks a paradigm shift and stands out amongst other rural employment programmes as it empowers the rural population, particularly women and other backward sections of the society with a legal right and employment guarantee through an act of parliament, unlike other wage employment programmes. Most remarkable feature of MGNREGA is that it pays women the same as men, something that was virtually unimaginable in rural India. The act plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. It stipulates that one third of the total workers should be women. It has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of the rural women and contributed substantially for the increased living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers. Income generation and economic stability of the poor women help them to think about the education of their own and their children. It also helps them to become aware about their health and hygiene. It was found that the additional income of the poor women from MGNREGA increased their social status in the family circle. The act has great impact on liberty and decision making power of poor women. Their political consciousness and active participation in local self govt. become evident. In fact this act focuses on rural development and women empowerment. But MGNREGA is not free from various limitations. The poor implementation across the nation (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility, illegal presence of contractors etc.) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. This paper aims at analyzing various issues of women empowerment and the challenges related to it in the districts of East Medinipur, West Bengal.

Keywords: Empowerment of Women, Income Generation, MGNREGA, Political Consciousness

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. A large segment of Indian womanhood still suffers deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is necessary to mobilize the vast women

power, if the country has to progress in all sphere of development. Empowerment of women is a long and difficult process which is to be promoted with full public support and this could be successful only when those women living at the lower strata who have been suppressed by the male dominated society taking undue advantage of their lack of education and poverty can rise up to claim their rightful place in their own society (Meena Devi, 2012). In spite of the draw backs in the implementation of the legislation, significant benefits have already started accruing to women through better access to local employment, at minimum wages, with relatively decent and safe work conditions.

Several poverty alleviation and employment generation programmes were introduced by different Indian states government, Union Territories and Government of India. But those schemes are not effectively and efficiently had worked to reduce poverty and increase the living standard of the people in rural India especially women population. As a rural wage employment programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) recognised the relevance of incorporating gender equity and empowerment in its design. Various provisions under the act and its guidelines, aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies. The MGNREGA marks a paradigm shift and stands out amongst other rural employment programmes as it empowers the rural population, particularly women and other backward sections of the society with a legal right and employment guarantee through an act of parliament, unlike other wage employment programmes. Most remarkable feature of MGNREGA is that it pays women the same as men, something that was virtually unimaginable in rural India. The act plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. It stipulates that one third of the total workers should be women. It has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of the rural women and contributed substantially for the increased living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers. Income generation and economic stability of the poor women help them to think about the education of their own and their children. It also helps them to become aware about their health and hygiene. It was found that the additional income of the poor women from MGNREGA increased their social status in the family circle. The act has great impact on liberty and decision making power of poor women. Their political consciousness and active participation in local self govt. become evident. In fact this act focuses on rural development and women empowerment. But MGNREGA is not free from different limitations. The poor implementation across the nation accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. In this paper I have tried to analyze various issues of women empowerment and the challenges related to the act in the districts of East Medinipur, West Bengal.

II. MGNREGA in East Medinipur District

MGNREGA was passed in 2005 and it became operational in West Bengal from February, 2006. In the first phase MGNREGA was implemented in 10 districts such as, South 24 Parganas, Bankura, Birbhum, Dakshin and Uttar Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Murshidabad, Paschim Medinipur and Purulia followed by another 7 district namely, North 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Coochbihar, Darjeeling, Hooghly, East Medinipur and Nadia from 1st April 2007 and one more districts (Howrah) in the third phase from 1st April 2008. In West Bengal, Panchayet and Rural Development Department is responsible for implementing the scheme. West Bengal State Rural Development Agency (WBSRDA) which was set up in 2003 performs various tasks on behalf of the department in providing support to implementation of MGNREGA. WBSRDA also has a dedicated MGNREGA cell. MGNREGA was introduced in East Medinipur district on 1st April 2007. East Medinipur is a coastal district of West Bengal with absolute flat terrain and is frequently affected by floods both due to heavy rainfall and cyclonic High Tide. It has an area of 4295 sq. km. and population of roughly 44.17 lakhs as per 2001 census. It has, 2974 Gram Sansads, 223 Gram Panchayats, 25 Blocks and 4 Sub-Divisions. The average population in each Gram Panchayat is about 20,000, which is largely dependent on agriculture and allied activities and is engaged as casual labourers in both farm and non-farm sector.

The district tried to evolve a system to ensure that the Act is implemented properly in letter and spirit, drawing from the local strengths and keeping in mind the weaknesses, without being obstructive in nature. The main advantage of East Medinipur lied in the high literacy rate among the population and especially among women which at 71% is the highest in the state. Coupled with this, the fact that the Self Help Groups had a strong presence (about 30,000 under SGSY, Cooperative, Bank and NGO forum) in the district helped in taking a lot many initiatives like earmarking certain activities-nursery, vermin-compost, social forestry, land development through horticulture and kitchen garden, only to be executed through women SHGs. The district introduced the process of concurrent social audit by supervisor of SHGs, who being a group of local stakeholders should be interested in monitoring both the need for work and the quality of work done. The district also piloted an independent system of monitoring through the National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers from among the college students. Another distinctive initiative was taken by the district on the worksite facilities front by providing toilet facilities for the workers. It aimed at ensuring a hygienic atmosphere and maintaining the dignity of women labour.

III. Research Questions:

1. To what extent can MGNREGA be considered a route for enhancing women empowerment?
2. Has the MGNREGA succeeded in providing improved access of women to productive wage employment for their empowerment?
3. What is the impact of MGNREGA on social status (liberty and decision making power) of women in rural area?
4. What is the impact of MGNREGA on political consciousness and participation of women?
5. What are the constraints of women's access to work in MGNREGA?

IV. Research Methodology:

The study was conducted in East Medinipur district of West Bengal. There are some reasons regarding the selection of the district. From socio-economic and educational point of view East Medinipur is forward district and my familiarity with the district is another reason of such selection. The study was based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was obtained from the official website of MGNREGA, state and district MGNREGA cell. Primary data was collected from the 20 villages of the district. Out of 25 blocks of the district 20 villages were selected on the basis of stratified random sampling method. The villages were stratified on the basis of some indicators like the total size of the population, the number of women MGNREGA beneficiaries, literacy rate, and health status. Total 400 households, including 360 beneficiary and 40 non-beneficiary ones, taking twenty households from each village were interviewed for the purpose of the study.

The officials and local self govt. representatives involved in the implementation of the MGNREGS were also interviewed through a semi-structured questionnaire to assess their perceptions and difficulties of the scheme. Qualitative data was also collected through a focused group discussion (FGD) on various issues.

IV. Findings and Analysis

As a rural wage employment programme, MGNREGA recognised the relevance of incorporating gender equity and empowerment in its design. Various provisions under the act and its guidelines, aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies. From financial year 2006–07 up to financial year 2011–12, around Rs 53,000 crore have been spent on wages for women and around 47 per cent of the total person-days generated have been by women. Significantly, female share on works under MGNREGA is greater than their share of work in casual wage labour market across all States. Women are participating in the Scheme much more actively than they participated in all forms of recorded work. This may support the hypothesis that MGNREGA creates decent and favourable work conditions for women. For instance, MGNREGA's stipulation of work within 5 kilometres of the village where the job applicant resides makes participation in the Scheme

logistically feasible for women who may have limited employment opportunities available to them, given their role and responsibilities in their households.

There is much that the MGNREGA promises from the perspective of women's empowerment as well. Most boldly, in a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women – in the opportunities for gainful employment afforded as well as wage rates – MGNREGA represents action on both these counts. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensuring that at least 33 per cent of the workers shall be women. By generating employment for women at fair wages in the village, MGNREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. Out of total women respondents 68 per cent were Scheduled Castes. Out of the total sample of women workers 37 per cent were illiterate. Half of the respondent households had less than 5 acres land, and 35 per cent had no land at all. Most respondents reported agriculture or manual labour as the households' main occupation

Employment at MGNREGA worksites seems to have raised both enthusiasm and expectations among women workers. Women workers unanimously affirmed that the benefits from MGNREGA employment were high and that they would like to get more days of work in a year. Regarding wage payments, we found that most women workers were receiving the stipulated minimum wage, i.e. Rs. 80 per day. Nevertheless, even where the full minimum wage was not being received, it is clear that MGNREGA wages are far higher than the wages otherwise locally available. It is clearly evident from the conversation of women respondents in East Medinipur that before MGNREGA, we were forced to work as agricultural labourers or casual labourers for Rs. 80/- to 100/- per day. But under MGNREGA, we are getting Rs. 240 per day, more than double, which is almost an unexpected amount for us. It is also clear that, by and large, men and women are paid equal wages at MGNREGA worksites as has been mandated by the Act. Given that wage gaps between the male and female casual workers have been the norm in rural India, this is an extremely significant development. Parity in wage rates also appears to be positively affecting participation of women in the Scheme. States that have a high wage differential in casual labour market (for works other than MGNREGA) are likely to have a greater participation of women in MGNREGA, which assures wage equity. An intra-household substitution effect appears to be at work. In other words, when casual labour market opportunities are better for men than they are for women, it is easier for women to get the number of jobs available under the Scheme.

By putting cash incomes into their hands, MGNREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. As mentioned, this was one of MGNREGA's main aims: with the increased participation of women in household income-generation a positive contribution to gender relations can be made. The field data suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere. The case study of Radharani Jana, a resident of Belechata under Heria gram panchayat indicates the above trends. She has a BPL card and her household owns a little land. They used to live in a kaccha house. She came to know about the MGNREGA works in her village through a public announcement. She decided to work under MGNREGA. Last year she and her husband worked under MGNREGA for 100 days and earned a good amount of money at the rate of Rs. 240/- per day. Their small land holding fulfils their basic food necessities. They decided to spend the money earned on MGNREGA works to build a *pacca* house. More than half of the respondents felt that the

MGNREGA has brought a significant change in their villages as well as in their own lives. This is because employment is being provided within their village, generating community assets and enhancing their spending capacity. MGNREGA employment has encouraged women to take the decision to enter the sphere of the cash economy. Another important point that emerged from the survey is that women workers were, by and large, receiving their wages in person, rather than through husbands or other proxies. In East Medinipur over 91 per cent of the women collected their own wages. Inevitably, women's MGNREGA earnings are increasing their contribution to household income. 72 per cent of the respondents said that they spent wages

earned at MGNREGA works on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through MGNREGA work, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day. For the most part, the amounts earned through MGNREGA are insufficient to repay debts. Nevertheless, 28 per cent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. Further, it helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders. A significant percentage of workers (almost 34 per cent) also spent their MGNREGA wages on their children's education. The other large expenditure regularly met through MGNREGA wages is health care, with around 40 per cent of the respondents having spent earnings on this. All this taken together seems to sketch out the beginnings of a marked shift from the previous role of women. While women's labour both farm and non-farm has always been an essential component in the functioning of rural households, it has been made invisible due to the absence of any monetary remuneration. By putting cash earnings in women's hands, MGNREGA has both increased and diversified the contributions that women are making to household incomes as wage earners.

VI. Limitations of the act

- a) Lack of child care facilities: One of the major shortcomings of the Act is lack of proper crèche facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. Different studies show that women remained worried about their children while they are working at MGNREGA worksite. It is also evident that some women do not accept the job facilities of MGNREGA due to non-availability of proper child care facilities (Kar, 2013).
- b) Low level of awareness: Generally the women are not aware properly about the process and entitlements of the programme. For this reason the participation of women is low.
- c) Most work is not suitable: In some cases the nature of work is not suitable for women workers. Most of the projects selected being related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies involving earth work requiring application of physical force.
- d) Poor worksite facilities: Minimum worksite facilities are absent in this scheme. MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place and first aid. But in reality it is evident that except drinking water facility all other facilities are generally absent.
- e) Irregular payments: Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they are the main earners in the family.

CONCLUSION

MGNREGA has positive impact on empowerment of women. Women have benefited both as individual and community. Women are benefited individually because they are able to earn independently, spend some money for their own needs, contribute in family expenditure etc. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the Gram Sabha, increasing number of women in speaking out in the meetings, increasing capacity of interaction etc. But the poor implementation of the scheme (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility and illegal presence of contractors) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation.

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