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Women Empowerment through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guaranty Act (MNREGA)

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Abstract

Formal analyses highlight a promising link between the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and women empowerment. Reforming social constructs that keep rural women in unproductive roles is vital for achieving gender equality. MNREGA aims to address constraints such as time poverty, limited access to economic assets, lack of mobility, and insufficient opportunities for participation in household decision-making. Developing a theoretical framework reveals potential connections between MNREGA and women's empowerment through concepts like time-use, income security, bargaining, and social norms. By examining these theoretical linkages and relevant empirical evidence, the research contributes to understanding MNREGA's impact on the rural poor and potential indirect effects on the rural-urban labor market. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(Deepak, 2012)

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), Women Empowerment.

1. Introduction

This paper uses MNREGA to explore the intersection of paradigm, policy, and reality. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA, 2005) is the world's largest rural wage employment programme, promising 100 days of unskilled work and payment within 15 days of completion. A critical part of India's rural-development strategy, it seeks to eradicate poverty,

enhance livelihoods, and empower women by providing rural households with a legal right to work and social security access. The programme embodies three key concepts of poverty: vulnerability, access, and entitlement. For the rural poor, agricultural wage work is often the sole employment option, with other opportunities depending on public and private interventions in non-agricultural seasons. The lack of consistent income exacerbates rural vulnerability. Additionally, women's agricultural work faces strict social and technical constraints, affecting poverty alleviation. MNREGA is being reevaluated as a framework for rural development and poverty reduction. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)

2. Conceptual Framework: Women Empowerment and Rural Livelihoods

An individual's access to resources depends on their assets and the opportunities available for utilizing those resources. Capabilities determine a person's ability to effectively use these resources. An asset-based approach evaluates an individual's wealth by considering various assets, which include physical, financial, human, and social aspects, alongside capabilities like education, health, and skills. Empowering rural women through employment opportunities is essential for poverty eradication. Most rural women engage in informal sectors, especially agriculture, with few employed in organized sectors. Women's dependency on informal work is global, reflecting their significant participation in agriculture. Their involvement in economic activities and decision-making is multifaceted, varying across social structures and policies. The rural labor force often encounters challenges in unorganized sectors, primarily agriculture. Consequently, female participation in the rural economy remains heavily concentrated in agriculture, with 86-87% of total female work participation attributed to this field, including 60% under programs like MHREGA. (K Vani, 2015)(R Reddy et al., 2014)(N. Nair et al., 2009)

3. Historical and Policy Context of MNREGA

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) ensures 100 days of unskilled wage employment per year for every rural household at the minimum wage, enhancing livelihood security in rural areas. It serves as a social security measure granting individuals a right to work, aiming to eliminate wage disparities between higher and lower caste individuals. MNREGA addresses rural distress from agricultural decline and reduces reliance on moneylenders while promoting transparency in rural development. It recognizes the right to work as fundamental and supports women empowerment by providing direct access to wages via banks, altering household spending dynamics, and encouraging labor market engagement. Participation in MNREGA can shift social norms, enhancing women's roles. However, economic growth has led to increased rural wage disparities. The act's impact may be limited when alternative employment opportunities arise, as men might leave the program for higher agricultural earnings. MNREGA aims

to boost income generation, promote self-employment, and develop skills for sustainable livelihoods. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)(N Mishra et al., 2014)

4. Mechanisms through which MNREGA Affects Women

Under MNREGA, women gain earnings that improve their bargaining power, decision-making participation, and self-esteem. Rural workers are legally entitled to at least one hundred days of unskilled work per household annually. The program focuses on providing wage employment for adults, contributing to rural asset creation and infrastructure. It aims to enhance livelihood opportunities for the rural poor, promote self-employment, and support self-financed group savings through SHGs, especially for women. MNREGA also addresses public service issues like health, education, and basic facility access, contributing to women's empowerment in rural areas. This initiative reallocates time, changing women's work dynamics by enabling market-oriented activities and enhancing job opportunities. By offering legal work entitlements, MNREGA boosts rural wage employment, liberates women from exploitation, and lessens reliance on informal jobs for emergencies. Involvement in the program encourages shifts in perceptions about women's mobility and their engagement in work environments, promoting collective governance. Engaging with male officials during planning processes may also change married women's views on agency and control over job cards. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)(Nair et al., 2014)

4.1. Economic Agency and Household Decision-Making

Women's empowerment is a crucial focus in development economics, yet evidence on the impact of rural work guarantee schemes is limited. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) in India is a significant initiative aimed at empowering women. It offers a unique opportunity to examine this aspect. Empowerment is defined as expanding women's ability to make choices previously denied to them. Based on studies, three key dimensions of empowerment—economic, social, and political—are identified along with five relevant indicators in the MNREGA context. The program aims to boost women's empowerment through mechanisms like issuing job cards in women's names and ensuring equal pay. By increasing women's earnings and labor market attachment, MNREGA enhances their bargaining power and reflects a variety of expected impacts. The program contributes to a shift from unpaid to paid work, reducing income risks by offering stable seasonal employment. It broadens labor options beyond domestic duties, promoting further development opportunities, including education and health investments. Although MNREGA encourages collective participation in decision-making, such interactions remain limited. (S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)(Kundu, 2012)(R Reddy et al., 2014)

4.2. Time Use, Labor Market Participation, and Mobility

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) guarantees 100 days of wage employment but impacts men and women differently, particularly in work hours and earnings. Women encounter barriers that restrict their participation in the scheme. A worksite intervention that created separate safety sections for women and men increased women's involvement. Working hours vary by sector, affecting participation rates; most work-hours are in components where female participation is lower. This unequal allocation restricts wage impacts on household investment. Although the Act theoretically allows flexible time slots, women's work hours still limit their time for household activities. Gender norms do not dictate where individuals work, but time allocation often does. To enhance MNREGA's effects on women, policy changes should include demand-driven job cards with separate schedules for men and women, minimizing time-use impacts. (R Reddy et al., 2014)

4.3. Social Norms, Participation, and Agency

The scheme also appears to shift social norms regarding women's labor. by affecting the gender-differentiated time costs involved in demanding work, MNREGA may enhance women's ability to collectively engage in public labor demands, increasing awareness and altering perceptions of their legitimate entitlement to public works rights. these shifts are facilitated by rural women's growing mobility and collective agency. collective participation and the move outside the household to engage collectively in matters of work and income are significant precursors to a discernible change in women's broader agency and decision-making ability. throughout the implementation of MNREGA, female workers increasingly indicate feeling able to pursue other forms of income-generating work and to engage independently with local government and community members. participation in public meetings regarding the scheme is consistently identified as enhancing information access, collective bargaining power, and perceived engagement with governance.

5. Empirical Evidence on Women Empowerment under MNREGA

Empirical evidence on women empowerment under MNREGA clusters under four broad themes. First, MNREGA participation has improved income security for many women, evidenced by more reliable wage earnings, a greater share of women's total household income coming from wages, and a reduction in long-term unemployment. Second, women's labour force participation has increased—particularly among women with little previous exposure to paid work—albeit from a low level, with most work still being informal, poorly paid, and often in sectors considered dangerous for women. Female work conditions remain poor, with pervasive occupational segregation; yet women are reportedly better off than men at MNREGA worksites, with more bargaining power and less intimidation. Third, women have gained better access to other safety-net schemes and have begun to build physical and financial assets; their asset ownership has increased,

albeit not always in their name. Finally, some studies suggest that women's involvement in MNREGA may have contributed to improved education and health indicators and to greater freedom from time poverty.

5.1. Income Security and Wage Roles

Employment is essential for women's empowerment. MNREGA is a vital tool in the formal economy that improves women's well-being, fostering better relationships with their families. Regular work boosts women's empowerment, and their participation in labor is tied to greater access to non-farm jobs. Increased wage demands by women have led to higher male outmigration, reflecting changes in household dynamics. Self-help groups (SHGs) empower women further. Dignified paid work enhances women's bargaining power in household decisions without sacrificing work hours. Women's autonomy in decision-making is affected by societal norms. SHGs that promote community sharing bolster empowerment both at home and in society. Collaborative efforts at employment sites, including WREGS-MGNREGA alongside SHGs, enhance perceptions of women's empowerment. (S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)(R Reddy et al., 2014)

5.2. Female Labor Force Participation and Work Conditions

Employment opportunities increase mobility, enhance access to financial resources, and affect intra-household resource allocation, enabling women to negotiate favorable terms. The availability of jobs and access to relief programs influence women's decisions regarding participation in schemes, determining engagement levels and associated outcomes (S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018). Jobs created on demand stimulate timely investments in health and education, prolong schooling, and enhance coping strategies against climatic shocks, ensuring children do not drop out and farmers experience gradual improvements in food security.

Women constitute roughly 60% of MGNREGA participants nationally, with figures varying significantly across states. Few schemes provide such wide-ranging coverage or allow simultaneous analysis of multiple mechanisms; those that do often fail to address gender concerns. Several interventions targeting household livelihoods or child welfare provide complementary information, but few connect cash transfer programs to women's empowerment across diverse contexts.

5.3. Access to Social Safety Nets and Asset Building

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, job cardholders in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh have a female share of 10 to 49 percent, while Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana report 50 percent or more. Scheduled tribe households exhibit a higher female share compared to scheduled cast and non-scheduled households. Rural residents in West Bengal, Uttarakhand, and Chhattisgarh enjoy greater female participation, while Tamil Nadu, Andhra

Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh show poorer coverage. Female participation tends to increase with nearby schools. Households with access to safety nets, like job guarantee programs, typically see welfare improvements, especially during downturns. In Bihar, smaller landholdings dominate, sharing labor across indivisible technologies. RHS work on private lands improves arrangement durability, as standards remain consistent. The MGNREGS labor-capital ratio does not match RHS; transitioning to contractors shifts focus to assembly, resulting in only partial loss to the RHS system. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)

5.4. Education, Health, and Temporal Freedom

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides time-use and income security directly affecting women. Women participating in MGNREGA are able to save time on household chores and can allocate additional time to education and health care. When women work in MGNREGA they receive cash that allows them to protect their children from hunger. When participating in the scheme, women are able to secure extra food for their children. Provision of extra food by the mother and caretaking by the mother when the child is ill positively affects health condition of the child (S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018).

Women, who are engaged in MGNREGA churn out extra time to take coaching classes and to shift towards learning the skills of managing various poultry (Nair et al., 2014). MGNREGS participation also supports women to spare time for taking coaching classes, tuition for school children, and preparing for competitive examinations. A number of women find extra time to shift to local cooperatives supporting the generation of self-employment.

6. Comparative Perspectives: Rural Labour Schemes and Women's Empowerment

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) was created to address the historical exclusion of women from formal education and the ongoing gender inequality evident in their access to assets and economic opportunities. It aims to reduce unemployment among women and promote female empowerment in rural areas. MNREGA guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment annually to every rural household willing to undertake unskilled manual work. Enacted on 25th August 2005 and phased into effect starting 2nd February 2006, the program initially targeted 200 Districts. Following evaluations, it expanded to all remaining Districts, becoming effective for 609 Districts from 01.04.2008. In rural India, women face significant disadvantages in labor force participation and job security, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks. The scheme notably benefits women by increasing their income by 300 tonnes monthly, providing 22 additional daily work days for households, and improving children's education and health outcomes. Enhanced household economic conditions allow for asset building through social

protection schemes, thereby strengthening resilience during economic downturns in rural areas. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(S Chakraborty & Singh, 2018)(N Mishra et al., 2014)

7. Policy Gaps, Implementation Challenges, and Recommendations

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) marks a significant shift in efforts to reduce rural poverty and empower women. It aims to enhance women's status by increasing income opportunities, earnings, freedom of time use, asset security, and social support. To maintain its gender-focused approach, specific design elements influencing participation and empowerment in rural India must be highlighted. Evidence shows that MNREGA positively impacts women's empowerment, particularly in economically backward regions. Where the scheme operates, women report higher decision-making power regarding household expenditures and asset ownership. Increased work-related time correlates with improved agency over personal income and access to borrowing. Analysis indicates that women's savings account deposits significantly affect decision-making. Women experience fewer mobility constraints compared to men, making rural employment programs relevant to mobility issues. Participation in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) enhances women's empowerment and well-being, with one-third reporting improved financial literacy. In areas with MNREGA, women's control over expenditures and participation in local government meetings increases, with 51–55% of employed individuals being women according to Management Information System data. (R Reddy et al., 2014)(N Mishra et al., 2014)(Deepak, 2012)

8. Methodological Considerations for Future Research

Future research should comprehensively investigate the effects of MNREGS on women's empowerment using multiple methods. A mixed-methods design with both quantitative and qualitative elements would provide a systematic analysis of MNREGS provisions and empowerment across diverse rural settings.

Assuming appropriate identification strategies, panel datasets (or repeated cross-sections with sufficiently large samples) could facilitate causal inference on the impact of MNREGS on income security, time use, and social norms, complemented by retrospective questions on employment history, asset ownership, and political participation. Qualitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions, could probe specific pathways through which MNREGS influences empowerment.

Generalisation of findings to other rural contexts remains an open question because MNREGS was conceived as a universal, rights-based entitlement system responding to specific conditions of underemployment and deprivation. Nevertheless, women's limited agency and access to resources

typify many rural areas outside India, indicating that relevant insights may still emerge, albeit in forms requiring contextual adaptation (Nair et al., 2014) ; (R Reddy et al., 2014).

9. Conclusion

Concluding insights underscore the significance of MNREGA for women empowerment and rural livelihoods in India. These findings resonate with development literature acknowledging empowerment's role in achieving gender equality. The challenges women face in rural areas highlight the need for targeted development programmes that address systemic disempowerment. Women empowerment is a pressing global concern, with MNREGA facilitating this goal in ways that merit exploration beyond India. Discussions include the development of programmes and funding mechanisms that prioritize empowerment, fostering gender-equitable systems in rural and urban areas. The analysis stresses the importance of gender considerations in policy measures shaping livelihoods across sectors. Policymakers increasingly integrate MNREGA principles into rural-building initiatives to enhance empowerment. However, challenges remain, emphasizing the need for robust empowerment, gender integration, and inter-sectoral coordination. Questions about MNREGA's impacts on empowerment continue, including the effects of participation and the implications of shifting entitlements to urban housing schemes. The evolution of initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana complicates women's responsibilities, making the analysis of empowerment pathways crucial. Examining gendered entitlements across governance systems at state, municipal, and national levels also requires attention.

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