

A Case Analysis of the Livelihood of Women: A Study of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Idukki

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Abstract:

This case analysis examines the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the livelihoods of women in Idukki, Kerala. MGNREGA is a flagship program of the Government of India aimed at providing employment and improving the living conditions of rural households. The study focuses specifically on women beneficiaries and their experiences in accessing and benefiting from the program. By analysing the implementation, challenges, and outcomes of MGNREGA, this study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of the program in promoting women's livelihoods in the region.

Introduction

The empowerment and economic independence of women are crucial for sustainable development. MGNREGA, launched in 2005, guarantees 100 days of employment to every rural household in India. The program has the potential to uplift the livelihoods of women by providing them with income, skill development opportunities, and increased social security. This case analysis focuses on Idukki, a rural district in Kerala known for its hilly terrain and agricultural practices. It explores the experiences of women beneficiaries under MGNREGA, shedding light on the challenges they face and the benefits they derive from the program.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interviews among the women workers of MGNREGA in Idukki to gather information related to their livelihood conditions such as income, savings, financial crisis during distress, self-confidence and perceptions of the program. In-depth interviews are conducted with selected beneficiaries to explore their experiences, challenges, and perspectives in detail. Secondary data sources such

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as government reports, academic studies, and program documentation are also utilized to supplement the primary data.

Case Analysis

Case No: 1- MGNREGA is helping to break the traditional barriers

Kalyani, a 34 year old woman from the Elapara Gram panchayat, has been working under MGNREGA since 2018. She has studied up to 12th standard. Her husband was very strict to allow her to go out. Kalyani belonged to a conservative family where women were expected to confine themselves to household tasks and were rarely allowed to step out of their homes. She dreamt of breaking free from these traditional barriers and carving out a life of her own.

Kalyani heard a chat among the neighbours and friends about the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Curiosity piqued, she decided to find out more about the program that seemed to offer a glimmer of hope for people like her. She discovered that MGNREGA provided guaranteed employment to rural households for 100 days a year, offering fair wages for their work on various development projects.

With newfound determination, Kalyani approached her husband to join in MGNREGA. Her husband was not allowed her to join and ordered to take care of household and children. But, her determination to join MGNREGA was remained. Her thought was to break the traditional barriers such as taking care of husband, household activities by women. Conitnous approach of kalyani, reluctantly her husband allowed joining MGNREGA. As days turned into weeks, Kalyani's hard work and income caught the attention of her husband. He marvelled at her strength and commitment, and desire to contribution of income to the family. Kalyani breaking the stereotypes exploring opportunities beyond their traditional roles.

Gradually, Kalyani's skills improved, and she became an integral part of the MGNREGA workforce. Her income not only helped her support her family but also empowered her to make decisions for herself. The woman once confined within the four walls of their homes, now actively participated in MGNREGA, contributing to the development of their community. The village flourished with improved infrastructure, and its people felt a renewed sense of pride and empowerment.

Outcome: The MGNREGA helps to improve participation and accessibility: The study finds that women's participation in MGNREGA in Idukki is relatively high, indicating an improvement in their access to employment opportunities. The program has helped women break traditional barriers and enter the workforce.

Case No: 2 – MGNREGA is a way to livelihood

Kamalam, a 32-year-old woman, has been working in MGNREGA since 2010 in the area of ayyapancoil. She lives with her husband, in-laws, and two children. Her in-laws are elderly, aged 85 and 80. Both Kamalam and her husband have registered in the MGNREGA program and work according to the scheduled employment opportunities available in their area. The majority of people in their hamlet are engaged in the program. Given her in-laws' advanced age, Kamalam and her husband bear the responsibility of taking care of them. Kamalam actively participates in MGNREGA, and the income she earns helps support her family's needs. Her elder child attends a government school and stays in a hostel, while the younger child goes to a nearby Anganwadi. Kamalam is also actively involved in the activities of Kudumbashree, an organization promoting women's empowerment, and was a member even before joining the MGNREGA scheme. When the program was implemented in their hamlet, the initial priority was to work on land management activities. The road facilities in their area were in poor condition, so the workers focused on clearing paths and cleaning roadsides to ensure safe transportation for the public. The income earned from the scheme helped the family meet household expenses, including the care of Kamalam's elderly in-laws. Kamalam maintains a savings bank account where she keeps the scheme income, withdrawing money only when necessary. Accessing the nearest ATM requires a three-kilometer journey, so she avoids unnecessary spending.

The family primarily relies on ration rice from the Public Distribution System (PDS) for their food. They also grow pulses and vegetables like tomatoes, beans, chilies, and peppers on their land for personal consumption. Due to increased disturbances from wild animals like elephants and wild pigs, farming activities have significantly reduced in their hamlet, as it is no longer profitable. However, with the PDS system in place, they can adjust their food supplies accordingly. Kamalam's in-laws prefer millets and maize over rice, as it aligns with their traditional food practices, which they believe contribute to their health. Occasionally, the family purchases clothes, and the income from the scheme covers those expenses as well. Kamalam's husband relies on this income for any other activities, as he does not have any other source of income. Kamalam expresses her satisfaction with the work undertaken in the MGNREGA scheme, such as road cleaning and watershed management, which have benefited their hamlet. While the program has not transformed her life, it has provided a sufficient level of security for her to lead a happy life.

Outcome: The implementation of the MGNREGA program has brought happiness and stability to women's lives. In this case, the income earned through the scheme has enabled Kamalam's family to lead a comfortable and content life by adjusting their lifestyle according to their earnings. The salary from the scheme serves as

their sole source of livelihood, providing them with a sense of security. This income has also ensured the well-being of the elderly family members, as they have accumulated minimum savings to address any emergencies. Overall, the MGNREGA program has provided a decent livelihood and security to Kamalam and her family.

Case No: 3 – Impact of MGNREGA in financial security

Parvathy is a 31-year-old woman residing in the hamlet of Vandanmedu village in Peermade Panchayat. She has been working in MGNREGA since 2012, and it is the only available wage employment opportunity in her area. She lives with her husband and two children. The family mainly depended with the daily wages from other sources and MGNREGA. Parvathy's husband is a daily wage labourer in the tea plantation. Apart from that, the wages from MGNREGA helps to household expenditure. The income earned from the MGNREGA provides individuals with financial support, as there are limited wage employment opportunities available in the village. The family sustains themselves with the food they cultivate and the portion of rice they receive from the Public Distribution System (PDS). Therefore, food is not a major concern for the family. Parvathy attributes their family's good health to their adherence to healthy traditional food practices.

The income primarily goes towards purchasing household items such as furniture, clothing, a television, and other utensils. Parvathy's husband is also involved in the scheme, and they jointly manage the income transferred to their account. Parvathy expresses her dissatisfaction with the lack of drinking water facilities, resting areas, and childcare services at her worksite. She finds the work performed in the scheme easier to implement compared to agricultural jobs. She appreciates how the program has enabled development in their area, emphasizing the construction of a new path that improves accessibility. Under the scheme, tasks such as constructing check dams, clearing forests, and working along riversides are the primary activities.

One fascinating advantage of the program is that it creates employment opportunities for people in their hamlet. However, there is a considerable time gap between work assignments, and timely allocation of work would greatly benefit the community. Parvathy believes that if jobs were provided, it would bring great relief to the people and help create financial stability for their families. She notes that in most families, it is the younger generations who are receiving an education, and wage employment programs like MGNREGA can provide better facilities for their children's education and overall development. Parvathy keeps a portion of her income in her account as a safety net to address emergencies, from hospital cases to her children's education. The program has made her think about the future and work towards creating financial security for her family.

Outcomes: The MGNREGA program has created wage employment opportunities for rural people, with women being the primary beneficiaries. Participation in the program has enabled women to achieve financial stability and security for their families by generating income. Women have recognized the importance of education and have encouraged their children to pursue schooling. The income generated through MGNREGA has prompted women to save for the future and establish financial security for their families.

Case No: 4 - Impact of MGNREGA on social transformation

Vasumathi is a 32-year-old Irula woman who has been working in MGNREGA since 2015. She resides in Eratayar Panchayat. Vasumathi is a homemaker and her only source of work is MGNREGA. She is married to an auto driver and they have two children, aged seven and three. Bhuvaneswari actively participates in the activities of Kudumbashree even before joining MGNREGA. Her MGNREGA group primarily works within their hamlet and its surroundings, typically receiving work up to a hundred days as the implementation of two hundred days of work has not yet reached their area. However, Vasumathi expresses concern about obtaining a hundred days of work this year due to slow work allocation. During the period of demonetization, there were delays in wage payments, taking around six months to be credited.

The income she earns through MGNREGA gives Vasumathi a sense of pride within her family, as she feels she has gained dignity. Since her husband's income covers the household expenses, she saves the money she earns. She takes pride in the fact that she was able to help her husband purchase their own auto-rickshaw. By saving her income, her husband made the down payment and bought the auto-rickshaw himself. He now repays the loans from his earnings. This achievement was made possible through her savings habit and the income generated from MGNREGA.

Vasumathi is content with the work pattern and the facilities provided at the worksite. However, the absence of a house cleaner to look after the children poses a challenge for the group, as one member is typically assigned to this duty. This is particularly difficult for Vasumathi, who has a three-year-old daughter. Fortunately, their hamlet has been selected for the provision of a community kitchen project initiated by the Government of Kerala. This project aims to provide a full meal for children under six years, adolescents, pregnant women, and people over sixty years to address malnutrition issues. The community kitchen operates effectively in the hamlet, providing support to those in need.

Vasumathi utilized the income earned through MGNREGA and the purchase of the auto-rickshaw to buy various items for her family, including a double cot bed, a steel bureau, a home theatre, and kitchen

utensils. While she has not bought any jewellery for herself, she has purchased a ring for her son, a chain, and a pair of earrings for her daughter. Regarding the work she performs, Vasumathi is pleased that it contributes to the watershed management of her locality. The check dams have been beneficial, improving conditions during the summer season compared to the past. Participation in the MGNREGA program has enhanced cooperation and camaraderie among the people in her hamlet, fostering strong relationships. The frequent interaction among the members during their workdays has increased sharing and caring. Vasumathi highlights that the scheme has fostered healthy relationships among the workers, resulting in mutual assistance for those in need. The program has indeed strengthened cooperation among the individuals and all members involved.

Outcomes: The implementation of the MGNREGA program has empowered women to actively contribute to their family's financial stability. Vasumathi's initiative has led to her family acquiring assets and her husband gaining employment, thereby providing income. When there is a steady flow of money within the family, it brings about changes in women, as they become key figures in managing the family's needs. These changes also extend to society, as social relationships improve within the community. The transformations at both the individual and societal levels contribute to the overall civic transformation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above case studies highlight the transformative power of the MGNREGA program in empowering individuals and fostering positive changes in society. MGNREGA provided a valuable source of wage employment, and support family's expenditure. The program not only improved the financial status but also enhanced cooperation among the community members. Participation in MGNREGA enabled to envision a better future for children and develop financial security for household. Similarly, MGNREGA has had a profound impact on family's livelihood. Through earnings, contributed to the household income and was able to fulfill women dream of helping them to purchase assets. The program not only empowered women as an individual but also strengthened social relationships and cooperation within community. These stories demonstrate that MGNREGA goes beyond providing mere employment opportunities. It enables individuals, particularly women, to take charge of their lives, improve their financial stability, and contribute to their communities. The program's positive outcomes extend to societal levels, fostering cooperation, and promoting overall civic transformation. Overall, the MGNREGA program has been instrumental in bringing about positive changes in the lives of individuals and communities, serving as a catalyst for socio-economic empowerment and transformation.