

# The National Policy of Empowerment of Women: A critical evaluation of policies with special reference to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2006

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## Abstract:

*“When I took up issues of women's welfare, I was accused in India of voicing "foreign concerns." "I was told Indian women don't think like that about equality. But I would like to argue that if they don't think like that, they should be given a real opportunity to think like that." -Amarthya Sen.*

The simple logic about the status of women in India is “as women receive greater education and training, they will earn more money. As women earn more money they spend it in the further education and health of their children, as opposed to men. Women rise in economic status; they will gain greater social standing in the household and the village, and will have greater voice. As women gain influence and consciousness, they will make stronger claims to their entitlements - gaining further training, better access to credit and higher incomes - and command attention of police and courts when attacked. As women's economic power grows, it will be easier to overcome the tradition of "son preference" and thus put an end to the evil of dowry. As son preference declines and acceptance of violence declines, families will be more likely to educate their daughters” (Coonrod, 1998). In other words, the women need to be ‘empowered.’

**Keywords:** women empowerment, economic status, education and health conditions etc.

## Empowerment

Five levels of empowerment are usually recognized in the Indian context. They are welfare, access, conscientization, control and mobilization.

## Policy evaluation

Policy evaluation research is the objective, systematic, empirical examination of the effects ongoing policies and public programs have, on their targets in terms of the goals they are meant to achieve” (Nachmias, 1979). The purpose of policy evaluation is to assess the efficiency, effectiveness adequacy, equity responsiveness and appropriateness and impact of the policy. Among the types of evaluation, Performance appraisal, audit, result evaluation, Cost-benefit assessment, and impact assessments (Sapru, 2011). According to Wholey (1970) “policy evaluation is the assessment of the overall effectiveness of a national program in meeting its objectives, or assessment of the relative effectiveness of two or more programs in meeting common objectives.” Rossi and Freeman (1993) defined evaluation as a systematic

application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation and utility of social intervention programs.”

To objectively evaluate a policy, the purpose and areas of evaluation must be identified; methodology and data organization need to be done; and results arrived at. For this reliable data should be collected. Policy objectives must be firmly kept in mind in the whole process.

Rossi et al. (2004) divided these dimensions into 5 main categories: needs assessment, program theory, process analysis, impact analysis, and cost-benefit & cost-effectiveness analysis.

### **Need Assessment**

A needs assessment examines the population that the program intends to target, to see whether the need as conceptualized in the program actually exists in the population; whether it is, in fact, a problem; and if so, how it might best be dealt with.

In a much quoted and useful review article Coonrod (1998) traced the status of women in India through the standard indices of malnutrition, poor health, lack of education, over work, unskilled condition, mistreatment and powerlessness. “The persistence of hunger and abject poverty in India and other parts of the world is due in large measure to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women.” Centuries of suppression resulted by the religious and cultural norms in India, lulled the very collective conscience of women-hood into believing that it is their ineluctable fate. 120 million women live in poverty in India. India's maternal mortality rates in rural areas are among the world's highest. Of the 15 million baby girls born in India each year, nearly 25 percent will not live to see their 15th birthday. Survival is a constant preoccupation and at its most basic, survival means food (Chambers 1983).

The need is long felt. The assessment is accurate and based on obvious facts and observation. The concept chosen, here the economic empowerment of women is also correct, at least the assumption, that economic empowerment will lead to greater participation in decision making.

### **The program theory**

The logic model or impact theory is a known or assumed situation observed by the people, media or policy makers and is taken as real state of affairs. It is an implicit understanding of how the desired outcome is thought to be achieved through implementation of the program. A common understanding shared by the policy makers, implementers and stakeholders determine the effectiveness of the policy (Rossi, 2004).

In the present context, it is assumed, with a fair degree of accuracy, that economic empowerment of women will result in the betterment of the overall status of women in India. And with this end in view the government of India introduced the National Policy on Empowerment of Women in 2001. the goals of the Policy are to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The objectives include creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for development of women to enable them to realise their full potential, access to health care, quality education, employment, equal remuneration and social security. They also include elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child and changing societal attitudes. (See Annexure 1)

However scant attention is paid to the social structure and limitations faced by women. It was not properly understood whether the social needs of women are met by the successful implementation of the

policy. The women are given the means of earning, but that is not adequate. The attitudinal change and conviction are lacking in the women. Social change is often very slow in Indian society. Culture can influence many facets of the evaluation process, including data collection, evaluation program implementation and the analysis and understanding of the results of the evaluation (Ebbutt, 1998). As part of the implementation, a National Mission for Empowerment of women was set up in 2010 aiming at implementing women-centric programs. Under this, about 3.7 million SHGs have been formed 7 million women received assistance. The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) scheme extends micro-credit support for income generation to poor women grouped into SHGs in unorganised sector. 34.3 million widows and 2.34 million divorced and separated women in the country are receiving monthly pensions (Patnaik, 2010).

The Centre has allocated Rs.11,000 crore to the Ministry of Women and Child Development for the year 2010-11, an increase of around 50 per cent over last year's Budget Estimates of Rs.7,350 crore. Protection against domestic violence, stopping crime against child and women, human trafficking, sexual harassment at work place, eliminating beggary among women and street children, child marriages, harassment in dowry related matters, malnutrition among women and children, providing relief and rehabilitation to rape victims are addressed (NMEW, 2001).

### **A policy case study**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Mahatma Gandhi NREGA), 2005 requires that 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. (Operational Manual. ANDHRA PRADESH RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME (UNDER THE NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT, 2005).

Government of Andhra Pradesh reports and government statistics show that women participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) was the highest in 10 financial years, standing at 57.47% in 2022-23 and 54.82% in 2021-22. The rates of participation of women in the MGNREGS, is defined as women person-days out of the total in percentage. (<https://pib.gov.in> › PressRelease).

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a gender-neutral Scheme which promotes participation of women by providing wage parity with men, provision of separate schedule of rates of wages for women, facilities for crèche, work-side sheds for children, and child care services. In convergence with National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), women mates have also been introduced, which again facilitate the participation of women. The Scheme also endeavours to provide works near the residence of the beneficiaries. The rates of participation of women (women person-days out of the total in percentage) under Mahatma Gandhi NREGS during the last five financial years from 2018-19 to 2022-23 shows encouraging trends.

Reporting in Indian Express (2022) Nair, S. K. states that women break new ground in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. They make up 57.8% of the scheme beneficiaries in 2022-23 — a 10-year high; Bihar and U.P. record a high proportion of women workers.

MGNREGA has several gender sensitive features that are attractive for women workers. The Act stipulates that priority shall be given to women. In terms of implementation, it mandates that a minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries are to be women who have registered and have requested for work (Schedule II, Section 6 of MGNREGA). The state is obliged to ensure certain worksite facilities to

enhance women workers' participation. The Act also stipulates payment of equal wages to male and female workers. (Dheeraja and Daimari, 2013 ). Breakdown by gender percentage of individuals receiving work at the inception of MGNREGS (2010-11) is males 49.1 and females 50.88.)

The extent to which the programme is inclusive of women, with a particular focus on sub-populations of women such as widows and mothers of young children who typically face serious constraints in the context of labour market participation, is examined in this study using data from the National Sample Survey. The study by Narayanan and Das, 2014 finds that while the MGNREGA has indeed been inclusive of women, the substantial variations both across states and the exclusion of vulnerable groups of women demand attention.

While the transformation of rural gender inequalities was not an intended goal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, a study draws on evidence from two villages in western Tamil Nadu to show how the scheme has benefited rural women in particular. Major attractions of the MGNREGA work include local availability through the year, it being perceived as relatively "easy" work with fixed, regular, gender equal wages, and free from caste-based relations of subordination and discrimination. The gendered impacts of MGNREGA are partly due to the universal, right-based and women-friendly nature of the policy, and partly to the specific ways in which this policy is implemented in Tamil Nadu, where it has received significant cross-party political support. (Carswell and Geert de Neve, 2013).

Coming to the more specific decadal growth rate of Scheduled tribes and sex wise percentages of Andhra Pradesh data was extracted from 1961 to 2011 census, males show a percentage of 5.48 and females 5.57. In their Working paper "MGNREGA, paid work and women's empowerment. Fernanda Bárcia de Mattos Sukti Dasgupta (Employment Policy Department. 230. 2017), examined the nexus between legislation, paid employment, women's empowerment and transformative gender equality. Women made up 89.8 per cent of all rural persons in subsidiary employment in 2011-12. A look into what these people did most of their time (usual activity status) further reveals deeply entrenched gender patterns. Almost all of these rural women, 95.8 per cent, were primarily engaged in domestic duties or "household work", outside of the labour force, in contrast to one in twenty men. Women's share of workdays under the scheme increased from 40.6 per cent in 2006-07, or about 368 million days of work, to over 1 billion workdays in 2011-12, or 48.1 per cent of total. For all India, the share of MGNREGA work going to women has, thus, surpassed the minimum quota in all years. Employment is positively linked to women's control over household resources and decision-making.

Kapil Meena and Vinod Sen, 2017, concluded that the women have done larger proportion of MGNREGA job compared to men. These phenomena imply that there is no social barrier of women participation in MGNREGA work in village. This simply states that the village is more liberal in terms of women participation. One of the major shortcomings of the Act is non-availability of child care and rearing facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. This further noticed that only 11 per cent women performed as uncertain daily labour before MGNREGA and rest 89 per cent women performed as agriculture labour before and after MGNREGA in lean period.

Women empowerment gained prominence in the nineties and meant equipping women to be economically independent and self-reliant with positive self-esteem to actively participate in decision making. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was a step in this direction by the Government of India. Based on variables such as participation in decision making of the household expenditure and saving, control over the income of the family, freedom of movement, social

participation and attitude towards domestic violence the study compared the level of empowerment of women before and after getting a job card of MGNREGA. It also compared the level of socio-economic empowerment of women with job cards and women without job cards. The findings indicated that beneficiaries were significantly more empowered after joining MGNREGA. There was a significant positive difference in the mean score of socio economic between the women with job cards and the women without job cards in the district. Other studies have shed light on the women empowering component of this vital policy (Kaur J. I. (2014; Goyal, S 2021)

### Process Analysis

In a significant report Attewell and Gerstein (1979) discussed the “failure of the local efforts... contradictory interests embodied in the government policy undermine crucial resources which local agencies require to gain, the compliance of their clientele on a day to day basis.” In case of the National policy of empowerment of women, it is not merely the ‘local’ contradictions, but the whole gamut of social, religious and cultural roots that challenge the implementation. Subtle adjustments come into play. How the provisions of a good policy can be scuttled, can be seen in the case of Mr. Lulu Prasad Yadav, a longstanding Chief Minister of the state of Bihar, who made his illiterate wife the chief minister. As per the provisions of the policy, reservations for women are created in elected bodies at various levels. This is negated by the practice of the leader who held the position for many years, now simply fields his wife for the position and gets her elected, and continues to wield de facto power. Thus failure for the policy is inbuilt in the very social fabric and sensibilities of Indian society. Participatory and innovative women’s development programs (WDP) in some states Were initially successful enough to challenge the socio-political power but were in time, derailed, thanks to the entrenched socio-cultural norms (Rajagopal and Mathur, 2000).

Women in unorganized sector especially in the 3 ‘C (caring, cooking and cleaning) professions constantly come up against the gap between law and practice. The Policy does not include provisions to draw legal strategies for proper wage structure and classification of work (Nimushakavi, 2011).

In the area of public policy analysis and description Okongwu and Mencher(2009)<sup>1</sup> explored links between globalization processes and policy on the national and local levels; social welfare policy, including employment and family welfare survival strategies, policies related to global agriculture, social inequality, and the manipulations of some multinational corporations. The tools of evaluation need to be refined and at the same time cover a broader ground. Data should be made available for an effective evaluation of policies such as the one under discussion.

In addition to taking into consideration the general indicators of development as a whole, for measuring women empowerment, there are separate indices for women. The Human Development Report in 1998 contains two gender aware measurements i.e. Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (Bordoloi, 2011). Determination such indices can better help in measuring the effectiveness of the policy. Nagaraja (2013) in an overview of the efforts put in India for empowering women analysed the degree of achievement of empowerment by adopting some of the modern indicators. Mehta (1996) examined three measures of gender empowerment based on representation in elected bodies; the literacy rate; exercise of the right to vote; life expectancy and income, aiming at revealing gender-based disparities that can be meaningfully used by policy-makers and analyst in making policies.

The implementation strategies are accused of focusing the individuals too much which will not work too well in a society where people are joined together as communities of caste, religion and language. "Rather than working with the individual it would be better if they adopted a community approach as empowerment can be realised much more effectively by a group rather than by the individual (Das, 1991).

In the area of gender mainstreaming, development of a more gender sensitive approach is found to be lacking as well as Human Rights approach is not adequately followed as reflected in the meagre allocation for Ministry of Human Rights is Rs 126 million for 2012-13. (Annual Plan, 2012-13).

However the empowerment of women was strengthened by other policies vigorously implemented. One major example is the MGNREGS, the most significant gain being equality of wages (Pankaj and Tankha, 2010).

### **Impact Evaluation**

In spite of the effective implementation of all the envisaged schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievements and actual practice at the community level. The Global Gender Gap Index (2012) observed that India is simply not doing enough for its women. The ranking of the country has fallen from 113 (out of 134 countries) in 2010 to 113 and out of 135 countries in 2011. However, in 2012, its ranking has improved from 113 in 2011 to 105 with a score of 0.644 in 2012 according to the recent report of the World Economic Forum. Rapid economic growth was accompanied by rapidly growing inequality.

The empowerment is an aid to help women to achieve equality with men or, at least, to reduce gender gap considerably. Women play a very strategic role in the development of society in particular and development of economy in general. (Kadam, 2012). Researchers questioned the efficacy of the Self Help Groups in comparison with the traditional Village microfinance initiatives and concluded that microfinance and micro credit cannot be offered as the all sufficient cure for economic empowerment (Campbell, 2012). However, under the policy, women employed in the various traditional occupations received attention. Out of the 5.4 million active fishers in India, 3.8 million (70.37%) are fishermen and 1.6 million (29.63%) are fisherwomen. Their role in decision-making in their family is limited. The innate poverty, illiteracy, lack of suitable avenues for earning and gender bias all put together have been creating obstacles for the development of the fisherwomen (Ninawe and Diwan, 2005).

Sexual and reproductive health continues to be a matter of concern as well as the security of women. Women's bodies, health and sexuality are being grossly neglected and abused (Mathur, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. The recent atrocity committed against a 23 year old intern is a grim reminder of the gruesome mistreatment meted out to the women (See Annexure 3). The policy does not have adequate provisions to ensure any significant measure of security for the women. Visaria (2008) and Karlekar (2008) discussed the domestic violence as another neglected component of the policy.

### **Cost-benefit analysis**

The basic assumption is that all factors in a policy should be quantified, so that a rational impact assessment can be arrived at. A cost benefit analysis (CBA) is the monetary assessment or of the risk of performing a task in relation to the benefit of performing the task. When a variety of social economic political, cultural and demographic factors are involved an accurate cost benefit analysis is difficult. When corruption is a significant limiting factor, any such exercise will yield faulty results. Here the

basic difficulty regarding quantifying of the benefits remain. The benefit itself cannot be measured in this type of policy. For example a policy aiming at elimination of urban slum areas can be evaluated in terms of cost-benefit. The impact on the women regarding their social status as a result of this policy cannot be directly measured.

And benefits can be observed which are not necessarily comparable to the costs. And in the case of the policy under evaluation, the impact may be felt 20 or 30 years from now. In other words longer periods may be required for the benefits become apparent.

### **Determining Causation**

At the ideological level the very concept of empowerment implies formal rather than substantive power and it involves an external upper level agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle. Above all, this concept is part of the political philosophy of the new economic globalisation of western capitalism (Mohanty, 1995). We must continuously work towards a more culturally appropriate model of women empowerment, with all the limitations peculiar to India.

Policies will have to be designed and budget allocations made. Framing policies can be a mechanical exercise and politically motivated with an eye on the votes. “The willingness to intervene on behalf of women is determined by the interests of the state and political actors in securing and maintaining power. The questions that women’s movements face are: to what extent do these national machineries effectively address the issues for which they had been created and to what extent are they able to bring in changes in the culture and practices of the bureaucratic structures of the state” (Arya, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

India is a sub continent with a complex set of demographic and socio-cultural factors. The implementation mechanism moves slowly because of the corruption and irresponsible attitudes of the lower level bureaucrats. The enormous population size, the information gap, the assumptions underlying the concept of women empowerment all contribute to the threat of failure. Unlike a simple policy like MGNREGS, the policy for the empowerment of women is complicated by the gender bias, since it seeks to put power into the hands of women, which is not acceptable not only to the men, but to women themselves. The machinery will grind heavily and the natural process of change will take its own course. The policy itself will go a long way towards the emancipation and empowerment of women, if implemented with sincerity and honesty. “Grass root empowerment needs to be viewed from the standpoint of the share of grass root women in the women’s movement per se. The current political situation makes this imperative, as with the deepening national crisis and increased violence, the constructive efforts of over a decade could be washed away overnight” (Bannerjee, 2008).

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has come a long way than any of its predecessors towards achieving the goal of women empowerment in India.

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