THE RELEVANCE OF MNREGS IN MOUNTING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The word empowerment is used in many different contexts and in many different organizations. Empowerment has become the buzz word for the last two decades. It is a process of building capacities, of creating an atmosphere, which enables people to fully utilize their creative potential. Empowerment, gives women the capacity to influence in decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) was notified on September, 2005 provides a legal Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. It is also committed to ensure that at least 33% of the workers shall be women. The study aims to analyze the relevance of MNREGS on women empowerment.

Design/methodology/approach: The material presented here is basically the outcome of the researcher’s field work in Rohtak district of Haryana. The study is based on primary as well as secondary data, such as basic physical and financial data of the selected sample area (Monthly Progress Reports), survey questionnaires, field visits, focused group discussions and interviews.
with district/ Block/ Village level Officials and beneficiaries. Keeping the objective of study in mind, an elaborate interview schedule was designed to search out information from respondents. It helped in meeting the beneficiaries, investigating motives and feelings, etc. Collection of secondary data has also been done from various government departments.

**Findings:** Significant benefit reported by the study includes success in raising the level of employment and income of the rural household women, thereby enhancing their purchasing power, satisfaction, confidence etc.

**Research limitations/implications** – The accuracy of the analysis is dependent upon the accuracy of the data reported by selected women workers as all beneficiaries were not confident in giving reply.

**Practical implications:** The result of these findings can help to know positive as well as negative aspects of this programme for policy makers as for them such feedback is always necessary to bring changes.

**Originality/value:** This type of study has been done for the first time in this district. In case of reports coming from various researchers, Haryana is not performing well if compared to other states. So, findings can be helpful to know the reasons behind this.

**Paper type** Research paper

**Introduction**

The personality structure, as we know, is significantly influenced by environmental conditions. A person is not formed only by heredity and conditions of growth and care, but also by opportunities and experiences in the world around him. Among these, especially important to us is the ability to make decisions and to act in order to attain goals. Empowerment is a process of internal and external change. The internal process is the person’s sense or belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems. According to the United Nations Millennium Campaign the overwhelming majority of the labor that sustains life – growing food, cooking,
raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining a house, hauling water – is done by women, and universally this work is accorded low status and no pay. In many societies around the world, women never belong wholly to themselves; they are the property of others throughout their lives. Their physical well-being – health, security and bodily integrity – is often beyond their own control. Where women have no control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children.

**Women Empowerment**

The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms -a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage. (Dasarathi Bhuyan 2006). It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. Empowerment is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:

- Having decision-making power of their own
- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision
- Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or.)
- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- Having positive thinking on the ability to make change
- Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.
- Ability to change others’ perceptions by democratic means.
- Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

**Status of Women in India**

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). Women today are trying to understand their position in the society. Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to fight them. The Indian women have cast of their age old shackles of serfdom and male
domination. Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Whatever whiff of emancipation has blown in Indian society, has been inhaled and enjoyed by the urban women, their population belonging to the rural areas are still totally untouched by the wind of changes. They still have been living in miserable conditions, steeped in poverty, ignorance, superstition and slavery.

In reality women representatives are ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are affected by the caste and class divisions, feudal attitudes, patriarchal nature of the family and village-social, environmental, ethnic, religious separatism and the like. They are members on record only. Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decision. Thus, women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no significant change in the power equal is observed in the villages. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. In the Panchayati Raj system, however, women have been given representation as a sign of political empowerment. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. However, their power is restricted, as it the men who wield all the authority. Their decisions are often over-ruled by the government machinery.

**MNREGS and Women**

The Mahatma Gandhi NREGA has been designed to allow women equity in both access to work and in the payment of wages. The participation of women in the workforce has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent and the trends also indicate an increase in the participation rate at the national level. Through this, it has protected the women justice and rights. There is much that the MGNREGA promises from the perspective of women’s empowerment as well. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. By generating employment for women, MNREGS can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. (Akhtar, Azeez, Alam)
The Act provides 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.’ (p.26)

* **Participation in Management and monitoring of the programme** – ‘The gram sabha will elect the members of the committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.’ (p.44)

* **Participation in social audit** – ‘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.’ (p.56)

* **Providing support for child care, and convenience to households** – The guidelines mention the need for a crèche at the worksite, and for the works to be convenient for families:

* **Ensuring that single women are eligible** – By recognizing a single person as a ‘household’, the Act makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work for widows and other single women to access work.

**Relevance of the study:**

The justification for relevance of a study may be given from the point of view of two major considerations. One, the ‘women’ is a major focus of the program in so far as the employment guarantee policy is seen as a tool that can promote job creation and bring about gender equality, and pro-poor development. And two, the program itself, in course of its implementation has brought into focus several issues concerning gender and poverty which need to be examined closely for deriving strategy lessons.

**Research Objectives & Research Methodology**

**Research Objectives:**

To know the relevance of MNREGS for women empowerment, the primary objective of the research is to study the impact of MNREGP on women empowerment and to identify major
constraints, if any, on women’s access to productive employment opportunities through MNREGP.

**Research Questions:**

To what extent can NREGA be considered a route for changing gender inequality? Has the new Employment Guarantee Program succeeded in providing improved access of women to productive wage employment through NREGA?

**Selection of District**

The Rohtak District of Haryana for Quick Appraisal of MNREGS was selected in consultation with the government officials based on the criteria that district which has experienced significant good impact under MNREGA in terms of number of woman given employment. There are five blocks- Sampla, Mahem, Rohtak, Kalanaur and Lakhanmajra. Four to five villages from each block were chosen as suggested by Block officials. Based on the nature and dynamics of the villages in Rohtak and also while ensuring that larger representation is maintained, the villages were selected primarily as per the provisions of the project and based on their performances.

**Research and Sample Design**

The primary data source was household level data being collected through especially designed semi structured interviews/questionnaire, the job cards and the MIS reports/Monthly/quarterly progress reports of the District Program Coordinators and the district specific reports collected at the state level. On the whole, the basic method of data collection has been focus group discussions and few semi structured/structured interviews with key informants besides information available through official statistics of the implementing agencies as indicated above. A random sampling was also done to select women workers from worksites. Two sets of questionnaires were used for the data collection. One was addressed to members of the Gram Panchayat and the second was addressed to workers. The target number of sample workers was 250 from 5 blocks of Rohtak district. A total of 110 women workers, 140 men workers and some Gram Panchayat members were actually interviewed.
Scope of the study

While the study has taken a broad view of the implementation process of the program, it has restricted its purview to gender aspects viz. impact of the program on gender and women’s access to productive employment. The other aspects viz. design, wages, asset creation and sustainability issues and issues relating to overall impact of the program on poverty etc. have been mostly excluded. While examining the gender issues, the determinants and influences of women’s participation, their (i.e. women’s) access to work opportunities, and dimensions such as women’s time constraints, impact of work design and payment system on women workers etc. are being examined in detail.

A Background of MNREGS Beneficiaries

By putting cash incomes into their hands, MNREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women implying empowerment. In the study area, the MNREGA has provided income-earning opportunities to women where hardly any existed before. The survey was aimed at understanding the impact of MNREGA has had in the lives of workers who are currently working under the programme. The survey was not focused on women specifically, but 40% of sample workers were women. The interviews with women workers provided insights into the significance of MNREGA work for these women and highlighted the “transformative” prospective of this programme in enhancing the empowerment of women workers.

Table No. 1 Sample Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of beneficiaries selected who are</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate (in %)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC (in %)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General (in %)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBC (in %)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agriculture work (in %)</strong></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other casual work (in %)</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wages under MNREGS they are getting (Rs.)</strong></td>
<td>179</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey

Less than one third were illiterate and another one-fourth was only functionally literate. Most of them were married and were from nuclear families. Some 45% were in the fertility age group: 55% in the age group of 30-45 years and another 22% in the age group of 18-29 years and 8% were also above 60 years. The income and assets base of these households was poor. 95% of those having land were only marginal landholders. Most of the beneficiaries were from schedule and backward classes. The combination of a labour surplus economy and sharp gender divisions of labour, imply that these opportunities tend to be seasonal in nature. There are even fewer opportunities for non-agricultural wage work in these areas where the rural economy is predominantly agricultural. Some women stated they did not engage themselves in agricultural wage labour earlier because they would have been paid too little and it was not worth their while to go out and work for a pittance.

**Participation of women**

The MNREGP works in the panchayat is characterized by the presence of a large number of women. In contrast to the high participation of women in the programme as workers, their participation in processes like work selection, social audit and share in the control and management of assets created is not encouraging. Factors that have encouraged women workers’ participation include the nature of the job not requiring special knowledge and skill, outmigration of male family members, the employment opportunity being available at the doorway, the provision of equal and non-discriminatory wages. Women of Lakhanmajra block were seen to view MNREGS as an opportunity to earn independently. The government-sponsored work, timely payment of minimum wages and payment into the individual account of women workers were other attractions. The availability of a paid employment opportunity, not available earlier, at their doorsteps and sarkari kaam were factors that attracted women to join MNREGS as
workers in other states as well (Khera and Nayak 2009). The liberal attitude of implementing agencies in issuing job cards facilitated participation of a large number of widows. (Pankaj, Tankha 2010)

**Empowerment Impacts**

The economic dependence of women on men in rural India plays a major role in the subjugation of women, and in this respect the MNREGA is an important tool of social change. (Drèze, Oldiges 2007). But how has paid employment under MNREGS transformed the position of rural women within their households? And to what extent have participatory development processes under MNREGS been able to create larger social effects on women’s empowerment? Answers of these questions can be finding out by knowing impact of this scheme on women workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Increased somewhat</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in society</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repayment of family debt</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting of</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table indicates that all the women workers are fully satisfied with MNREGS works. The main reason for their satisfaction is that; today they are assured of 100 days of jobs. It means that no longer they have to fear the occurrence of seasonal unemployment and poverty. Likewise all of them unanimously opine that, the MNREGS enabled them to participate effectively in the civil society. Now all of them have no fear to enter in to a commercial bank or government office to hold discussions with the officials.

- 95.5% of them believe that, the programme enhanced their credit worthiness and 78% women believe that, they could start saving some money only because of the MNREGS.
- Inevitably, women’s MNREGA earnings are increasing their contribution to household income. A large majority (76 per cent) of the respondents said that they spent wages earned at NREGA works on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through NREGA work, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day.
- For the most part, the amounts earned through MNREGA are insufficient to repay debts. Nevertheless, 32 per cent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. Further, it helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders.
- More over the income from MNREGS helped them to increase the expenditure on education of their children (41%), repay family debt (54%), medical expenses (69%). At the same time 97% of the women had the opinion that today, only because of the MNREGS, they are able to support their families and 78% opined that, the income from the MNREGS works
provided economic independence to them. No longer are they dependent on the income earned by their husbands.

- 66.4% women asserted that MNREGS contributed much to the enhancement of their social contact. In other words, the new wage employment programme succeeded ensuring freedom and equality for women in civil, economic and social areas of activity (E.M.Thomas 2010)

- Participation in the scheme has meant that women (65%) are coming out of their homes, not only to work but also to visit banks which they may not have done previously. This enhanced mobility comes with the higher status of being income earning workers. ‘Women can now be seen moving around in places like gram panchayat office, banks, schools, block office without anybody to accompany them.’ (Sudarshan 2011)

- Control over use: ‘What you do with your money?’ was one our question to the women workers interviewed. Out of 110 women workers interviewed, as many as 78% was found to be confident about use of the money by herself which is great step forward in women empowerment. By putting cash incomes into their hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. (Jandu Navjyoti 2008)

- It is also clear that men and women are paid equal wages at MNREGA worksites as has been mandated by the Act. Given that wage gaps between the male and female casual workers have been the norm in rural India, this is an extremely significant development.

**Women Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Gram Sabhas**

MNREGA is designed to be largely implemented through PRIs and at least 50% of all sanctioned works are to be implemented by the Gram Panchayats. The Gram Sabha too plays a crucial role in the selection of works and the conduct of social audits. Participation of people at large and women in particular in these institutions and assemblies is, then, critical to realizing the participatory potential of the Act. During the survey it was found that women workers did not generally take part in Gram Sabhas. This is partly due to lack of awareness about the significant role to be played by the Gram Sabhas in making a shelf of projects and conducting social audits of MNREGA works. An important part of MNREGA is participatory planning, where the list of MNREGA works is to be decided. Only a small proportion of women workers in our sample...
have attended a gram sabhas (village meetings), and even fewer had spoken at one. Many do not
go to gram sabhas because they do not feel welcome, or because they believe these meetings are
not for women.

**Complementing the MNREGS for different needs of women**

The programme design is perceived to be inclusive, as it is open to all irrespective of age or any
other consideration. However, for elderly women or young women with infants who need to earn
their living, hard manual labour is not desirable from the point of view of their own health or that
of infants. MNREGA enabled her to stop working for a local landlord, who pays women less
than men. She has used her MNREGA earnings to buy rice to feed her family, books and clothes
for her children, fertilizers (they are share-croppers), and also to celebrate Holi. (Reetika , Khera
2011)

**Obstacles to women workers**

However, MNREGS benefits have not come easily – working hours for women have increased;
their leisure time has vanished; and they have to bear with physical and emotional strains.
(Pankaj, Tankha 2010) Some of the obstacles that we found during survey were as follows:

- While identifying the shelf of projects at GP & Block level, very little was considered as
  regards suitability of women. In other words, hardly any project was selected which had
  specific women content both in terms of suitability for women workers and in terms of
  providing direct benefit to women.
- The MNREGA guidelines provide for certain affirmative action in order to encourage women
  participation in the program. To encourage participation of women workers, facilities for
  crèche, drinking water, shade and first aid are required to be provided at every worksite. The
  results of the interviews show that with the exception of provision for drinking water, other
  worksite facilities viz. crèche, resting place, first-aid, recreational facility for children etc. and
  other affirmative action for the promotion of gender was generally absent in the worksites.
• As regards other works, most respondents said, when they got some support from their husbands, most of the domestic work like cooking, and care related works they used to do after return from work. This means, their work hours used to get extended due to MNREGA.

• Delayed payments also come in the way of participation of poor women. Delays in wage payments make things particularly difficult for single women, who cannot afford to wait as they are the sole earners in the family. When the wages do not come on time, they are often forced to return to previous, less preferred forms of employment. The money is released only after submission of the completion report of every project, which is a relatively long process. The workers hardly have the patience or can ill afford to wait so long for payments.

• One of them is the introduction of wage payments through banks. When a single account is opened per job card (as happened in some of the sample villages), the account is generally opened in the name of a male member of the family. This means that women have to rely on men to withdraw their wages. Ideally, there should be one account per registered MNREGA worker, or at least joint bank accounts instead of men-only accounts.

• The awareness of MNREGA and workers entitlements is very low. In many villages, there has been a deliberate attempt not to disseminate complete information regarding the MNREGA. Most people are not even aware of the fact that they should apply for work and also of getting unemployment allowance in case of not getting work.

CONCLUSION

Viewed in a wider perspective, MNREGA signals a possible reshaping of priorities in India through a democratic determination to provide real livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. The MNREGA is a wage employment program, providing minimum wage employment to casual, unskilled labour, women, disabled especially during lean season. Gender has never been at the centre stage of the program as a policy. But this apart, MNREGA has emerged as a very powerful tool for addressing women empowerment. It was found that the program has indeed a positive impact on women empowerment, in so far as it has addressed a number of practical gender needs.
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