

MGNREGA: A SILVER BULLET PROJECT FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT A CASE STUDY OF KHARGRAM BLOCK OF MURSHIDABAD DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

Sri Shibu Paul

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, Murshidabad, West Bengal

ABSTRACT

After independence a lot of poverty alleviation programme launched in India but there is no doubt to accept of the fact that MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act) has become the largest employment programme in the world now. Another aspect of this programme is that there is a provision which has given a space to the women to take part in the scheme and earn their livelihood. This is an opportunity to empower themselves economically because economic security and economic freedom is one of the main component of human life. It has a great impact on the women empowerment and development of rural population. With the participation of women to this project, gender inequalities in society are being eradicated rapidly. Thus the programme acts as a tool of transformation of the scenario of rural women and their lifestyle. Hence, this study aims at analysing the women's participation on MGNREGA with special reference to Khargram Block, District of Murshidabad, West Bengal.

Keyword: MGNREGA; women's participation; empowerment; challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Once Dr.A.P. J Abdul Kalam, the former president of India said that “Empowerment of women leads to development of a good family, good society and ultimately, a good nation”. In this sense, women empowerment means overall development of women and it include social, economic and political development of life. And economic independence is inter-related to other needs of life. Because Economic security and freedom increases purchasing power, increases social dignity, power of decision making and capacity of earning money. And economic security requires employment and an assured source of basic income adequate for meeting one's basic needs. It is true that women occupy almost 50% of total economy of India. But the picture of the rural area is quite different. Rural women are traditionally homebound. They didn't have no space to come out of their daily life and women engaged in any job was seemed as an offence. But the introduction of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 which was renamed as MGNREGA or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has given a space to them to make their lives better. This Act was brought into force by the Union Government in February 2006 and playing a significant role for the betterment for the

women empowerment and development of rural population. The scheme is attractive especially for women because it stipulates that 1/3rd of the total workers should be women.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are many studies done on evaluation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The literature reviewed here focused on the impact on rural women and their development after engaging into the scheme.

Richard Mahapatra in his article “How Women Seized NREGA” mentions that unique features of the public wage programme turned it into a magnet for women. More women than men work under the national programme that guarantees employment to the rural people.

Trishna Kalita in her article “Women's Participation in NREGA” shares that women like NREGA work for various reasons. Firstly, it is locally available. Secondly, there is less chance of exploitation. Thirdly, there are regularity and predictability of working hours. Fourthly, such works are socially acceptable and dignified. And finally, they are better paid in comparison to the other works.

A study conducted by the National Federation of Indian Women on “Socio-economic Empowerment of Women under NREGA” in selected districts of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Tamil Nadu found out that there was enhanced women identity and empowerment as NREGA provided an economic opportunity. Another aspects of understanding NREGA is the growing contribution of women workers to the sources of their households ‘livelihood. The major findings of the study are that women workers are getting empowered as visible in the form of growing contribution to the household expenditure, bearing cost of children’s education and healthcare.

All women workers according to Thomas, EM. (2010) are fully satisfied with MGNREGA works. The main reason for their satisfaction is that today they are assured of 100 days of jobs. The overall impact of MGNREGA on women’s lives is quite positives in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self- confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration or fostering better awareness of minimum wages.

3.RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is no doubt that a lots of poverty alleviation programme and employment generation schemes(Community Development Programme in 1952, Food for Work Programme in 1977-78, Antyodaya Yojna, Integrated Rural Development Programme in 1980, National Rural Development Programme in 1980, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme in 1983, Jawahar Rozgar Yojna in 1989, Employment Assurance Scheme in 1993, Annapurna Yojna in 1999, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna in 1999, Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna in 2001 and National Food for Work Programme in 2004) have been launched after the independence by the Government of India, but they were not so much effectively and efficiently had worked to reduce poverty and increase the living standard of the people in rural India. Introduction of MGNREGA in rural areas has attracted more people. It also has a great impact on women empowerment and development of rural population. With the participation of women to this project, the gender inequality in society are being eradicated rapidly. Women are being felt more important part of the society with their economic freedom. Hence this study aims at analysing the women participation and impact of

MGNREGA with special reference to Khargram Block of Murshidabad district of West Bengal.

4.STUDY AREA

Murshidabad district consist of 26 Blocks and Khargram Block is one of the under developed area. There are 12 GP under this block and most of the population depends on farming. Almost 70% of total population belongs to Muslim community. Due to some rituals women do not have more space to come out of their home and earn money. But the introduction of MGNREGA which is a right based scheme has compelled them to think twice.

5.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper studies a lots of things relating to MGNREGA and women empowerment. Keeping views on all of this aspect following few selective objectives are taken into consideration....

- To study the participation rate of women in MGNREGA in Khargram Block.
- To examine the impact of this scheme on the life of the respondents.
- To analyse the beneficial advantages acquired by the rural poor women through this programme on the basis of various parameters.
- To find out the challenges faces in taking part in the schemes.

6.METHODOLOGY

This study has been done on the basis on the field survey as primary data made by the author in September 2016. Secondary data in form of official documents has been collected from different gram panchayats under Khargram Block. Random sampling method was used for collecting the samples. Direct personal investigation along with the scheduled questionnaires were used for collecting primary data.

7.ANALYSIS OF DATA

The MGNREGA programme has already completed twelve financial years and now running into thirteen years. Bur the present study provides data only up to September 2016 as discussed below. Table.1 provides total number of registered families, persons and percentage of women of 12 Gram Panchayats engaged in the scheme. If we

take a look to the figure of the 12 Gram Panchayats, women participation rate in 100 days' work programme is very low. The lowest

percentage of women participated in MGNREGA from BALIA Gram Panchayat (29.72%).

Table.1: Khargram Block, Murshidabad, West Bengal (Sept 2016)

SL	Panchayats	No. of Reg. families	No.of Reg. Persons	Women%
1.	BALIA	3686	7758	2306(29.72)
2.	EROALI	5181	12674	5189(40.94)
3.	INDRANI	5244	11700	3768(32.21)
4.	JAIPUR	3689	8909	3316(37.22)
5.	JHILLI	5871	11799	4358(36.94)
6.	KHARGRAM	3668	6857	2322(33.86)
7.	KIRTIPUR	5666	10911	3860(35.37)
8.	MAHISAR	3167	7680	3144(40.94)
9.	MARGRAM	5150	10960	3685(33.62)
10.	PADAMKAN DI	4121	9792	3818(38.99)
11.	PARULIA	5616	12799	4820(37.66)
12.	SADAL	5531	12157	4870(40.06)

Source: nrega.nic.in

According to this figure the highest number of women's participation can be seen from EROALI (40.94%), MAHISAR (40.94%) and from SADAL (40.06%) Gram Panchayats. From the above table it is clear that women are interested to take part in this scheme. And it is a great achievement for an under developed poor rural area.

Samples: With the help of random sampling 100 samples (women) have been collected who are directly engaged into the scheme. A few interviews have been taken with the help of some questionnaire to find out their social and economic conditions and impact of MGNREGA on their lives.

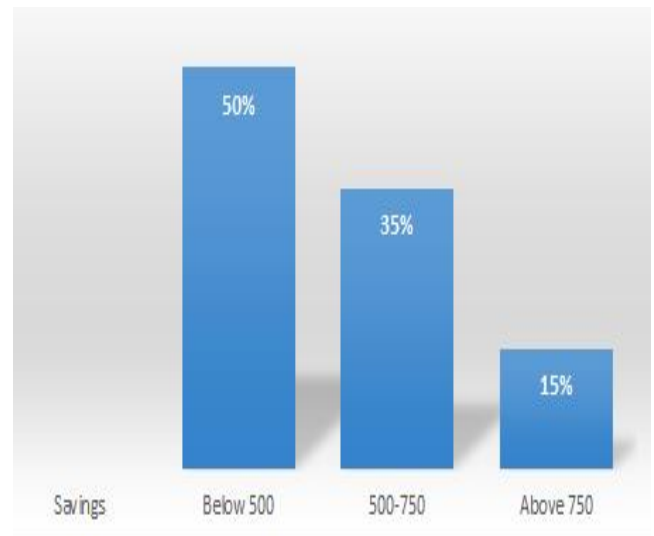
Table 2. Social condition of the Respondents

Category	Respondents
Married (women)	54

Unmarried (Women)	35
Widow	11
Age group	
Below 30	10
31-50	75
Above 50	15
Educational qualification	
Below 5 th	26
5 th -8 th	30
8 th -10 th	38
Above 10 th	06
Categorization of workers	
APL	25
BPL	75

Table 2. describe the social condition of the respondents. Under this surveyed sample, due to

low wages, male workers are not attracted towards this job. On the other hand, female workers prefer this job because of short distance from their home and lower risks. Many female workers opined that they have been provided jobs nearby their villages and they would not have to move far away from their house. In this way, they can manage both sides family and outer business of the family. Table also shows that maximum married women (54%) engaged in this scheme. But 35% unmarried persons basically unemployed and they engaged themselves to this job only to meet their basic needs. And 11% widow prefers this job only for extra income except widow pension. The table farther indicating that the majority of female workers who engaged in this job belong to the age group of 31-50 i.e. 75% of the total respondents. It is clear from the table that 68% workers completed their school education and 26% workers got only fifth standard education. From this information it is derived that workers have a very low educational qualification. This shows that no basic education or skill is required for getting job under the scheme. Table also reveals that 75% of surveyed workers are from BPL families. And it's clear from that 100 days' scheme of employment has proved its necessity to them.



From the table.3 we can get a clear concept about the economic changes of the surveyed samples. Out of the surveyed samples, majority of female workers (80%) has been engaged themselves into the MGNREG. They earn 45% of their total income from MGNREGP and others from agriculture and non-agricultural activities. And within the total surveyed samples, 71% of workers felt that their income has increased after joining under this scheme. Thus the collected data shows that MGNREGA has played a significant role in increasing the earnings as well as the living standard of the rural poor people.

A survey was done with the help of few questionnaires on why the respondents selected to take part under the scheme. The above table shows that 50% of women admitted that they felt comfortable of doing job under the scheme.

Category	No. of Respondents
Spouse employed under the scheme	
Yes	80%
No	20%
Earning of NREGP workers	
NREGP	45%
Agriculture	35%
Non agriculture	20%
Change in income	
Yes	71%
No	29%
Savings	
Below 500	50%
500-750	35%
Above 750	15%

Table.4 Reason for selecting work under NREGA

Category	No. of Respondents (%)
Other job is not available	15
Scope of doing less work	25
Work is suitable for women of different age	50
Easy to get job under the scheme	45
Getting job under own G.P	35
Getting job within 5km radius	45
Timely getting of wages	65
Family supports	72

Social status increased	60
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Source: Surveyed data

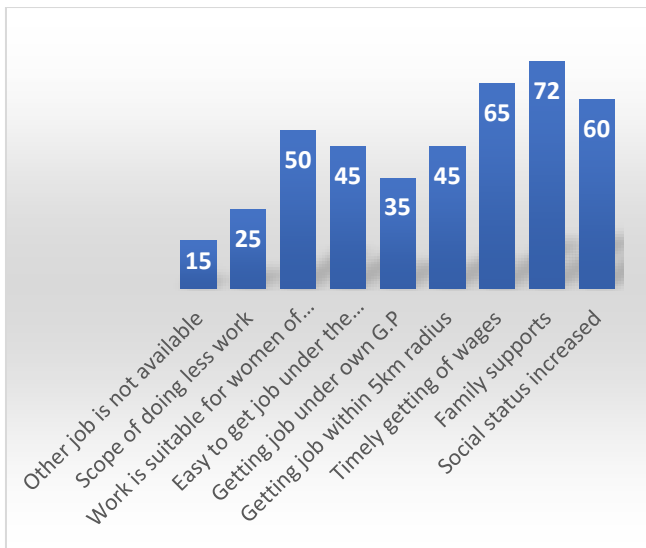


Figure 4. Showing reasons for selecting work under MGNREGA

They also explain that they can get job easily within 5km radius through the application. Another significant reason of engaging themselves into the scheme is that after completion of job they get enough time to spent with their family members. The surveyed data also shows that 72% respondents get full family support to be enlisted into the scheme. And 60% respondents claimed that their social status has been increased after the engagement into the scheme. They are economically so independent now that they can meet almost all needs of their family.

Area of Expenditure	Percentage (%)
Meeting home needs	50
Medicine	20
Repayment of loan	10
Travelling	05
Education of children	10
Others	05

If we take look to the expenditure of the respondents, then it is clear that they spent 50 percent of their earnings in meeting their

household products while 20 percent spent for medicines. On the other hand, a few respondents were found to spent their earnings for the repayment of small loans. Unfortunately, only 10 percent their earnings have been used for the education of the respondents.

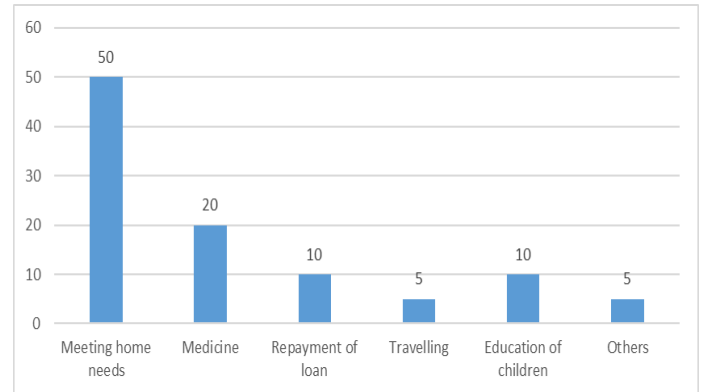


Figure 5 showing the areas of the expenditure of the respondents

Impact on Women

There is no doubt that MGNREGA has a great impact largely on rural areas. It helps to maintain a standard lifestyle of poor villagers as well as the women. The various impacts of MGNREGA on women of Khargram Block are discussed below-

Increasing income: It has been observed that MGNREGA helped to push cash incomes into the hands of women that create a greater degree of economic independence among them. Table.5 shows that 35-50% respondents are able to save 500-700 rupees' earnings from MGNREG scheme. The surveyed data indicates that women workers are more confident about their roles as a contributor to their family expenditure, their work decisions and that they are also becoming more assertive to their space in society.

Consumption of Smoothing: It is needless to say that women's earnings from MGNREG scheme have increased their contribution to household income. From the surveyed data it has been found that a large majority of respondents said that they spent wages on regular foods and consumer goods. Surely it could reduce infant malnutrition through positive effects on household food security and infant feedings.

Lower indebtedness: MGNREGA helps to reduce the burden of debt of women workers to some extent. From the survey, 10 percent (Table.5) of the respondents said that they had spent their

wages on repaying the small debts. But it is the fact that the amount earned through MGNREGA is not sufficient to repay debts.

Enriching Literacy: It is the fact that maximum numbers of women workers are illiterate but they wished to make their children literate. Now they feel economically secure and spent 10 percent (Table.5) of their total income on their children's education.

Improved Healthcare: As the women of the study area (Khargram Block) have become the earning members of the family, now they are capable of spending money for their medical purpose. At least 20 percent of total income under MGNREGA has been spent for medical purpose by the respondents. Therefore, the health condition (specially women) of surveyed area found a lot of improvement after implementation of MGNREGA.

Poverty Neutralization: It has been noticed that the condition of women in Khargram Block were in measureable condition before the implementation of MGNREGA. But there is a change can be seen after the implementation of the scheme. From the surveyed data it (Table.3) is clear that 35-50 percent respondents mostly women can save 500-750 rupees earned under the scheme. As a result, the migration rate has decreased and at the same time, the village economy has improved.

Changing role in family: There is no doubt that nowadays rural women are playing a significant role in decision making process in their family. MGNREGA is significant in converting such unpaid work of women into paid work and widen the scope of decision making role of women in household matters.

8. CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MGNREGA

In order to know the barriers and challenges in women's participation in MGNREGA under Khargram Block, interviews were carried out from 100 poor and unemployed women of Khargram Block. Their experiences and views are discussed and given below-

Absence of job cards: Majority of surveyed women complained that they have no job cards in their own names. As a result, the money earned from the scheme goes to the bank account of their husband and they (women) are still dependent on

their family members for their small economic needs. Basically male members have jobs cards and they restrict their female members to participate in MGNREGA work.

Social factors: Majority of people living in Khargram Block belongs to Muslim community. So religion plays an important role in limiting the participation of women in MGNREGA. Muslim women who practice Purdah system and others rituals limiting their ability to participate in different public activities as well as in MGNREGS.

Lack of safety measure: A common picture can be seen at the work site that women workers lay their children cradles tied around the tree branches. As per MGNREG Act, crèches have to be set up so as to enable women carrying their children to the work place without much apprehension about their children. In absence of these facilities women of the surveyed area are hesitating to participate under this scheme.

Lack of awareness: A large number of women workers of the surveyed area are not aware about their work site facilities and many more. Even they do not know that this is a right based scheme. They also do not know that they can get job on demand within 15 days after application and they can enjoy unemployment allowances if the authority is unable to provide job within 15 days of application. But their lack of awareness limiting of getting 100 days of work in a financial year.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a few suggestions and recommendations to strengthen the support structure of the NREGA-

- Full time professionals should be appointed for the implementation of NREGA at all levels so that the process can be run smoothly without any administrative obstacles.
- A regular awareness programme and workshop should be organised (especially for women) in a regular interval with the help of information technology.
- Specific effort should be made to reduce the time gap between work done and payment received by the rural labourers in NREGA.

- Facilitate speedy registration, job cards and application of programme for improvement of the scheme of prospect. A daily registration counter and an enquiry centre should be set up in every village.
- An active local level committee should be set up in every village to supervise the total project and to identify the fake card holders.

10.CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that MGNREGA scheme is a bless to the poor villagers as well as to the women who were illiterate but able to work hard because there is no need of any academic qualification. As per surveyed data, women participation under this scheme are increasing rapidly. They are now feeling economically independent and they have become an inseparable part of the family in the sense of a bread earner. They are playing a significant role in decision making process in their families. But one thing should be kept in mind that this survey has been done in a limited area and on a few sample, so this survey does not justify the total success of MGNREG scheme. It will definitely vary place to place. The above study is just an attempt to find out the success rate of women and impact of the scheme.

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