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Cell : 9595 359 435, Ph No: 02172372010 Email: ayisrj@yahoo.in Website: www.ror.isrj.org

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MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME AND WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

Shivakumar S. Sangan and Mallikarjun J. Akki

Guest Lecturer , Dept. of Women's Studies , Gulbarga University, Gulbarga , Karnataka.

Abstract:-Having well designed grand rural employment generation to manual labour, MGNREGA launched new portals for women employment across the country. Women population and labour share are given due weightage in the act to enhance the opportunities for employment and income levels. It is the sustained effort of the academics and activists for the introduction act to reduce poverty among marginalized sections of the society. There are number of provisions which are clearly meant for female work force in rural India. The paper analysis Women participation in MGNREGA, Gender and MGNREGA and New Identity for Rural Women.

Keywords:Employment Guarantee Scheme and Women , Women population and labour share .

INTRODUCTION

The women in India had enjoyed considerable respect and wisdom to participate as per to their choice in different social, cultural, political, religious functions and economic activities and had enjoyed a very respectable position and honour in the prevailing socio-cultural system during Vedic period. In fact the presence of women along with their better offs was regarded compulsory for the success of performing various social and religious functions. However, it was after 500 BC the social status of women started deteriorating due to the sudden development of various social evils.

The changing socio-cultural system during the post Vedic period had disturbed and increasingly reduced the participation of women in carrying out certain activities and were largely deprived the opportunities of education, participating in outdoor socioeconomic and cultural activities. Though the upper caste women had the higher privilege and greater freedom to participate in certain activities than the lower caste women, as the consequences the former groups of women had found the opportunity to improve their socio-economic status in the society at higher level than the latter groups of women.

The changes which emerged in the political social and economic pattern during the medieval period had further marginalised and discriminated the women in providing freedom for participation in certain activities and were deprived of various social and economic rights and were brought out under the overall control of their male family members. Certain social evils, such as Sati Prathe, Psrdeh Praths, Child Marriage, Prostitution, Girl's Killings, division of women based on caste, race and socio-economic status and the economic dependency of women on men gradually emerged during this period, more especially during 712 AD when the Turks entered in India. These socio-economic problems of women continued during the British rule in India. With the formation of various social and political organisations, including the Indian National Congress, in the late nineteenth century and initiating certain movements against the existing deteriorating situation and deprivation of women from various rights, by these institutions at different forms and before the British rules some legal measures were introduced by the Government for favour of improving the status of women(Patttnaik, 2000).

Women Participation in MGNREGA

As a rural wage employment programme, MGNREGA recognised the relevance of incorporating gender

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equity and empowerment in its design. Various provisions under the Act and its Guidelines, aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies.

Gender and NREGA

The NREGA with its guarantee of 100 days of unskilled work for every household has been envisaged as gender sensitive scheme'. The main way in which a scheme for social protection can be made gender sensitive is to suggest that a certain percentage of beneficiaries must be women, which have been provided for in the Act: 'While providing employment, priority shall 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. (NREGA, Schedule II, Section 6: 19).(National Rural Employment Guarantee Act :2005)

The Act also provides for some explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation. These include:

Equal wages for men and women - 'Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers and the provisions of Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with.'

Participation in Management and monitoring of the programme - As per the guidelines, a local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee is to be appointed with members from the immediate locality or village where the work is undertaken, to monitor the progress and ensure the quality of work. 'The gram sabha will elect the members of the committee and ensure that SCs/STs and women are represented on it.'

Participation in social audit - The guidelines mention about social audit forum, convened by the 'gram sabha' every six months as part of the continuous auditing process. There is stress on the quorum of these meetings maintaining female participants alongside those from other disadvantaged groups. '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 marginalised communities (Narayanan, S.,2008).

Providing support for child care, and convenience to households - The guidelines mention that the need for a creche at the worksite, and for the works to be convenient for families: 'If some applicants have to be directed to report for work beyond 5 kms. of their residence, women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work nearer to their residence.' Also, 'If several members of a household who share the same job card are employed simultaneously under the scheme, they should be allowed to work on the same work site.'

Ensuring that single woman is eligible - By recognizing a single person as a 'household', the Act makes it possible for widows and other single woman to access work.

MGNREGA: A New Identity for Rural Women

Among all the policies MGNREGA is distinctive for its capacity to provide immediate hope and actual economic opportunities, that it has started to generate. In the wake of MGNREGA, women in rural areas seem to have become confident about being integral contributor to family expenditure and about being assertive about their identity space in public sphere. From 2006-07 up to 2011-12, around Rs 53,000 crore have been spent on wages for women and around 47 per cent of the total person-days generated have been by women. Overall, MGNREGA has been a positive and important Scheme for women.

Aggregate Participation: At the national level, the participation of women in this Scheme has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent; in 2011-12* alone, women person-days of employment were close to 50 per cent. The percentage of women participation from 2006-07 up to 2011-12* is provided in Table 1.

Significantly, female share on works under MGNREGA is greater than their share of work in the casual wage labour market across all States. Women are participating in the Scheme much more actively than they participated in all forms of recorded work. This may support the hypothesis that MGNREGA creates decent and favourable work conditions for women. For instance, MGNREGA's stipulation of work within 5 kilometres (kms) of the village where the job applicant resides makes participation in the Scheme logistically feasible for women who may have limited employment opportunities available to them, given their role and responsibilities in their households. A study conducted across ten sample districts of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh seems to confirm these findings; only 30 per cent of the women in the sample recalled earning cash income from a source other than MGNREGA, in the three months preceding the survey. Of the total women in the sample, 50 per cent said that in the absence of MGNREGA they would have worked at home or would have remained unemployed.

Table 1. Percentage of Women Person Days from 2006-07 to 2011-12

State	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2006-07	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2007-08	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2008-09	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2009-10	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2010-11	Women person-days (% of total person-days in the State) 2011-12*
Andhra Pradesh	55	58	58	58	57	58
Assam	32	31	27	28	27	25
Bihar	17	28	30	30	28	29
Chhattisgarh	39	42	47	49	49	45
Gujarat	50	47	43	48	44	45
Haryana	31	34	31	35	36	36
Himachal Pradesh	12	30	39	46	48	60
Jammu and Kashmir	4	1	6	7	7	18
Jharkhand	39	27	29	34	33	31
Karnataka	66	71	85	88	90	93
Kerala	66	71	85	88	90	93
Madhya Pradesh	43	42	43	44	44	43
Maharashtra	37	40	46	40	46	46
Odisha	36	36	38	36	39	39
Punjab	38	16	25	26	34	43
Rajasthan	67	69	67	67	68	69
Tamil Nadu	81	82	80	83	83	74
Uttar Pradesh	17	15	18	22	21	17
Uttarakhand	30	43	37	40	40	45
West Bengal	18	17	27	33	34	32
All India	40	43	48	48	48	47

Source: Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (official website), www.mgnrega.nic.in.

Note: (1) Union Territories and some States are not included in the table. (2) All-India total is for all States and Union Territories.

*Provisional Data. At the time of the preparation of the report, data entry for States was still open for the year 2011-12.

Inter-State Variations: However, the large interstate variation in women participation has remained an issue for further analysis. In FY 2011-12 Kerala had the highest female participation rate at 93 per cent, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan followed with 74 per cent and 69 per cent respectively. Nine states below the requirement of 33 per cent were Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland, Bihar, Jharkhand, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal.

The southern states, like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, show a higher rate of participation in MGNREGA as compared to their overall work participation in all recorded works. Among the northern and some eastern states, however, the pattern has been generally different, with proportionately fewer women working in the Scheme than in other rural work; Rajasthan is the only exception. These gaps are especially marked in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, where women participation in MGNREGA is particularly low.

Some of the possible factors responsible for a high rate of participation in the southern states could be:

Cultural acceptance of female participation in the labour force,

Influence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs),

Effective institutions at the State and local government level that are committed to promoting female participation in MGNREGS,

Wage differentials between private sector and MGNREGS,

Higher rationing in poorer states such that there are still a higher percentage of women in casual wage structure.

Rationing could also be due to a lack of awareness in the poorer states, or also due to a high demand and limited supply of work opportunities wherein women are forced to compete with men for employment, and the latter are usually favoured for manual labour. However, in places where the market wages are higher than MGNREGA, men undertake jobs in the market and women seek employment under the Scheme.¹⁴ (Also see Reduced Differential Wages and Wage Parity below).

Non-availability of work-site facilities like crèches, is also a huge disincentive for women. Further, certain types of MGNREGA work also limit the participation of women. In some states, productivity norms are too exacting, because the Schedule of Rates¹⁵ (SoRs) is yet to be revised in line with the norms of the Scheme.¹⁶

Additionally, the work hours may make it difficult to balance MGNREGA with their house work such as collecting water, wood, grass for livestock, etc.

Parity in wage rates also appears to be positively affecting participation of women in the Scheme. States that have a high wage differential in casual labour market (for works other than MGNREGA) are likely to have a greater participation of women in MGNREGA, which assures wage equity. An intra-household substitution effect appears to be at work. In other words, when casual labour market opportunities are better for men than they are for women, it is easier for women to get the (limited) number of jobs available under the Scheme (see Table 1). However, Punjab (43% participation of women) and Haryana (36% participation of women) appear to be the exceptions; these States have high differences between men and women in market wages, yet have participation below the national average of 50 per cent.

This trend requires further investigation. The possible reasons could be limited demand of work such that men avail of the employment, or non-availability of work suitable for women, or it could be due to cultural reasons such as non-acceptance of women in the labour force, etc.

The NSSO 66th Round¹⁹ indicates that MGNREGA has reduced the traditional wage discrimination in public works. As per the data, average wage for labour in MGNREGA was Rs 90.9 per day for men, and for women it was Rs 87 per day. The difference was larger for labour in other public works; Rs 98.3 per day for men and Rs 86.1 per day for women (Raina, Roshan Lai, Sharma G.L. and Bajpai S. K., 2008)¹⁴ Other studies also suggest an upward movement of unskilled wages for women post-MGNREGA. For instance, in Kerala, the wages for women in agriculture and forest work rose from Rs.70–80 in 2007 to Rs.110–125 in 2009. In fact, real wages increased more rapidly for female workers than for male workers. In a survey of 75 villages across four states—Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala and Rajasthan—it was found that the ratio of male female wage rates, on an average, declined from 1.40 in 2007–08 to 1.30 in 2009–10.

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Table 2. Average MGNREGA Wage and Average Casual Wage Rate as per NSSO 66th Round

State	Average Wage Rate on MGNREGA (Rs/day)	Average Casual Wage Rate (Rs/day)			
		Overall	Male	Female	Difference
Andhra Pradesh	91.9	98.5	115.4	75.7	39.7
Assam	87	90.1	94.4	74.9	19.5
Bihar	97.5	79.4	81	65.8	15.2
Chhattisgarh	82.3	68.8	70.8	65.5	5.3
Gujarat	89.3	83.3	87.3	71	16.3
Haryana	150.9	139.6	146.1	99.1	47
Himachal Pradesh	109.5	139.6	141.4	110.2	31.2
Jammu and Kashmir	93.3	158.3	157.5	NA	NA
Jharkhand	97.7	101.2	103.6	82.2	21.4
Karnataka	86	84.5	96.9	62.8	34.1
Kerala	120.6	206.5	226.6	119.3	107.3
Madhya Pradesh	83.7	69	74.5	58.1	16.4
Maharashtra	94.3	75.2	86	58.2	27.8
Odisha	105.9	75.6	81	59.1	21.9
Punjab	123.5	130.4	133.5	91.8	41.7
Rajasthan	87.4	125.7	132.3	94.3	38
Tamil Nadu	71.6	110.8	132.1	72.6	59.5
Uttar Pradesh	99.5	94.3	97	69.2	27.8
Uttarakhand	99	118.7	122.1	96.7	25.4
West Bengal	90.4	85.3	87.8	65.9	21.9
All India	90.2	93.1	101.5	68.9	32.6

Sources: NSSO, Government of India, 2009–10 and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (official website), <http://www.mgnrega.nic.in>.

Note: (1) Average MGNREGA wages per day are based on unskilled expenditure and total person-days, and not on the official notified MGNREGA wages. (2) Union Territories and some States are not included. (3) All India includes all States

MGNREGS: Gender and Ecology

Women rely heavily on natural common property resources like water, fuel, etc., and since MGNREGA plays an important role in natural resource regeneration, the Scheme seems to be strengthening livelihood security for women.

While considering the Scheme's impact on gender, one needs to keep in mind the link between environment and livelihood security. In a context where the large majority of women are dependent on agriculture and where household access to water and fuel relies heavily on common property, local resources are clearly a major source of well-being, or risk. Women are more severely affected by climate change and natural disasters because of their social roles (providing daily essentials like food, fuel, fodder, water, etc.). Migration again leads to extra hardships for women since in cases of extreme circumstances men tend to migrate leaving the women-folk behind to look after their property and household. In dry land areas, female-headed households are often ones which are the poorest, and to manage the house women put in significantly extra efforts. MGNREGA, through the creation of sustainable rural assets, water conservation and forestry works, has the potential to contribute to ecological restoration and generate environmental benefits through increased livelihood security, especially for rural women, to climate change and other shocks.

Experts on gender studies point out that part of the problem women face in household provisioning in areas of high dependence on natural resources is due to a lack of defined rights over community assets. At present a large number of women workers have minimal rights to the productive assets they work on even under this Scheme and this contributes to persistence of social exclusion. Organisational arrangements at the local level are needed to reduce the problem of implementation of gender-specific policy measures. These may include rights to maintenance, sharing, etc. Further, a more detailed gendered analysis of MGNREGA may be necessary to make rural asset generation an inclusive process and address the crises underlying increasing feminisation of poverty in India in general and women empowerment in rural India in particular.

CONCLUSION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most progressive legislations enacted in India, since independence. It is a bold and unique experiment in the provision of rural employment in India. Further, it is the first expression of the right to work as an enforceable legal entitlement. In a country where labour is the only economic asset for millions of people, gainful employment is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of other basic needs and empowered the rights like– the right to life, the right to food, and the right to education.

One can observe that the positive and negative impacts of MGNREGA on women's empowerment cannot be ignored on the grounds that these are unintended or not covered under the main objectives of MGNREGA. By addressing these impacts will not only help women's empowerment but it will also help in achieving medium and long term goals of MGNREGA and help in moving towards optimum use of labour in the economy. It will also help in moving towards some desirable national level social policies.

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