

Empowerment of Rural Women through MGNREGA: A Study of Idukki District in Kerala

Anjumol M.R*

Abstract

The government of India has implemented the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a wage employment program throughout the country. Enacted by legislation on August 25, 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was renamed as MGNREGA. The primary objective of this scheme is to enhance the livelihood security of households in rural areas by ensuring at least 100 days of guaranteed employment in each financial year. In recent years, MGNREGA has had a positive impact on the empowerment and employment patterns of women. This study aims to examine women's empowerment, the issues and challenges associated with it, and the overall impact of the MGNREGA scheme in India. The implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India marks a significant milestone in rural governance. The act has served as a tool for empowering the most vulnerable village communities, who often face social exclusion and political marginalization. It has brought about a positive transformation in the lives of rural women, contributing significantly to their lifestyle improvements and economic conditions. This study is based on empirical and analytical research, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Rural Development, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Since independence, the government of India has implemented numerous programs and policies aimed at uplifting women and marginalized groups. One such scheme is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was enacted in 2005. This Act includes provisions to ensure that women have fair and decent working conditions, receive equal wages, and that one-third of the beneficiaries are women. The empowerment of rural women is crucial for the overall development of rural India, as empowering women is seen as a prerequisite for building a strong nation

* Full-Time Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and Development Administration, Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed to be University, Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu-624302, Email: anjurajan004@gmail.com

and ensuring societal stability. Women's empowerment also encompasses their participation in decision-making processes. Economic empowerment, especially, is seen as the key to granting women an equal status in a male-dominated society. The progress and prosperity of women in rural society are essential for achieving overall development and gender equality. MGNREGA plays a significant role in providing women with a source of income, thereby promoting greater economic independence. This income generation contributes to achieving a positive gender balance in rural communities. In India, MGNREGA serves as an important safety net for women, offering childcare facilities at worksites and ensuring work opportunities are available close to participants' homes, which has been particularly attractive to women. The implementation of MGNREGA follows a demand-driven approach, focusing on the needs of the community rather than a supply-driven approach. By providing a guarantee of at least 100 days of employment in each financial year for every adult volunteer willing to undertake unskilled manual work, the scheme enhances the livelihood security of rural households. Additionally, it has led to the equalization of wages for female workers in the labour market. Given the substantial public expenditure associated with MGNREGA, it is important to evaluate the extent to which the scheme has strengthened the rural population.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to investigate the correlation between the empowerment of rural women and the performance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). MGNREGA has not only increased the income of poor women but has also contributed to asset creation through the generation of productive infrastructure. The program has led to a rise in the earnings of rural households, subsequently enhancing their purchasing power. Additionally, the availability of employment opportunities through MGNREGA has played a significant role in reducing poverty levels in rural areas. The study also aims to examine the direct impact of MGNREGA on the development and long-term empowerment of rural women. Specifically, it focuses on exploring the field-level situation in the agricultural-based Idukki district of rural Kerala.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to analyse the influence of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in Kerala.

Literature Review

The existing literature demonstrates the positive impact of the MGNREGA scheme on women's empowerment, particularly in addressing practical gender needs¹. The program has emerged as a powerful tool for empowering rural women in India, providing livelihood security, democratic governance, and social protections². Women participants in the scheme reported reduced financial dependence on their husbands and greater control over their earnings, no longer needing to surrender their entire income to their mother-in-laws³. While the primary objective of the scheme is to enhance the empowerment of poor women, it is crucial to improve institutional effectiveness in generating employment and create a supportive social environment that encourages increased participation of rural women⁴. The economic conditions of women beneficiaries have shown improvement after joining MGNREGA, indicating positive development outcomes. Additionally, beneficiaries have started to repay their debts⁵. Active participation of village women in the planning process and inclusion in the MGNREGA framework is essential⁶. Measures such as establishing childcare facilities for women workers, eliminating contractors, implementing transparency mechanisms effectively, and establishing a schedule of rates that is more favourable to women can help overcome short-term barriers to women's participation in MGNREGA⁷. The program contributes to enhancing the standard of living for vulnerable sections of society, particularly women, leading to their social, political, and economic empowerment⁸. Women workers express high satisfaction with MGNREGA, as it ensures equal wages for both men and women. The main aim of the scheme is to promote economic independence among women⁹. Women workers gain self-confidence in their roles as contributors to family expenses, participate in family decision-making, and allocate some of their earnings for personal use¹⁰. It is noteworthy that the Act holds significant meaning and power for rural development and women's empowerment at a national level¹¹. Wage equality between men and women helps reduce gender disparities, leading to increased respect for women within their society and families¹². Individual promotion of women occurs, as they become self-sufficient earners who can allocate cash for their own needs and contribute to family expenses¹³. Women's genuine contributions to household income are recognized, and there is a growing trend of women actively participating in Gram Sabhas (village meetings), as well as having improved access to post offices and banks¹⁴.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is primarily exploratory, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected from all the women workers of MGNREGA through a well-structured interview schedule.

Study Area

The study focuses specifically on the Idukki district of Kerala, which spans an area of 4,358 square kilometres and comprises five taluks. This district was chosen due to the high level of active participation in the MGNREGA program. It is the second-largest district in the state in terms of size and is characterized by its low population density, mountainous hills, and dense forest cover. The district is home to a significant population engaged in agricultural activities, making it an ideal location for studying the impact of the MGNREGA program.

Sampling

For the field surveys, the study has adapted a random sampling method. This approach will allow the researcher to collect data from a representative sample of beneficiaries of the MGNREGA program in the Idukki district. By using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the researcher will be able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

Source of Data

The data for this study were obtained from two main sources.

Primary Source

The primary data were collected through field surveys, which will involve conducting interviews using a structured interview schedule and carrying out case studies with the respondents. Additionally, focused group discussions were conducted to gain deeper insights into the situations. The study will also incorporate the participatory rural appraisal method to obtain a clearer understanding of the study area.

Secondary Source

The secondary data for the study were sourced from books, journals, and the internet. These secondary sources will provide additional information and insights related to the topic.

Findings

The findings of the study are as follows:

- The majority of the respondents belong to the age group of 51-60.
- 21.3 percent of the respondents are illiterate, while 36.2 percent have upper primary education, and only 10.6 percent have higher secondary education.
- 66 percent of the respondents belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, while 34 percent belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- 42.6 percent of the respondents belong to the middle class, 34 percent belong to the lower middle class, and 23.4 percent belong to the lower class.
- 59.6 percent of the respondents are engaged in agricultural labor, while 40.4 percent are involved in small-scale agriculture.
- 42.6 percent of the respondents receive information about NREGA through the Panchayat, while 40.4 percent receive it through the ward member.
- 48.9 percent of the respondents participate in NREGA to earn extra income, while others prefer it because the work is easier.
- The majority of the respondents have been members of NREGA for 5 years or more, indicating their long-term engagement with the program.
- 48.9 percent of the respondents did not have a bank account before joining NREGA, while 32.5 percent rarely used their bank accounts and 8.5 percent used them frequently. Some respondents opened bank accounts for specific purposes such as pensions and other benefits.
- 96 percent of the respondents believe that they have achieved economic benefits through the NREGA scheme.
- 80 percent of the respondents state that the majority of their income is earned through the NREGA program.
- 44.7 percent of the respondents use NREGA income for savings, while 23.4 percent do not save money and 31.9 percent use it for emergency purposes.
- The majority of respondents use NREGA income for educational purposes and daily consumption, while some use it to purchase consumer items like gold.
- 75 percent of the respondents believe that NREGA has helped increase their status within their families.

- 34 percent of the respondents believe that NREGA has helped them during periods of unemployment, while 40 percent believe it has helped to some extent, and 21.3 percent believe it has had little impact as they engage in other casual jobs.
- 96 percent of the respondents feel that NREGA provides a sense of income guarantee.
- 65 percent of the respondents believe that NREGA has helped them reduce their debt burden.
- 83.3 percent of the respondents report increased participation in decision-making after joining the NREGA scheme.

Women's participation in NREGA has enabled them to not only work but also visit Panchayat offices and banks, leading to increased status and income-earning opportunities for women in society. These findings highlight the positive impact of the NREGA program on the economic and social empowerment of women, as well as its contribution to poverty reduction and improved decision-making within households.

Conclusion

In the Idukki district, 90 percent of MGNREGA workers are women. However, compared to other manual labor jobs, men receive higher daily wages of 600 rupees, while women earn 350 rupees, resulting in men preferring alternative work options. Women, on the other hand, consistently choose NREGA due to its wage guarantee and relatively easier work. This program has enabled women to contribute significantly to their household income and allocate more funds towards their children's education. Additionally, the introduction of bank accounts for wage transactions has fostered a savings mind-set among women. Participation in NREGA has also elevated their status within their families.

Overall, MGNREGA has instilled a sense of security and provided livelihood opportunities for people. It has brought about transformative changes in women's lives, empowering them economically and granting them a greater role in decision-making within their families. The program has improved income levels, standard of living, savings habits, and access to infrastructure facilities for women. The additional income generated through NREGA has been instrumental in meeting expenses related to education and healthcare for their children. However, there are still challenges and issues that need to be addressed, particularly in the working conditions and awareness among rural women regarding the provisions of MGNREGA.

Asset creation under MGNREGA has emerged as a promising avenue for sustainable development in rural India. However, the lack of comprehensive and systematic planning in project selection has

hindered the scheme's potential benefits. Enhancing the implementation of MGNREGA through better worksite facilities, timely payment of wages, phased project planning, and efficient grievance redressal will encourage women to demand more work under this scheme. It serves as a crucial tool in the path towards uplifting women and promoting their overall development.

References:

1. Jena SK (2012) MGNREGA: A Critical Assessment of Issues and Challenges. *The Indian Journal of Commerce* 65: 165-179.
2. Kaushal SL, Singh B (2016) A study of Women participation in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh. *Productivity* 56: 382-391.
3. Venu babu Ch, Sudhakar G (2014) MGNREGA: Making Way for Social Change in Women's: A Case Study of Musunuru Mandal in Andhra Pradesh. *International Journal of engineering and Management Research* 4: 1-5.
4. Farooqi SA, Saleem I (2015) Impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the Life of Women Living under Poverty, A Study of District Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. *Pacific business review international* 8: 09-16.
5. Shobha K (2015) Inclusion of Female Labour Force in MGNREGA: A Micro Level Study *Socialomics* 4: 1-5.
6. Saha S (2014) Women Work Issues in Rural Development: A Case of MGNREGA Implementation in west bengal, India. *Global Journal of human-Social Science* 14: 49-52.
7. Reetika K, Nandini N (2009) Women Workers and Perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. *Economic and political weekly XLIV*: 49-57.
8. Dasgupta S, Sudarshan RM (2011) Issues in labour market inequality and women's participation in India's national rural employment guarantee programme. Geneva: International labour Office. pp: 1-28.
9. Sabanna Y (2016) Women empowerment through MGNREGA in Karnataka. *Indian Journal of research* 5: 240-242.
10. Agarwal S, Madhuri Devi M, (2015) Empowerment of Women through MGNREGA with Reference to Chhattisgarh. *Indian Journal of Applied Research* 5: 657-659.
11. Kant SV, Ashvine K (2013) Women empowerment through rural employment in Uttar Pradesh. *International Journal of Engineering and Management Sciences* 4: 144-148.

12. Ananta KrN (2016) Empowerment effects of the MGNREGA on women workers: A case study of four village panchayats of Majuli, Jorhat district. South Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary studies 3: 62-69.
13. Shihabudheen N (2013) Potential of MGNREGA in empowering rural women: Some preliminary evidence based on a field study in Ernakulum district in Kerala, India. International Journal of Innovative Research and Development 2: 272-278.
14. Ahangar GB (2014) Women empowerment through MGNREGA: Case study of block Shahabad of district ananthag, Jammu and Kashmir. ABHINAV National Monthly Refereed Journal of Research in Commerce and Management 3: 55-62.
15. Sahoo M (2014) Impact of MGNREGA on Women empowerment-a case study of Cuttack district in odisha. Journal of Organisation and Human Behaviour 3: 45-50.
16. Saravana M (2013) Impact Assessment of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme On Rural Women Empowerment. Golden Research Thoughts 3: 1-12.