MGNREGA AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION: A CASE STUDY FROM PURULIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

Santanu Ghosh
Research scholar, Department of Sociology
University of Kalyani, India
Email:santanugaria@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Inequality and vulnerability of women is present in every sphere of our society. We need to empower them to form an egalitarian society. The paper attempts to study the impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment through their participation. Purulia a district of West Bengal known for its backwardness by analyzing field level data from four blocks, Raghunathpur-I, Raghunathpur-II, Puncha, Hura during the field work, in the year of 2013. It was found that overall impact of MGNREGA on women’s lives has been quite positive in many ways, whether it is by promoting their economic independence and self-confidence or by helping them to have larger role in choice making in household. An integrated approach which connects equality-based rights to manage fruitful assets and gender inclusive is the need of the hour for addressing risks arising from MGNREGA fatigue

Keywords: MGNREGA

INTRODUCTION
Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their capacities. In other words, it is a process conceived for changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. Empowerment has become the buzz word for the last two decades. It is a process of building capacities of creating an atmosphere which enables people to fully utilize their creative potential in pursuance of a quality life. It is a social action process that promotes participation of people’s organization and communities in gaining control over their lives in their communities (Hazra, 2009).

Empowerment gives women the capacities to influence in decision making process, planning implementation and evaluation by integrating them into political system. Women empowerment is not only empowerment but also crucial if development is to be sustainable. Indian economic reforms based on globalization, liberalization and empowerment of women by reserving 33% reservation in areas such as Panchayati Raj are opening new vistas for development of women and in improving this status. A nation goes ahead only through the contribution of all of its members. Pushing women into the backyard drags behind the society. Current framework of international development recognizes women empowerment as an immense effective stratagem for the all-round development of the society. Though India is developing economically and technologically by leaps and bounds but women, especially rural women still continue to be discriminated and their current status in the society still causes concern (Hazra A, 2011).

“Employment for all” has always been acknowledged as one of the strategy of India to eradicate poverty. Many schemes like National Rural Employment Programme (1980-89); Rural Landless
Employment Guarantee Programme (1983-89); Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (1989-99); Employment Assurance Scheme; Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (1999-2002); Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (2001-08) and National Food For Work Program (2004-08) were introduced to attain this goal. However, in these development programs there was no guarantee of employment for longer period of time or payment of minimum wage which required the government to make sure guaranteed jobs for substantial period of a year and minimum wage. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most progressive legislations enacted since independence. Its significance is evident from a variety of perspectives. First, it is a courageous and exclusive experiment in the provision of rural employment – in India and indeed in the world at large. Second, it is the first expression of the right to work as an enforceable legal entitlement. In a country where labor is considered as the only economic asset for millions of people, gainful employment is a precondition for the fulfillment of other basic rights – the right to life, the right to food, and the right to education. Gender is the unavoidable driving force for growth and development of a nation like India. In India women constitute a major share of persistently underprivileged population. The Government has framed different programs or schemes to uplift the women from poverty and susceptibility of life. One such women friendly program is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which was enacted in 2005. MGNREGA has given an exclusive opportunity to people from rural India to earn their own income without any discrimination of caste or gender. Most significant attribute of NREGA is that it pays equal to women and men, something that was virtually unimaginable in rural India. However, some States have registered high percentage of women workers getting enrolled in the scheme whereas others have registered a very low percentage of women availing benefit under MGNREGA.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the study is to understand the impacts of MGNREGA among the women in the study area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Primary data from the field and secondary data were used to analyze the study. 100 women were taken as sample 25 from each block to understand the impact of the program.

Table 1: Women participation in MGNREGA (India)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Person days in Core</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>36.40</td>
<td>40.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>61.15</td>
<td>42.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>103.57</td>
<td>47.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>136.40</td>
<td>48.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>122.74</td>
<td>47.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>101.86</td>
<td>48.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>200.44</td>
<td>56.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source- Compiled by author, www.nrega.nic.in)

From the table it can be seen that the involvement of women in MGNREGA has increased considerably in the country in course of time.
DATA ANALYSIS

From data analysis it is found

Impact on income and consumption

By measuring impact on income-consumption effects we mean an increase in income of women workers and as a result, their ability to choose their consumption baskets. MGNREGA empowers women by giving them a scope of independent earning and spend some amount for their own requirements. It has been noticed that MGNREGA helped to put cash incomes into the hands of women that create a greater degree of economic independence among women. The survey data (both qualitative and quantitative) 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.

Inevitably, women's MGNREGA earnings are increasing their contribution to household income. From the survey it has been found, a large majority of the respondents (74%) 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. It could reduce infant malnutrition through positive effects on household's food security and infant feeding.

Lower Indebtedness

MGNREGA has emerged as helping hand to reduce the debt burden upon them. During survey 32% of respondent said that they have used the earned wages for repaying their small debt, the influence of local money lender has been lowered.

Improvement of health care

Through the MGNREGA, in the study areas, it has been noticed that the health condition of the poor people in both rural and urban areas are improved. A large expenditure regularly met through MGNREGA wages is health care, with around 37% of the respondents having spent their earned wages on this field. It can be understand that the MGNREGA has brought a change to their concept towards health.

Literacy Enrichment

Around 42% said that they have spent their wages for their children education. However though they thought basic education is necessary but their attitude towards higher education is somehow negative.

Standard of living improvement

During survey, it has emerged that before introduction of MGNREGA their standard of living was below decent level rather miserable, a large section of the people have agreed (87%), the standard of living has improved.

Intra Household effect

Since inception of our society, the women have been playing an very vital role but unfortunately their contribution remains uncounted because of they perform a noteworthy amount of unpaid work. In the survey it has been found 52% of the women claims that they have contributed while making decisions.

Community-Level Effects

Women’s involvement at the Panchayat, block and district level of governance process is low in spite of 73rd Amendments of the Constitution. But surprisingly during survey it was found that women participation has increased after the implementation of MGNREGA in many areas. A large number of women (47%) workers attended the Gram Sabha meeting held in connection with MGNREGA. Community level empowerment of women is one of the great achievements of this Act.
Issues related with women participation

Though the success of MGNREGA is quite fruitful but it has to a very long way to involve the women more intensively to this project.

1. **Low Level Awareness:** Though the act has different provisions but during survey, it came out that most of the worker are unaware about the entitlements of the act.

2. **Poor worksite facilities:** MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place, changing room, first aid, children care etc. From the survey, it came out that except drinking water facility they can hardly sure about other facilities. The women are quite unsatisfied with the facility provided.

3. **Non-availability of Child Care Facilities:** During survey it came out as major problem for the women job card holder, though there is a provision within the act and it is an entitlement, but unfortunately the implementing agencies do not follow the rule all the time.

4. **Nature of Work:** Most of the studies reveal that nature of work is also not helpful for women workers. In most of the projects selected being related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies involving earth work requiring application of physical force, male workers were preferred to women workers (Hazarika, 2009).

5. **Delay in 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. The wages are paid through banks, and the Banks are far from the village, it becomes difficult for the women to open Bank Account and draw cash which discourage women participation. They generally avoid institutional financing system like bank and post office.

**CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

MGNREGA has undoubtedly has a positive impact on employment pattern of women. Women have benefited both as individual and community. Women are benefited individually because they are now capable to earn independently, use some money for their own requirements, add contribution in their 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 across the nation (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act mainly in north-eastern state. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation.

Though MGNREGA is a good tool but the goals cannot be achieved if not implemented as per norms. During survey it has come out that the norms are not properly followed be it in deliberation or sheer ignorance. However if few changes can be made the program m be more fruitful.

1. The key officials are contractual and their salary is much lower compared to other permanent post, it discourages them to involve with the project intensely. All the officials should be regular job cadre and have decent salary.
2. More decentralization needed, it has been noticed the Panchayats are puppets of the concerned block office.
3. Apart from financial audit the Social Audit system must be strengthen.
4. The elected officials of the Panchayats must be trained. A regular review of their work is needed.
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