

MGNREGA and Rural Women Empowerment in India: A Case from Bankura, West Bengal

¹Pinaki Banerjee, ²Indrasish Banerjee, ³Debarati Majumdar Bhowmick and ⁴Saikat Majumdar

¹IRDM Faculty Centre, Narendrapur, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute

²Belur Vidya Mandir College, Belur, Howrah

^{3,4}University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya

Abstract—The enactment of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in 2005 is indeed a significant development or the giant leap forward to eliminate or at least reduce the degree and intensity of absolute poverty from the nation. In other words, it symbolizes the achievement of a very long civil society and people's movement towards ensuring right to food through ensuring right to work. The Indian Parliament passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in August 2005, which provides for a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household. Women (mainly unskilled) after 58 years of British Raj somehow got an opportunity to earn their meager living through the help of this Act. The act provides for 100 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household in a financial year for unskilled manual work. The Act initially notified in 200 districts, however ultimately covered all the rural districts (99% of the districts in the country) and expected to benefit some 5.5 crore poorest households in the year 2009-10 (Sharma 2009). With the budget allocation of Rs. 11,300 crore in 2006-07, under the umbrella of the NREGA, this is probably the largest rights-based social protection initiative in the world (Farrington et al. 2007). As per the Schedule I of the Act, the work under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) will be essentially creation of sustainable rural assets. As a result, after the year 2009 -10 lots of research work on this policy intervention was taken up by various researchers' throughout the country to study the impact or pros and cons of the project as a whole but not focusing the most vulnerable economic group of our country, i.e., women. To converge this academic as well as policy interest researchers' of this study endeavored to go beyond livelihood issues of the women and inferred deep to introspect their empowerment issue.

Selection of the issue

Backwardness of women is common and not seen as a sin in our nation. They are worshipped as the goddess of prosperity (by the majority) while keeping their avatars in our home as the symbols of poverty and agony. Men in this patriarchic society believe to have every pleasure for them only e.g.-job, sex, land etc. No wonder, India hosts over one-third of the poor in the world, as lack of empowerment of women is a significant cause of this poverty. Without the active participation of women, establishment of a new social order will not be a successful one, because women constitute half of the population. Women should realize that they have constitutional rights to quality health care, economic security, access to education, conjugal life and political power. Equity

is a pre-condition for any development to be sustainable in the long run. The empowerment of women and rural development is of cardinal importance in attaining equitable and sustained economic development. In countries with high unemployment rates, transfer benefits from welfare programmes can prevent poverty from worsening, particularly during lean periods. Durable assets that these programmes create may have the potential to generate second-round employment benefits as needed infrastructure is developed.

Research Objectives:

- To study the general profile of the women MGNREGA workers in the study area,
- To study the worksite facilities of MGNREGA in the study area,
- To study the rural women's perception about their economic empowerment through MGNREGA,
- To study the rural women's perception regarding their social empowerment through MGNREGA;

Locale of the study

Nekrapahari, Guabandh, Digtar, Bamni of Moshiara Gram Panchayat and Jhoriakocha of Gopalpur Gram Panchayat and Nipania, Benagoria of Molian Gram Panchayat were purposively selected (on the basis of socio-economic condition, climatic condition, migration, performance of MGNREGA etc) as the study area from Hirbandh Block of Bankura District of West Bengal for this study.

Research Design

In this research, exploratory research designing has been used as no other related studies were found in the study area. For this reason during the pilot survey researcher has used check list and open ended question to explore the research problem in the study area. In this design the substantial qualitative data collection becomes a means for developing quantitative instruments. In the later phase categorical information found from qualitative endeavor used to develop a quantitative structure for the study. (Onwuegbuzie, and Collins, 2007).

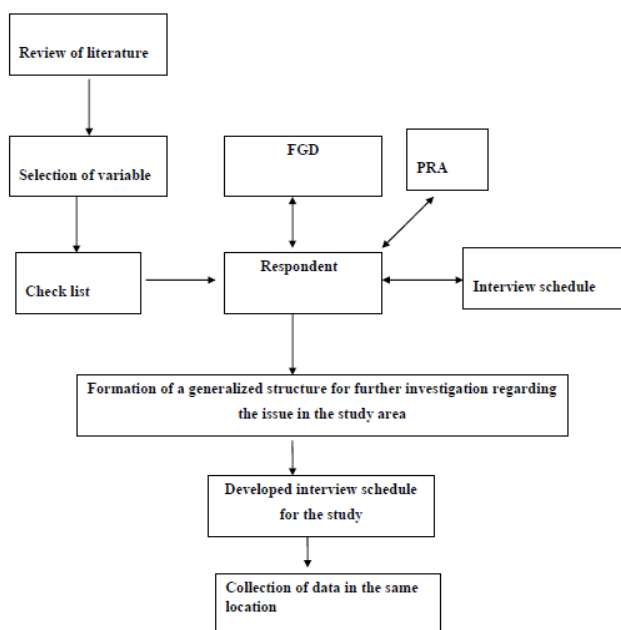


Figure 1: Exploratory Research Design

Synthesis of the Findings from the study

- 58% MGNREGA women workers were more dependent on Panchayat members regarding the information about the availability of MGNREGA work in the study area.
- 60% of the respondents in the study area did not apply for job under MGNREGA but considered by the Panchayat as potential unskilled laborer under this Act directly.
- 70% of the respondents told that their family was getting less than 50 days of work in a year. 20% of the respondents told that their family was getting less than 75 days of work in the study area. Only 10% of the respondents told that they were getting 100 days of work from the MGNREGA programme
- 62% of the respondents got payment after 14 days of work
- 18% of the respondents told that male supervisor was causing problems to them in the study area
- 42 % of the respondents told that they were getting drinking water facilities in the MGNREGA wok site.
- 26% of the respondents agreed to the fact that they were getting First aid in the MGNREGA worksite
- 76% of the respondents told that sheds were not available in the worksites.
- 96% of the respondents told that crèche scheme was not available in the worksites
- 4% of the respondents told that they were getting the toilet facility in the worksites.

- 48% of the respondents have withdrawn money from post offices and 52 % respondents have withdrawn money from Bank
- 54% of the respondents agreed on the fact that they had full right on MGNREGA income
- 62 % of the respondents told that wages were accessed and controlled by their male counterparts in the study area
- All the respondents agreed to the fact that they (getting from MGNREGA work) for buying luxury food items like meat, fruits , sweet and vegetables etc.
- 98% of the respondents while describing their situation told that the monetary benefits from MGNREGA work used it for health purposes which was not affordable to them previously
- 72% of the respondents told that they spent their monetary income from MGNREGA for their children's education purpose in the study area
- 42% the respondents told that they had spent their money to buy assets for their family from this income
- 34% of the respondents had noted increase in the level of saving after participating in MGNREGA work in the study area

Conclusion and Scenarios

In a one liner it can be concluded that empowerment of rural women has emerged as an **unintended consequence of MGNREGA**. Women have benefited more as labors than as a community. Women as individuals have gained because they are hard working in nature, made possible due to the paid employment opportunity under MGNREGA. However, independent and monetized earnings have increased consumption choices and reduced economic dependence in the study area. This has helped women in registering their tangible contribution to the household's income. The overall effects of these have translated into an increased voice for women in household affairs. Women as a community, however, have been slow in realizing the potential benefits of the Act. Nevertheless, their increased presence in the gram sabha, the increasing number of women speaking out in the gram sabha, frequent interactions with government officials and PRI representatives, and access to banks and post offices are new developments. Additionally, the female mate system has reversed the traditional gender roles, albeit in a limited manner. On the flipside, working hours for women have increased; leisure time has vanished; and there are physical and emotional strains related to such work. Lactating women and women with young children work under emotional strain, as they remain separated from their children for long hours. Some adolescent girls are reported to have left their studies to avail of the job opportunity under MGNREGA, especially in Guabandh. The challenges lie in horizontal and vertical expansion of benefits first. The high participation of women

ensures horizontal spread of benefits. Realization of greater numbers of person days ensures better individual-level effects. This district with high SC and ST populations and our state with relatively poor human and gender development indices and greater levels of state and civil society mobilization could have benefited more. However, other than SC, ST, and OBC women, others are not forthcoming in availing this paid job opportunity. Apart from implementation issues, there are social and cultural contexts that restrict women's participation in some villages. Persistent social and community mobilization and a proactive role of the administration can compensate some of these social and cultural deficits. Nonetheless, at the end it can be said safely that intensity and chance of women empowerment through MGNREGA is conditional and are still dependent on the societal choice and policy interventions.

References

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