

Women Empowerment through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India

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Abstract: Indian social order is patriarchal. The patriarchal social order is the reflection of a social division that lacks a space for equal treatment of men and women in terms of providing them opportunities and expecting their performances. Indian society has been legitimized positioning women to remain under the subjugation of their male counterpart within and outside the family. Traditionally, the role of an Indian woman has been largely approved of a status that is only social in nature and sequences as a daughter, sister, wife, mother etc. Women in India mostly were limited to the social identity having been deprived of economic and political participation and recognition until some progressive efforts taken by the Indian governments. To sustain the change momentum in the life of women, continuous efforts by the government is required and the policies need to address the combined influence of social norms and beliefs, women's access to economic opportunities, the legal framework, and women's education. Measures that increase women's control over household resources and laws that enhance their ability to accumulate assets, especially by strengthening their property rights, are important. The present study analyses the empowering changes occurring in the socio-economic and political behaviour of the women after their participations in the scheme under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Key words: Women, Empowerment and MGNREGA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Unraveling the pages of history of India reads the deteriorated situations of women that existed in the practice of polygamy, sati pratha, dowry system, female infanticide, etc. However, in the passage of time, social reformers and leaders emerged from the society in a given period to counter such anti-women thinking and practices and worked hard to raise the status of women in the Indian society. The independent India took up many progressive and effective legislative efforts in the form of enactment of laws, education and social awareness activities regarding safety and empowerment of women. The governments have focused women as center of development. Therefore, the governments looking into the development and empowerment of women have been taking a holistic and composite approach of social, economic, political and legal measures and interventions. However, studies find that, many gender disparities remain even as countries develop (Revenga *et al.*, 2012). This calls for a sustained and focused public action. It is viewed that, corrective policies will yield substantial development payoffs if they focus on persistent gender inequalities that matter most for welfare. To be effective, these measures must target the root causes of inequality without ignoring the domestic political economy (*ibid*).

Social and economic freedom is very important for the women for their empowerment. Gender equality is a means to the availability of the freedom of opportunities exercised by the women in par with the men. Women can exercise their freedom through development. In such context, development is a process of expanding freedoms equally for all people—male and female (Sen, 2009). Studies prove that, improvement in the status of women changes the social and economic status of the country. Empowering women as economic, political, and social actors can change policy choices and make institutions more representative of a range of voices. In India, giving power to women at the local level led to greater provision of public goods, such as water and sanitation, which mattered more to women (Beaman *et al.*, 2011).

Women in the present time are comparatively more conscious of their rights, position and consistently fighting for expanding their societal roles and opportunity for participations. They are asserting their individuality beyond the barrier of socially constructed and mostly prescribed identities. The state has come

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forward and is taking progressive steps in providing legislative support for their development and empowerment. Among many such progressive acts, MGNREGA is such progressive law that provides opportunity to the women to come out of their homes and participate in the economic activities in the rural areas. It strengthens their economic situations that ultimately leading to enhancing their decision-making ability in their families.

Thus, the present article is discussed in two parts. In one part, it deals with the conceptual understanding of women empowerment, state interventions in promoting women development and empowerment through various progressive laws, policies, and schemes and on the other part, the impact of MGNREGA as a strategic intervention by the government focusing economic approach to the women empowerment.

Part- I

II. WHAT IS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT?

Women empowerment is a socially unrestricing of the women about their making choices and performances that they are capable of doing. It is giving power to women to decide for their own lives or inculcating such abilities in them so that they can find their rightful place in the society.

According to the United Nations, women's empowerment mainly has five components:

- Generating women's sense of self-worth;
- Women's right to have and to determine their choices;
- Women's right to have access to equal opportunities and all kinds of resources;
- Women's right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives, within and outside the home; and
- Women's ability to contribute in creating a more just social and economic order.

Thus, women empowerment is more about recognition of women's basic human rights and creating an environment where they are free to have all the opportunities that the men have. It is about women's freedom for, from and equal opportunity to be.

III. WOMEN CENTRIC LEGISLATIONS

The Constitution of India provides provisions to secure equality in general and gender equality in particular. Various articles in the Constitution safeguard women's rights by putting them at par with men socially, politically and economically. The Preamble, the Fundamental Rights, DPSPs and other constitutional provisions provide several general and special safeguards to secure women's human rights.

a. Preamble:

The Preamble to the Constitution of India assures justice, social, economic and political; equality of status and opportunity and dignity to the individual. Thus, it treats both men and women equal.

b. Fundamental Rights:

The policy of women empowerment is well entrenched in the Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Constitution of India. The most important among others are:

- Article 14 ensures to women the right to equality.
- Article 15(1) specifically prohibits discrimination based on sex.
- Article 15(3) empowers the State to take affirmative action in favour of women.
- Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office.

These rights being fundamental rights are justiciable in court of law. The Government is obliged to follow the same in the process of execution.

c. Directive Principles of State Policy:

Directive principles of State Policy in the Constitution of India contain important provisions regarding women empowerment. The government is duty bound to apply these principles while making laws or formulating any policy. The principles are not justiciable in the Court but these are essential for governance. Following are some of the important principles more relevant to women empowerment:

- Article 39 (a) provides that the State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- Article 39 (d) mandates equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- Article 42 provides that the State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

d. Fundamental Duties:

Fundamental duties are enshrined in Part IV-A of the Constitution. They are positive duties for the people of India to follow. It contains a duty related to the protection of women's rights such as Article 51 (A) (e) expects from the citizen of the country to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

e. Other Constitutional Provisions:

Through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1993, a very important political right has been given to women, which is a landmark in the direction of women empowerment in India. With this amendment, women were given 33.33 per cent reservation in seats at different levels of elections in local governance i.e. at Panchayat, Block and Municipality elections. Thus, it can be seen that, these Constitutional provisions are very empowering for women and the State is duty bound to apply these principles in taking policy decisions as well as in enacting laws that aim at women empowerment.

f. Specific Laws for Women Empowerment

Following is the list of some specific laws, which were enacted by the Parliament in order to fulfill Constitutional obligations of women development and empowerment:

- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.
- The Medical termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.
- The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and) Act, 2013.

Above mentioned and several other laws are there which not only provide specific legal rights to women but also gives them a sense of security and empowerment.

g. International Commitments of India as to Women Empowerment

India is a party to various International conventions and treaties that are committed to secure, protect and promote equal rights of women. One of the most important among them is the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by India in 1993. Other important International instruments for women empowerment are: The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21st century, titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action". All these have been whole-heartedly endorsed by India to improve women's situation by addressing their problems of female infanticide, dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment at workplace and other heinous sex crimes against them.

h. Government Policies and Schemes for Women Empowerment

Governments have been trying to address the issues of women with a single point agenda of empowering women through appropriate policies and schemes. In the year 2001, the Government of India launched a National Policy for Empowerment of Women. Following are the specific objectives of the policy:

- Creation of an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- Creation of an environment for enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres.
- Providing equal access to participation and decision making of women in social political and economic life of the nation.
- Providing equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public life etc.
- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

- Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development is the nodal agency that deals with the welfare, development and empowerment of women. It delineates schemes and programmes for their benefit. The thrust areas of the scheme are women's need for shelter, security, safety, legal aid, justice, information, maternal health, food, nutrition etc., as well as their need for economic sustenance through skill development, education and access to financial institutional credit and marketing. Various schemes of the Ministry that enable economic empowerment of the women are Swashakti, Swayamsidha, STEP and Swawlamban. Working Women Hostels and Creches provide support services; and Swadhar and Short Stay Homes provide protection and rehabilitation to women in difficult circumstances. The Ministry also supports autonomous bodies like National Commission, Central Social Welfare Board and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, which work for the welfare and development of women. Economic sustenance of women through skill development, education and access to credit and marketing is also one of the areas where the Ministry has special focus.

Part- II

IV. MGNREGA AS INCLUSIVE GROWTH

MGNREGA, 2005 is a flagship programme of Government of India. It is being executed by the Ministry of Rural Development *w.e.f.* 2 February 2006. The Act provides opportunity for the rural people to participate in the economic activities in their own locality for enhancement of livelihood security of their households. It is the mandate of the Government that, it has to provide at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

Therefore, in India, public works programs provide employment and social protection to the working age poor, with gender responsiveness now making them. According to Pranab Mukherjee (2009) inclusive growth carries the twin strategy of the growth and the instrumentalities through which it is achieved, so that the benefits reach the largest section of the society and that the maximum numbers of people are able to derive benefits from these development projects. That is why special emphasis was given to schemes like NREGA and Bharat Nirman.

Suresh Kumar¹ observed that, MGNREGA is a step towards the right to work, as an aspect of the fundamental right to live with dignity in accordance of Indian constitution. The MGNREGA bring into being the rural people inclusive through following:

- Social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India.
- Livelihood security for the poor through creation of durable assets, improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity.
- Drought proofing and food management and increasing production in rural India.
- Empowerment of the socially disadvantaged, especially women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, through the process of a rights-based legislation and implementation.
- Strengthening decentralized and participatory planning through convergence of various anti-poverty and livelihoods initiatives.
- Deepening democracy at the grass-roots by strengthening Panchayat Raj Institutions.
- Effecting greater transparency and accountability in governance.

Table 1 Progress of MGNREGA in India²

Particulars	2013-14 Financial year
Person days (in Crore) total	134.80
Employment provided to Households (in Crore)	3.81
SCs	31.53 (54%)
STs	21.09 (16%)
Women	73.33 (54%)
Budget outlays (in Rs.Crore)	33,000

¹ A research scholar. For more read at

http://www.academia.edu/6477160/MGNREGA_A_STEP_TOWARDS_INCLUSIVE_GROWTH

² Journal of Internet Banking and Commerce, Jan 2017, vol. 22, no. S7, <http://www.icommercenral.com>

Works completed (in Lakhs)	11.17
Total work taken up (in Lakhs)	111.64
Total job card issued (in Crore)	12.72

The table 1 indicates the progress of MGNREGA during the period of 2013-14 financial year. It is found that, women participate the highest in the scheme bearing 54 per cent.

V. MGNREGA AS A TOOL OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India said as quoted “you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. The scholars observe that, the eleventh five-year plan marked a significant departure from the conventional way of looking at women in plan document. It tried to mark the centrality of women in all sectors. It explicitly recognized, probably for the first time, that women are not just equal citizens but agents of economic and social growth. According to UN Women (2013) MGNREGA in India and the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in South Africa are examples of important safety nets for women (Xavier and *et al.*, 2014).

MGNREGA is one of the most important Acts for the rural people especially the manually working women to include them in the growth process for national development with focus on their empowerment. It plays a significant role in reducing poverty in rural areas by providing guaranteed wage employment at least for 100 days. In the villages, the infrastructures are created, which is of prime importance for the development of the rural as well as the urban areas. MGNREGA has been instrumental in raising the standard of living of the rural people as it enhances their bargaining and purchasing abilities in the labour market. It empowers them to participate in the cash dealings with the Mahajans/Sahukars (local traders) and be protected from the probable exploitations due to traditional business transactions and practices.

Women centric studies on the impact of MGNREGA for their socio - economic improvements and challenges faced by them reveal that, there has been a positive change in the life of rural women participating in the scheme. It has improved their income level and enhanced their standard of living (Institute of Applied Manpower Research, 2008). Khera *et al.*, (2009) observed that the MGNREGA plays a facilitator role for the women participants of the scheme to attain socio-economic empowerment. Among others, decision-making in the household by the women has been an important indicator to understand the situation of women in the society. The MGNREGA enhanced decision-making power of women participants in the scheme (Arora *et al.*, 2013). The improvement of women participation in MGNREGA is enhanced from active participation of NGOs and better wage payment of scheme, which is above the prevalent market wage (Sudarshan, 2010).

It is has been a traditional practice that, women generally assist their husband in the work along with managing household responsibilities. They also work as a business partner but often don't get paid for their contribution. Even if they are paid for their work, women earn less than their male counterparts (Bushan *et al.*, 2013). However, this traditional system has been averted after the implementation of MGNREGA in rural areas. Equal remuneration, job quota (one-third of job), locally available jobs, worksite facility and socially acceptable job support to women are the main thrive towards MGNREGA job in rural area. MGNREGA has also not allowed them doing hazardous work (Khera *et al.*, 2009).

Figure 1 Trends in women participation in MGNREGA scheme



* Provisional. ** As on 30.01.2013. Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India.

MGNREGA provides that priority should 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 this Act. The figure 1 shows the increasing trend of the women participation in the scheme. From the year of implementation 2006-07 to 2012-13 there has been about 15 per cent variation in the trend, which is upward.

MGNREGA has reduced traditional gender wage discrimination, particularly in the public works³ sector. As per NSSO 66th round⁴, the average wage for labour in MGNREGA was Rs 90.9 per day for men, and for women it was Rs 87 per day. The wage difference was larger for labour in other public works; Rs 98.3 per day for men and Rs 86.1 per day for women. 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 110–25 in 2009⁵.

Preliminary findings suggest that the increased access to paid work due to MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's socio-economic status and general well-being. For instance, in a survey conducted across six states, 82 per cent of the widows in the sample regarded MGNREGA as a very important source of income, and of the total sample, 69 per cent of the women stated that MGNREGA had helped them avoid hunger. Findings from different studies also observe that post MGNREGA, women have greater control over their wages and have been spending them on repaying small debts, paying for their children's schooling and bearing medical expenses, etc.⁶

MGNREGA reduced poverty by up to 32 per cent and prevented 14 million people from falling into poverty. It has reduced poverty by up to a third and gave a large number of women their first opportunity to earn cash income, a new research has found. Officials from the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) released a new report Wednesday evening which used data from two rounds of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) – 2004-5 and 2011-12. The survey was conducted by the NCAER and University of Maryland, involving over 26,000 rural households across the country (Rukmini, 2015). Comparisons between the two survey rounds found that the programme reduced poverty overall by up to 32 per cent and prevented 14 million people from falling into poverty. Economic growth contributed to overall poverty reduction during this period, but we found that the MGNREGS also played a significant role (Ibid).

The report also found that MGNREGA is often the first opportunity that women have had to earn cash income – 45% of female MGNREGA workers surveyed in 2011/12 said that they were not earning back in 2004/05. Another positive impact is that reliance on moneylenders had decreased since the implementation of MGNREGA⁷.

VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Women face inequality in almost all aspects of life. Among others, economic opportunity and participation has been the most visible areas of women being deprived of their access to. In order to facilitate the process of women's access to economic opportunity, thereby reducing male-female disparity in earnings and economic productivity, a combination of policies is called for and MGNREGA is such legal intervention in the socio-economic development and women empowerment. Governments expect socio-economic development and women empowerment through MGNREGA. It is an important tool for Indian inclusive growth and poverty reduction. It provides productive employment to rural people especially the women folk. It does eradicate poverty. It promotes self-assertion of the women and they are able to lead their lives with dignity and freedom. It adds to their self-esteem and gives them a distinct identity. They are able to gain positions of respect in society. As they are financially independent they are able to spend on all their needs and desires.

However, women are still far behind achieving the equality and justice, which the Preamble of the Constitution talks about. The real problem lies in the patriarchal social order and male-dominated system of our society, which considers women as subordinate to men and creates different types of methods to subjugate them. Female education, family with gender equality orientation, social awareness and sensitization of male members of the society about the issues and challenges faced by female members need to be extensively and effectively addressed. Both the government and non-government organizations need to continue their efforts spreading awareness, education and legal support to empower female members of our family by providing them equal opportunities of education, health, nutrition and decision making without any discrimination. The MGNREGA has enough potentialities to address the gender issues and promote women empowerment. It proves that, both men and women of this country make India great.

³ Public works are development projects/works that are undertaken for public use and owned by the government.

⁴ NSSO, 66th Round National Survey, July 2009–June 2010, Employment and Unemployment, 2009–10.

⁵ R. M. Sudarshan, 'Examining India's National Regional Employment Guarantee Act: Its Impact and Women's Participation'.

⁶ MGNREGA Sameeksha, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2006-2012.

⁷ 2015 National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) report

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