

Impact of MNREGA in transforming lives of rural women

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■ **ABSTRACT** : Rural women are key agents for development. They play a catalytic role towards achievement of transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. In the interest of long term development it is essential to facilitate women empowerment. To achieve the empowerment of women the government of India introduced different programmes. One such programme focusing on unskilled based wage-employment is MGNREGA. Besides meeting out the goal of social protection and livelihood security, MGNREGA promises so much from perspective of women empowerment. In this paper, based on the secondary data an attempt has been made to comprehensively understand the impact of MNREGA in transforming lives of rural women via gainful employment generation.

■ **KEY WORDS**: MNREGA, Empowerment, Rural women, Employment generation

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Women are an inevitable part for the development and growth of national economy and their contribution as well as potential is of greater significance. They constituting one-third of the national labour force and one of the major contributor to the survival of the family. However, their contribution to family income and economy remains largely invisible and unnoticed. They remain untapped and unattended in planned developmental efforts with little access to and control over resources.

In India over centuries, a very large number of rural women folk have been carrying the burden of poverty, ignorance, out molded customs and traditions. Women have been lying down and surrendering all their comforts for their family members, hence, the well-being of the community despite the multitude of social disabilities and economic deprivation. Involvement of Indian women work force in national progress is unquestionable reality

although the degree of involvement varies according to time as well as region to region. The development of women has always been the central focus of planning and women empowerment is must in this direction. It has become the key solution to many social problems like high population growth rates, increasing poverty and low status of women. In the words of former President Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam "Empowering women is prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured".

Under employment and surplus labour force has been a major focus of planning for rural development. For this government has initiated, sustained and refined various programmes in India, namely-Community Development Programme, Food for Work Programme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), National Rural Employment guarantee Act (NREGA).

With all these programmes Indian government has taken up various measures to overcome the problem of poverty. Some were partially successful in addressing the issue of poverty but could not provide social security to the rural poor as well inadequate in the view of the dimension of unemployment in rural areas. Prior to the enactment of Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, India had no programme in rural areas that promised employment as a legal right. The government had been merging old schemes to introduce new ones while retaining the basic objective of providing additional wage employment involving unskilled manual work, creating 'durable' assets, and improving food security in rural areas through public works with special safeguards for the weaker sections and women of the community. In this context, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 meeting out stark inequalities between men and women with regards to opportunity for gainful employment as well as wage rates. Hence, it represents action on both counts at same time.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The present review paper is based on secondary data which has been collected from the relevant literature consisting of research studies, magazines, journals and reviews, information collected from the internet and publications by various academic organizations, management experts and researchers. The present paper has made an attempt to study the impact of employment generation and benefits of MNREGA on the lives of rural women in various states of India over the years.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study as well as relevant discussion have been presented under following heads :

MNREGA and Gender sensitive perspectives :

The government of India has initiated Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides a legal guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The act was passed on August 2005 as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the scheme was effective in Feb. 2006 in 200 district in the first phase and then extended to an additional 130 district have been notified with effect from April 2008.

NREGA was renamed as "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act" (MGNREGA) in year 2009 and covers whole country with the exception of district that have a hundred per cent urban population.

Long-term objectives of the act include:

- Enhancement of livelihood security in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every registered household.
- Creating productive assets
- Protecting the environment
- Reducing migration
- Empowering rural women and the poor through the provision of a right-based law.
- Fostering social equity
- To create strong social safety net for the vulnerable groups by providing employment source, when other alternative are inadequate.

It is a powerful instrument for ensuring inclusive growth in rural milieu through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic empowerment. Its bottom up, people centered, demand driven, self-selecting, and right - based design is distinct and unprecedented. Besides this the scheme intends to provide employment to the rural poor during the lean agricultural season. In addition to providing income when no work is available, the programme aims to create village assets and bring about inclusive and sustainable development.

Women empowerment is a global issue which has gained momentum in recent decades. In India there are provisions in the constitution and several legislative Acts have been passed to ensure women empowerment. Empowerment is the process through which individuals gain efficiency, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that they controls their environment. It is not just financial independence, nor access to education or control over reproduction, but a combination of increasing their social, political, economic and spiritual strength, both individually and collectively. To achieve the empowerment of women the government of India introduced different programmes. One such programme focusing on unskilled based wage- employment is MGNREGA.

Besides meeting out the goal of social protection and livelihood security, MGNREGA promises so much from perspective of women empowerment with its

gender sensitive features.

The gender sensitive features like :

- While providing employment “Priority” will be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under the scheme.

- Equal wages shall be paid no discrimination solely on the ground of gender and provision of Equal Remuneration Act 1976, shall be complied with.

- In case of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site shall be made to depute one such women working to look after the children.

- The gram sabha will elect the members of committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.

- Participation in social audit: The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient for people to attend – that it is convenient for REGS(Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalized communities.

- By recognizing a single person as a ‘household’, the act make t possible for widows and other single women to access work (www.nrega.nic.in).

Women empowerment through MGNREGA :

Presently, the MNREGA is being implemented in the all rural districts of the country. A number of authors have attempted to study the MGNREGA in detail and enlighten its impact on rural lives. Jandu (2008) carried out a research in four states namely Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu and found employment at NREGS worksites seems to have raised both enthusiasm and expectation among women worker. They unanimously affirmed that the benefits from NREGA employment were high and that they would like to get more days of work in a year. By putting cash income into their hands, NREGS is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. Roy and Singh (2010) in their study in West Bengal’s two district to assess the impact of MNREGA on empowerment of the beneficiaries, significant positive changes were found in the level of aspiration , self-confidence and self-reliance of the respondents after commencement of the scheme. A positive impact of the programme was observed ashundred per cent respondents were found to be in low empowerment

category and 24.5 per cent were found under medium empowerment category after working under MNREGA.

According to Azeez and Akhtar (2011) Empowerment of rural women has emerged as unintended consequences of NREGS. Women have benefitted more as worker than as a community. Women as individual have gained because of their ability to earn independently, made possible due to the paid employment opportunity under NREGS. Chatterjee (2011) recommends that despite numerous problems, NREGA is a programme that has begun to make a difference in the lives of women. There is a massive demand for NREGA work, and the administration should respond to it by increasing the scale of employment. Other challenges too remain. The timely payment of wages is a problem in most areas. The low levels of awareness and lack of worksite facilities are also troubling. The role of NREGA as a tool of women’s empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far.

Chandra and Parvez (2012) think that high participation of women was likely to empower them socially, economically and politically. 36.4 per cent of the respondents reported that the women were socially empowered while 43.8 per cent of women respondents said that they were economically empowered and enjoyed freedom in spending the money they earned and 17.6 per cent women beneficiaries reported that they were politically empowered as they participated in decision making process under the scheme.

Major changes felt and reported by beneficiaries in the study of Thomas and Bhatia (2012) are increase in income and improvement in debt clearance. A noticeable shift in case of means of livelihood is from agriculture to labour work. A positive impact of NREGA on quality of life in terms of non-food items like possession of vehicles and mobiles rather than food items like milk, milk products, rice, cereals etc. is evident from the study. Mohanty (2012) examined the implementation process of this programme and its impact on tribal livelihoods in a tribal dominated panchayat of Sundargarh district, Odisha where majority of the respondents of the field did not know that there is provision for grievance redressal. The operational guideline detailed the procedure of Social Audit forums to be held by gram sabha on MGNREGA works 6 months basis. But in this village Social Audit is never held.

Arora *et al.* (2013) reveals that women's MGNREGS earnings have increased their contribution to household income. Majority (92%) of the women had the view that today only because of MGNREGS, they are able to support their families and 95.5 per cent of the women respondents believe that the programme enhanced their credit worthiness and 78 per cent women believe that they could start saving some money and found to be confident about use of money by herself which is a great step ahead in terms of women empowerment.

Sharma and Kumar (2013) have also found women workers feel highly satisfied with the MNREGA employment. Earlier, she used to depend on her husband for all types of expenses, but now she herself is an earning member of the family. Dey (2014) in her research points out that MGNREGA has a social impact on the lives of women. It has helped women in rural areas to come out of their closed shell. The women respondents said that the enactment of MGNREGA has been a fortunate thing for them. The wage from the scheme is an additional income for the family.

Conclusion :

MNREGA playing a significant role in strengthening the women workforce by equal wages for work and 33 per cent reservation in getting employment. The various gender sensitive measures under the act generate many benefits to women mass and paving a way for their empowerment.

The present paper delves into the impact of employment generation and benefits of MNREGA on the lives of rural women in various states of India. High participation flagged the empowerment of women workforce in many spheres *i.e.* socially, economically and politically. Studies of various states reflect that MNREGA credited high benefits to women in terms of greater economic independence, improvement in quality of life and capability to support their families through their own earnings. Better self-aspiration level, self-confidence and self-belief were also reported as positive changes among them. Further scheme brought substantial impact over social lives of women, as they are coming out of their homes not only work but visiting banks, panchayat offices and reduces their dependency on their husband. As far as challenges encountered under the scheme were low awareness, non-availability of

worksite facilities and wages not paid on time. Thus, it is clear from the cited cases in spite of several problems this programme is able to produce a difference in lives of women workforce through gainful employment opportunity. Women workers gained a lot and feel satisfied with the MNREGA employment.

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