

Participation of Women Workers in MGNREGA: A Case Study of Ludhiana District of Punjab

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) represents one of the most progressive and visionary pieces of legislation crafted for the advancement of rural India. This scheme guarantees 100 days of employment, minimum-wage work on public projects, with a commitment to maintaining a 33 percent female workforce. The study has been planned to examine the socio-economic aspects of women's empowerment through their involvement in MGNREGA in the Ludhiana districts of Punjab. A sample of 80 households in which 40 MGNREGA and 40 non-MGNREGA households were taken into consideration. The study revealed that MGNREGA led to increased work hours, savings, reduced debt, and improved decision-making. This positive change also reduced reliance on money lenders, although land holdings saw little positive impact. In contrast, non-MGNREGA programs had limited positive effects on these socio-economic factors, resulting in decreased work hours and savings, with little change in debt and money lender dependence.

Key Words: MGNREGA, Labourer, Women, Wages, Empowerment.

JEL Classification: J31, E24, E29, J23, J62

Introduction

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), was introduced in 2006 and proposed to strengthen rural households with employment opportunities and ensure the social presence of women in this scheme (McCord and Paul, 2019). Its impact extends to social protection, safeguarding livelihoods, and advancing democratic empowerment. It prioritizes women by ensuring that at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women. This initiative prevents any gender-based discrimination in all employment under the scheme and abides by the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. Moreover, this program offers opportunities for women to engage in planning and executing MGNREGA as members of Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat. At least one-third of the total non-official members of the central council must be women. Certain provisions, such as work within a five-kilometre radius from home, the absence of contractors, and flexibility in selecting work periods and months, were designed not exclusively for men but also to benefit rural women in various ways. The name of the scheme was changed to MGNREGA on oct 2, 2009.

Thus, MGNREGA is such a program that can help

to reduce gender inequalities in the poorest households, producing useful resources, and promoting economic growth that benefits the underprivileged. It can guarantee that men and women are paid fairly for the work they do, produce resources that lessen the burdens women bear, give them ownership of assets, and empower them by giving them control over their income. Furthermore, this employment guarantee program can help the groups to work together to get better pay and benefits. According to Das and Mahanto (2012) the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has yielded favorable outcomes for the employment landscape of women. This impact extends to both personal and collective levels within the community. Individually, women have experienced advantages as they gain the ability to earn their income, allocate funds for personal requirements, and contribute to family expenses. The communal benefits for women are reflected in enhanced participation in the Gram Sabha, a rising number of women voicing their opinions in meetings, and an increased aptitude for interaction. Even, Carswell and Neve (2014) pointed out that the most efficient method for creating jobs, whether directly or indirectly, is the MGNREGA. This program not only generates employment but also boosts the rural economy, meets the basic requirements of rural people, and

enhances the buying capacity of rural laborers. Samaddar (2020) also emphasized the growing consciousness and engagement of women in the aftermath of MGNREGA's implementation. Their involvement in the Gram Sabha and social audits functions as a tool for enhancing their political empowerment. MGNREGA has fostered a sense of shared resilience among women across various aspects of village life. A significant outcome observed among women from different villages is the establishment of acquaintances, interactions, and mutual assistance among them. Khera and Nayak (2009) conducted a study that uncovered the noteworthy advantages reported as improved food security and a heightened ability to avoid unsafe work among women. The limitation of working hours to 7-8 hours per day was beneficial in preventing the harassment of women workers. The study also revealed that employment under private landlords and contractors often carried an underlying risk of sexual abuse and exploitation while MGNREGA has notably contributed to the psychological contentment of the female workforce. However, women faced challenges in managing their household's work as flexible working hours under MGNREGA. Somehow, women's household work and responsibilities are jeopardised (Mehta and Sharma 2019). Moreover, flexible working hours in this job remained unsuccessful in controlling the household burden. The positive aspect is, MGNREGA provides women access to the outer world and mobility outside of the households (Thapar-Björkert *et al* 2019). In a nutshell, it plays a significant role to meet the practical and strategic needs of rural women (Das 2018). Thus, the study has a specific objective is to understand the impact of MGNREGA on the socio-economic profile of women.

Data Sources and Methodology

The present study is based on primary data collection with special reference to women's participation in the scheme to enhance women's empowerment. For the present study data was collected from Ludhiana district of Punjab. Further two villages i.e. Assi-Kalan and Sidda were randomly selected for the research work. A total 80 households in which 40 MGNREGA and 40 non-MGNREGA households were taken for the present study. From each household, women workers (working in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA) were interviewed through semi-structured interview schedule. Both open-ended and close-ended questions were put to the respondents. The study examines the factors affecting women's participation in MGNREGA on a three-point continuum as major, minor, and not at all with scores of 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The primary data were collected from the respondents pertained to the year 2022-23.

Results and Discussion

The study showed a demographic analysis of two distinct groups, MGNREGA beneficiaries and non-MGNREGA

individuals. The finding revealed that 70 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) individuals participate in MGNREGA, compared to 60 per cent in non-MGNREGA. This suggests that MGNREGA seems more accessible or attractive, possibly due to targeted outreach or perceived advantages. In contrast, General Caste representation is higher in non-MGNREGA programs, with 15.3 per cent compared to five per cent in MGNREGA, suggesting different social or economic factors. These results align with the findings of (Singh and Singh 2019) that respondents, 91.15 per cent, were from Scheduled Castes, 7.82 per cent were from backward classes, and only 1.03 per cent were from general castes. In terms of religion, MGNREGA has a much higher proportion of Sikhs at 87.5 per cent as compared to 62.5 per cent in non-MGNREGA, while Hindus are more represented in non-MGNREGA at 35 per cent compared to 12.5 per cent in MGNREGA. The majority of MGNREGA participants come from larger families of 4-6 members, i.e. 85 per cent, whereas non-MGNREGA shows a more balanced distribution between one to three family members i.e. 40 per cent and four to six family members i.e. 60 per cent, indicating MGNREGA participants may be more reliant on the program to support larger households. Most participants in both groups are married, with 85 per cent in non-MGNREGA and 82.5 per cent in MGNREGA. There were no unmarried individuals in MGNREGA, whereas non-MGNREGA includes five per cent unmarried individuals. The widow representation was higher in MGNREGA i.e. 17.5 per cent compared to 10 per cent in non-MGNREGA, suggesting widows might be more dependent on MGNREGA for financial support. Thus, the study revealed a higher representation of SC and Sikh individuals in MGNREGA (Table 1).

The study revealed a slight increase in nuclear families among MGNREGA households, rising from 61.5 percent to 69 per cent after participation, whereas non-MGNREGA households had no changes with regard to family system. The program was impacting the traditional concept of joint households, either directly or indirectly. As family size grows, the number of larger households among job card holders decreases. Some joint families have registered as separate households to obtain more job cards. This finding was supported by the findings of (Sarkar *et al* 2011)

However, the study exhibited no changes in housing types, with 70 per cent of MGNREGA households living in pucca houses and non-MGNREGA households evenly split between pucca and semi-pucca houses. The house ownership for MGNREGA households improved marginally from 92.5 per cent to 97.5 per cent, while non-MGNREGA households stayed constant at 87.5 per cent. Room availability in MGNREGA households saw a slight increase in three-room houses. Access to washrooms remained the same, with 95 per cent of MGNREGA households using common washrooms. Fuel usage for cooking showed a small shift

Table 1. Distribution of demographic profile of the respondents

Particulars		MGNREGA	Non-MGNREGA
		Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	40 (100)	40 (100)
	Caste		
	General	2 (5)	6 (15.3)
	OBC	10 (25)	9 (24.7)
	SC	28 (70)	25 (60)
Religion	Hindu	5 (12.50)	14 (35)
	Sikh	35 (87.50)	26 (65)
Family size	1-3	5 (12.50)	16 (40)
	4-6	34 (85)	24
	7-9	1 (2.50)	0
Marital status	Married	33 (82.50)	34 (85)
	Unmarried	Zero	2 (5)
	Widow	7 (17.50)	4 (10)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

i.e. 60 per cent of MGNREGA households were using LPG exclusively post-participation, which was earlier in 57.5 per cent of households, while non-MGNREGA households consistently used LPG at 80 per cent. The study observed minor changes in family structure, housing, and fuel usage among MGNREGA households, along with slight improvements in house ownership and room availability. Non-MGNREGA households remained stable in these aspects (Table 2).

The finding of the study presented in Table 3 revealed significant differences between MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA participants. Market wages were a major issue for 82.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 57.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA respondents. Lack of skills was a major concern for 72.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 57.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants. Both groups faced indebtedness and it was a major issue for 72.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 70 per cent of non-MGNREGA respondents. Lack of continuous work affected 82.5 per cent of MGNREGA participants and

remain a major factor for joining MGNREGA, however, 55 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants reported it as a minor issue. Migration was not a significant factor for either group. Illiteracy impacted 67.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 50 per cent of non-MGNREGA respondents. Financial resources were a major concern for 72.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 67.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants. Illiteracy and financial resource constraints further highlight the need for educational and economic support.

The results indicated that MGNREGA participants experience greater benefits and fewer major issues compared to non-MGNREGA participants. For wages, 95 per cent of MGNREGA respondents considered it a major factor, while 87.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA did. The asset creation was less significant for MGNREGA (42.5 per cent) than for non-MGNREGA (70 per cent). Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) was seen as a major factor by 87.5 per cent of MGNREGA and 80 per cent of non-MGNREGA. The results are in line with the findings of (Gora *et al* 2018) that the workers were

Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to their households

Particulars		MGNREGA		Non-MGNREGA	
		Before	After	Before	After
		Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Family type	Joint	16 (38.5)	13 (31)	3 (7.5)	3 (7.5)
	Nuclear	24 (61.5)	26 (69)	37 (92.5)	37 (92.5)
House type	Pucca	28 (70)	28 (70)	20 (50)	20 (50)
	Semi-Pucca	10 (25)	10 (25)	18 (45)	18 (45)
	Kucha	2 (5)	2 (5)	2 (5)	2 (5)
Ownership of the house	Owned	37 (92.5)	39 (97.5)	35 (87.5)	35 (87.5)
	Rented	3 (7.5)	1 (2.5)	5 (12.5)	5 (12.5)
No. of rooms	One	10 (25)	10 (25)	16 (40)	16 (40)
	Two	17 (42.5)	16 (40)	17 (42.5)	17 (42.5)
	Three	10 (25)	11 (27.5)	7 (17.5)	7 (17.5)
	four	3 (7.5)	3 (7.5)	0	0
Access to washroom	Attach washroom to all room	2 (5)	2 (5)	0	0
	Common use of HH	36 (90)	38 (95)	40 (100)	40 (100)
	Public/Community washroom	1 (2.5)	0	0	0
	Others	1 (2.5)	0	0	0
Type of fuel used for cooking	Wood	3 (7.5)	2 (5)	0	0
	Wood and LPG	13 (32.5)	13 (37.5)	6 (15)	6 (15)
	Kerosene	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	0	0
	Kerosene and LPG	0	0	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)
	Electricity & LPG	0	0	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)
	LPG	23 (57.5)	24 (60)	32 (80)	32 (80)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

highly satisfied with the mode of payment, likely because women's wages were deposited directly into their bank accounts rather than being paid in cash. Skill development was considered important by nearly all respondents in both groups. Work undertaken and family support were acknowledged by almost all participants. Gender equality in working hours, MGNREGA participation, and wages were seen as significant by a higher percentage of MGNREGA respondents. The influences of Panchayat and contact with officials were reported by MGNREGA participants, with 95 per cent and 97.5 per cent, respectively. Self-esteem, decision-making, and peer group involvement were more positively impacted among MGNREGA participants, whereas mental pressure was reported less among MGNREGA (85 per cent) than non-MGNREGA (77.5 per cent). Various studies (Sain and Mondal 2018; Bhat and Mariyappan 2016) were supported by finding that MGNREGA has had a noticeable impact on beneficiaries, especially women, by providing financial stability and enabling them to seek employment

outside the home (Table 4).

The study revealed notable differences in constraints faced by MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA participants. A substantial 97.5 per cent of MGNREGA participants indicated consistent availability of work, in contrast to 87.5 per cent among non-MGNREGA participants. This finding contrasts with the observations made by (Bishnoi *et al* 2014), who identified significant challenges faced by respondents in the Ludhiana district, such as demanding MGNREGA work for women, low wages, delayed wage payments, inadequate job cards resulting in limited employment opportunities, the dominance of elite groups in obtaining job cards, and a lack of childcare facilities. Delays in wage payments were experienced by 90 per cent of MGNREGA participants, with 47.5 per cent indicating frequent delays, while 65 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants faced wage delays, with 62.5 per cent reporting frequent occurrences. Provision of skilled workers was limited for both groups, but more so for MGNREGA (5 per cent) than non-MGNREGA (50 per

Table 3. Factors impacting women's involvement in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA initiatives

Particulars		MGNREGS				non-MGNREGS			
		Frequency (%)	Not-at-all	Minor	Major	Frequency (%)	Not-at-all	Minor	Major
Market wages	Yes	37 (92.5)	7.5	10	82.5	39 (97.5)	2.5	40	57.5
	No	3 (7.5)				1 (2.5)			
Lack of skills	Yes	38 (95)	5	22.5	72.5	40 (100)	0	42.5	57.5
	No	2 (5)				0			
Indebtedness	Yes	33 (82.5)	12.5	72.5	15	33 (82.5)	17.5	70	12.5
	No	7 (17.5)				7 (17.5)			
Lack of continuous work	Yes	39 (97.5)	0	17.5	82.5	39 (100)	0	55	45
	No	1 (2.5)				0			
Illiteracy	Yes	39 (97.5)	0	32.5	67.5	40 (100)	0	50	50
	No	1 (2.5)				0			
Financial resources	Yes	37 (92.5)	5	72.5	22.5	40 (100)	0	67.5	32.5
	No	3 (7.5)				0			

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

cent). Provisions for elderly persons were almost non-existent in both groups. Political disturbances were reported by 60 per cent of MGNREGA participants but not at all by non-MGNREGA participants. Exhaustive manual work was a constraint for 35 per cent of MGNREGA and 42.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA respondents. Delay in obtaining job

cards was an issue exclusively for MGNREGA participants (75 per cent). Corruption was a significant issue for 67.5 per cent of MGNREGA participants, compared to 17.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants (Table 5).

The study highlighted several impacts of MGNREGA compared to non-MGNREGA participants. Before

Table 4. Motivating factors impacting women's involvement in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA initiatives

Particulars		MGNREGA				Non-MGNREGA			
		Frequency (%)	Not-at-all	Minor	Major	Frequency (%)	Not-at-all	Minor	Major
Wages	Yes	38 (95)	5	65	30	40 (100)	0	12.5	87.5
	No	2 (5)				0			
DBT	Yes	40 (100)	0	12.5	87.5	33 (82.5)	17.5	80	2.5
	No	0				7 (17.5)			
Support family	Yes	38 (95)	5	30	65	40 (100)	0	32.5	67.5
	No	2 (5)				0			
Gender equality in working hours	Yes	40 (100)	0	20	80	38 (95)	2.5	62.5	35
	No	0				2 (5)			
Gender equality in wages	Yes	40 (100)	0	17.5	82.5	38 (95)	5	55	40
	No	0				2 (5)			
Increase contact with Officials	Yes	39 (97.5)	2.5	95	2.5	1 (2.5)	97.5	2.5	0
	No	1 (2.5)				39 (97.5)			
Self-esteem	Yes	40 (100)	0	57.5	42.5	40 (100)	0	45	55
Decision making	Yes	40 (100)	0	57.5	42.5	40 (100)	0	37.5	62.5
Mental pressure	Yes	34 (85)	12.5	80	7.5	31 (77.5)	22.5	70	7.5
	No	6 (15)				9 (22.5)			
Peer group involvement	Yes	39 (97.5)	2.5	65	32.5	36 (90)	10	52.5	37.5
	No	1 (2.5)				4 (10)			

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

MGNREGA, 97.5 per cent of participants reported a decrease in work hours, whereas 76.67 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants reported the same. After MGNREGA, 100 per cent of participants experienced an increase in work hours, compared to 87.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants. The results are in line with the findings of (Pandi 2019) that 16 per cent of the workers reported that the working hours for MGNREGA are shorter than those for agriculture, allowing them to manage their household chores more effectively. Total annual savings decreased for both groups before MGNREGA, but post-MGNREGA, 10 per cent of MGNREGA participants saw an increase in savings, versus 82.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants. Expenditure patterns changed, with 82.5 per cent of MGNREGA participants and 85 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants reporting an increase

after the program. Indebtedness initially increased for both groups, but post-MGNREGA, 45 per cent of MGNREGA participants and 95 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants saw a decrease. Decision-making capacity and dependency on money lenders showed similar trends, with a majority in both groups experiencing a decrease in decision-making capacity and high dependency on money lenders before MGNREGA. However, post-MGNREGA, 82.5 per cent of MGNREGA participants saw a decrease in dependency on money lenders, compared to 97.5 per cent of non-MGNREGA participants (Table 6).

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The demographic analysis of MGNREGA beneficiaries and non-MGNREGA individuals reveals significant

Table 5: Constraints faced by women in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities

Particulars		MGNREGA				Non-MGNREGA			
		Frequency (%)	Never	Sometime	Always	Frequency (%)	Never	Sometime	Always
Availability of regular work	Yes	39 (97.5)	1(2.5)	31(77.5)	8(20)	35 (87.5)	3(7.5)	36(90)	1(2.5)
	No	1 (2.5)				5 (12.5)			
Delay in wage payments	Yes	36 (90)	4(10)	17(42.5)	19(47.5)	26 (65)	14(35)	25(62.5)	1(2.5)
	No	4 (10)				14 (35)			
Provision of skilled worker	Yes	2 (5)	38(95)	1(2.5)	1(2.5)	20 (50)	20(50)	20(50)	0
	No	38 (95)				20 (50)			
Political interferenc	Yes	24 (60)	16(40)	15(37.5)	9(22.5)	0	40(100)	0	0
	No	16 (40)				40 (100)			
Exhaustive manual work	Yes	14 (35)	26(65)	13(32.5)	1(2.5)	17 (42.5)	23(57.5)	17(42.5)	0
	No	26 (65)				23 (57.5)			
Delay in getting job card	Yes	30 (75)	10(25)	8(20)	22(55)	0	0	0	0
	No	10 (25)							
Corrupt practices	Yes	27 (67.5)	13(32.5)	5(12.5)	22(55)	7 (17.5)	33(82.5)	7(17.5)	0
	No	13 (32.5)				33 (82.5)			

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

Table 6. Impact of job on women empowerment

Impact of job on women empowerment		MGNREGA Frequency (%)	Non - MGNREGA Frequency (%)
Duration of work (hours) before	Increase	1 (2.5)	7 (23.33)
	Decrease	39 (97.5)	23 (76.67)
Duration of work (hours) after	Increase	40 (100)	35 (87.5)
	Decrease	0	5 (12.5)
Total annual savings of the household before	Decrease	40 (100)	40 (100)
Total annual saving of the household after	Increase	4 (10)	33 (82.5)
	Decrease	36 (90)	7 (17.5)
Expenditure before	Increase	0	2 (5)
	Decrease	40 (100)	38 (95)
Expenditure after	Increase	33 (82.5)	34 (85)
	Decrease	7 (17.5)	6 (15)
Indebtedness before MGNREGA	Increase	39 (97.5)	39 (97.5)
	Decrease	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)
Indebtedness after MGNREGA	Increase	22 (55)	2 (5)
	Decrease	18 (45)	38 (95)
Decision-making capacity increase	Increase	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)
	Decrease	39 (97.5)	39 (97.5)
Decision-making capacity decrease	Increase	39 (97.5)	38 (95)
	Decrease	1 (2.5)	2 (5)
dependency on money lenders increase	Increase	39 (97.5)	38 (95)
	Decrease	1 (2.5)	2 (5)
dependency on money lenders decrease	Increase	7 (17.5)	1 (2.5)
	Decrease	33 (82.5)	39 (97.5)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

differences in caste, religion, and family size, which could inform targeted policy interventions and program improvements. The study indicates that MGNREGA is particularly important for Scheduled Castes and Sikhs, who have higher participation rates compared to general castes and other religious groups. Family size and marital status also differ between the groups, with MGNREGA participants more likely to come from larger households and include a higher proportion of widows, suggesting a greater economic dependency on the program.

The impact of MGNREGA extends beyond employment, influencing family structure, housing, and fuel usage. Post-MGNREGA participation, there is a slight increase in nuclear families among MGNREGA households, stable housing types with a predominance of pucca houses, improved house ownership, and a minor shift towards exclusive LPG usage for cooking. These changes reflect the program's role in supporting household stability and infrastructure. Both MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA participants face constraints, but MGNREGA participants report greater benefits in terms of work hours, savings, indebtedness, and financial dependency. The consistent availability of work, albeit with some issues like delayed wage payments and corruption, underscores the program's effectiveness in providing local employment opportunities and reducing the need for migration. Overall, the study highlights the positive impacts of MGNREGA on its participants, particularly in terms of economic stability, social support, and reduced dependency on money lenders. These findings align with existing literature, reinforcing the program's significance in rural development and its potential for further improvement to address existing challenges.

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