

Mgnregs and its Implications on Female Participants in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper makes an empirical study of the socio-economic profile of the women beneficiaryes of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), its problems and prospects with reference to the state of Kerala in India.

The study uses a sample of 90 women labourers, comprising of 30 each randomly drawn from the three top most performing Grama Panchayaths each of which corresponds to three top most performing Districts in Kerala in respect of MGNREGS activities (viz. Thiruvananthapuram, Palakkad and Alappuzha). Based on the issues and problems as revealed by the study, suggestions are made for more effective implementation of the scheme for faster empowerment of the beneficiaries especially women.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Kudumbasree, Kerala Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), formerly known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), stands as one of the most extensive rights-based social protection programs globally. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which has since been renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), was passed on August 23, 2005, and received presidential approval on September 5, 2005. It was implemented in 200 districts starting on February 2, 2006. MGNREGA is “an Act aimed at enhancing the livelihood security of households in rural areas across the nation by guaranteeing at least one hundred days of wage employment each financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual labor and for matters related or incidental thereto.” In addition to generating employment, the aim of the scheme is to develop lasting community assets that enhance livelihoods in a sustainable way. Currently, it encompasses all 614 districts across the nation. Utilizing the authority granted by subsection (1) of section 4 of the NREG Act 2005, the Government of Kerala established the Kerala Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (KREGS), which primarily focuses on ensuring a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed employment per financial year for every household where adult members are willing to perform unskilled manual labor in rural areas. The secondary goal is to create long-lasting community, social, and economic assets as well as to foster infrastructural development in rural regions. KRES is executed in all 14 districts of Kerala.

Relevance and Significance of the Study

In Kerala, more than two-thirds of the labour force under MGNREGS consists of women. Women are engaging in this program regardless of caste or community differences. This participation has facilitated

their social interaction and provided an additional income source for their families. As MGNREGS wages are deposited directly into bank or post office accounts, many households have gained financial inclusion thanks to this initiative. The significant amount of wages credited to their accounts has encouraged women to develop better saving habits. It is true that when women earn, they allocate their income towards household requirements and their children's needs more than men do. Therefore, poverty is reduced more effectively when women have income. MGNREGS has also enabled many women to build courage and confidence to pursue other employment opportunities. Their increased independence from their husbands has further bolstered their self-esteem. MGNREGS has played a vital role in empowering women in rural areas. Thus, in order to enhance the effectiveness and speed of MGNREGS for women's empowerment, it is essential to investigate its challenges and devise appropriate solutions.

Objective of the Study

- To study the problems and prospects of MGNREGS with respect to women labourers;
- To suggest suitable remedial strategies for more effective implementation of MGNREGS

Research Design

The study sample was established using a multistage sampling technique. In the initial stage, purposive sampling was employed to select the top three performing MGNREGS districts based on data from the official website www.nrega.in and advice from subject matter experts. The selected districts, in order of performance, were Thiruvananthapuram, Palakkad, and Alappuzha. Subsequently, another round of purposive sampling was conducted within each district to pinpoint the leading MGNREGS gramapanchayats according to the data from www.nrega.in. In the next stage, a random sampling approach was utilized to choose one gram panchayat from each of the selected block panchayats: Perumkadavila block panchayat in Trivandrum, Chittoor block panchayat in Palakkad, and Kanjikuzhy block panchayat in Alappuzha. Therefore, within Thiruvananthapuram's Perumkadavila block panchayat, Perumkadavila gram panchayat was randomly chosen from a total of eight gram panchayats. In Palakkad, Polpully gram panchayat was selected from the Chittoor block panchayat's options. In Alappuzha, Kanjikuzhy gram panchayat was picked from five gram panchayats within the Kanjikuzhy block panchayat. Finally, another random selection was made, with 30 respondents chosen from each of the gram panchayats, resulting in a cumulative total of 90 respondents for the study.

Review of Literature

Dreze, J. (2005) contends that MGNREGA imposes a mandatory responsibility on the state and empowers laborers in negotiations. To fund this extensive program, he recommends enhancing the overall GDP of the nation by increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio, allowing us to secure the necessary financial resources for public social spending. He addresses three prevalent concerns regarding this initiative: the worry about heightened corruption resulting from extensive expenditure, the anxiety of financial insolvency, and the trepidation among government officials that dissatisfied laborers may pursue legal action against local authorities. He argues that such worries are unfounded and stem from a misunderstanding of the law's operational framework. Bhatti, K. (2006) emphasizes the importance of establishing adequate crèche facilities at work sites, as well as designating a specific individual for childcare at these locations. It is essential to ensure the availability of these facilities so that women can participate in MGNREGA without compromising the well-being of their children. This paper discusses the implementation of MGNREGA

shortly after its initiation in the Durgapur district of Rajasthan, based on a 'padyatra' conducted in the area that served as a social audit of MGNREGA.

Krishnamurty, J. (2006) examines MGNREGA and associated programs as a solution to manage the aftermath of natural disasters, particularly those that have significant local impacts. The article emphasizes the necessity for a prompt response mechanism that should be addressed within MGNREGA. It highlights MGNREGA's role in providing 'livelihood security' during times of crisis. Mathur, L. (2007) writes about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act as it reaches its second year of operation. This paper evaluates its progress up to that point. The NREGA represents the first concrete pledge to the impoverished, ensuring they have the right to earn a living wage with dignity. Its vastness, reach, and scope are indeed significant. Implementation is undoubtedly challenging, and it seems that some less developed states have outperformed more advanced ones. Certain states have accessed larger amounts of funding in relation to the number of NREGA districts. The paper also presents broader parameters indicative of a real transformation in India's developmental landscape. Pramathesh Ambasta (2008) explores why there are high expectations for this rural development initiative and how its unfulfilled potential can be harnessed. The paper describes the experience of a national consortium of civil society organizations (CSOs) collaborating with panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) across 30 districts in seven states to facilitate MGNREGA implementation. Additionally, the insights provided by the CAG report of 2007 have been included. It also discusses how the extensive application of IT can enhance the quality of MGNREGA implementation, suggesting effective use of Management Information Systems (MIS). Khera, R. (2008) illustrates the impact of grassroots organizations in mobilizing the MGNREG Act, using the example of Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS) in Pati block of Madhya Pradesh. In regions where the Sangathan was active, the level of employment generated through MGNREGA averaged 85 days per household, with around 50 percent of households receiving the full 100 days of employment. The author posits that the effectiveness of MGNREGA significantly hinges on the establishment of robust workers' organizations.

In their paper, "The Battle for Employment Guarantee," Dreze, J. & Khera, R. (2009) conducted a thorough examination of the socio-economic characteristics of MGNREGS (then NREGS) workers, their levels of awareness, the number of employment days they actually secured under NREGS, and the program's effects on their economic status and living conditions, including its unique opportunities for women. The survey was carried out in 2008, and the authors contend that this Act imposes a legal responsibility on the state while providing laborers with enhanced bargaining power.

K.N. Nair et al. (2009), in their working paper, have explored the impact of NREGS in detail, focusing on three Grama Panchayaths in the Kasaragod district of northern Kerala. The authors note that despite numerous challenges arising from the execution of MGNREGS work during the agricultural seasons, the scheme has proven to be largely advantageous for socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the areas they studied, particularly for women.

Manoj P K (2011) in his research paper, "MGNREGA Implementation in India: Problems, Prospects and Remedial Strategies with Special Reference to Kerala," has investigated the challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of MGNREGA in India, with a particular emphasis on the state of Kerala. He highlights that, despite various issues faced by the scheme in different states, MGNREGA's implementation in Kerala has been relatively well-organized and free from corruption, making it a model for other states to emulate. The significant developmental potential of MGNREGS has also been emphasized by the author in this paper.

Manoj P K (2012) in his research paper titled “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Effective Implementation of MGNREGA in India: An Analysis” examined the significant potential of ICT in improving the quality and efficiency of MGNREGA implementation, as well as in lowering operational costs and curbing corrupt practices by intermediaries in the program. Consequently, the author proposed strategies for a more effective and ICT-based execution of MGNREGA. The current authors, Keerthan Rose Alexon Puthukkeril and Manoj P K (2013), in their paper analyzed the effectiveness of MGNREGS in increasing the income of female workers in the Chengannur Block of Alappuzha district, Kerala. This preliminary study highlighted the considerable potential of MGNREGS to boost women’s income and, as a result, improve their living standards. The Government of India (2012), in its report on MGNREGA covering the period from 2006 to 2012, noted that since women depend significantly on natural common property resources (such as water and fuel), and given that MGNREGA plays a crucial role in regenerating these resources, the program has substantial potential to enhance livelihood security for unemployed women workers in the country. Shah, M. (2007) asserted that NREGA has the necessary capability to provide a significant boost to economically distressed areas in India. He indicated that the multiplier effects of MGNREGA (formerly NREGA) were making a noteworthy contribution to the long-term advancement of agriculture and effectively alleviating poverty in the nation. According to a recent report by the World Bank (2015) on global safety nets, a comprehensive review was conducted on safety net programs available to the general public. It highlighted that MGNREGS in India is the largest program of its type among various existing schemes (specifically labeled as ‘Public Works Programmes’) worldwide. The size of MGNREGA far surpasses that of four similar programs from other countries, as indicated in the chart comparing the five largest safety nets globally. Thus, the combined size of these four other programs does not measure up to MGNREGA, the largest scheme.

Research Gap

It's important to note that while there are numerous studies on MGNREGS, comprehensive empirical research covering the whole state of Kerala is quite limited. In light of this, this paper aims to fill the existing research gap by conducting a focused examination of the challenges and opportunities of MGNREGS specifically for women workers within the context of Kerala state in India. The benefits derived from employment under MGNREGS, and how the scheme has aided women workers, are discussed. Based on the study's findings, recommendations are provided to enhance the effectiveness of this program

Data Analysis and Findings

It is noted that 32 respondents (34.52 per cent) said MGNREGS is their only source of personal income. Along with MGNREGS, 22 respondents (24.30 per cent) did agricultural labour. 12.89% of respondents were coir labourers and were also involved in MGNREGS. 12 respondents (12.4 per cent) were casual labourers who did MGNREGS works too. 5.93 per cent found their personal income through cattle rearing or poultry farming and depended on MGNREGS as a secondary income source. 4.74 per cent were tailors who got involved in MGNREGS too. 1.33 per cent worked as housemaids to earn a living in the absence of MGNREGS. 0.89 per cent were self employed and involved in MGNREGS. Another 0.89 per cent did business and also MGNREGS works. 0.74 per cent took tuition for children to earn a livelihood not to set apart MGNREGS labour. Another 0.74 per cent used to do company type works and also MGNREGS works. One respondent was an Asha worker who did MGNREGS as a secondary employment. One

respondent left this question unanswered.

Table I: Main Occupation of the Respondents

Main occupation	Number
Agricultural labour	17
Housemaid	2
Cattle rearing/ poultry farming	6
Tailoring	5
Coir labour	10
Casual labour	11
Self employed	1
Tuition	1
Business	1
Company type work	1
Panchayath / Contract labour	1
Asha worker	1
Only MGNREGS	32
Not answered	1
Total	90

Source: Field Survey (Primary data)

Problems of rural women and how MGNREGS helps to overcome them:

Advantage of financial inclusion through MGNREGS

Previously, many rural women relied on informal financial sources, such as private money lenders, to fulfill their financial requirements. The MGNREGS initiative mandated that personal bank accounts be opened for beneficiaries to enable wage payments through direct cash transfers. This has not only encouraged rural women to save in formal financial institutions but has also assisted them in obtaining loans or other formal credit services to address their urgent needs. This observation is supported by the survey data.

Confidence gained to go for manual labour

Kerala, known for its high literacy rates, has seen many rural women attain education at least up to the secondary level. Consequently, the unemployment issue here is characterized by educated individuals being unemployed. A prevalent challenge faced by Keralites is the lack of available local manual labor. It is against this backdrop that the MGNREGS program, which upholds the dignity of government initiatives, has attracted a significant number of rural women to work as manual laborers. MGNREGS has played a role in diminishing the initial stigma associated with women taking on manual labor jobs. This discussion excludes those women who were already engaged in casual work prior to the introduction of this program. Women have now developed the confidence to pursue various types of manual labor beyond just MGNREGS opportunities.

MGNREGS as a bridge filling the gap of economic empowerment

Through Kudumbashree, significant progress has been made in empowering women at the lower end of the social and personal spectrum in Kerala. The introduction of MGNREGS came at a crucial moment when these rural women were in dire need of economic independence. Kudumbashree has strengthened

the organizational capacity of rural women, and MGNREGS has filled the gap in their economic needs, according to a senior official from the MGNREGS state mission in Kerala. It was a strategic decision by MGNREGA policymakers in Kerala to implement this program through Kudumbashree. This approach not only facilitated easier access for rural women at the grassroots level but also encouraged widespread involvement of rural women in MGNREGS.

Improvement in women's intra household power in decision making process

An important change resulting from the large participation of women in MGNREGS is the enhancement of their power dynamics within the household. Women have become self-reliant in managing their minor expenditures. They can now save money and invest in their children without significantly relying on their male counterparts. Their influence in decision-making, particularly regarding finances, has grown.

Suggestions and Concluding Remarks

The preceding discussions indicate that MGNREGS has had a beneficial impact on the empowerment of women in rural areas. It results in improved financial stability, decreased reliance on others, and increased self-assurance. The following recommendations can enhance the effectiveness of this initiative in empowering rural women: (i) The existing model implemented in Kerala, which leverages Government-supported poverty alleviation programs such as 'Kudumbashree', transparent protocols, the use of ICT tools/E-Governance, higher daily wages, and direct payments to workers, should be maintained; (ii) Active backing and collaboration from the robust framework of 'Kudumbashree', the Government of Kerala's initiative, must be guaranteed and further fortified; (iii) Increased utilization of ICT and various E-Governance tools should be encouraged to lower costs, boost operational efficiency, facilitate quicker and more transparent operations, and diminish corruption caused by intermediaries; (iv) Enhanced decentralization of authority should be ensured in all MGNREGS tasks, with Local Self Government (LSG) organizations playing a central role; (v) External technicians and engineers (those not regularly or contractually employed by MGNREGS) should be accredited on an ad-hoc basis; and (vi) Finally, consistent monitoring and follow-up of the system should be conducted to reduce bureaucratic interference and foster greater public and civic engagement. The success of MGNREGS in Kerala has inspired several other Indian states to adopt the Kerala model. Nonetheless, complacency should not be an option for Kerala. The state must strive for more swift progress towards achieving complete socio-economic equity and gender equality. This goal appears attainable, given the high unemployment rate despite an elevated literacy rate and the active presence of organizations such as 'Kudumbashree'.

Table II: Reasons for Joining MGNREGA

Reasons	Per cent
As wages are coming to the bank account as a heavy amount	61.3
Dignity associated with a government programme	46.2
Can work in the company of friends and relatives	41.9
Nearby availability of work	51.3
Will get a respectable amount as wage	51.6
Fixed timing	42.2
Additional income to the household	57.3
Due to insufficiency of other works	45.6
Main income to the household	72.6

Others (Financial problems, mental relaxation, environmental cleanliness	8.0
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Source: Field Survey (Primary data)

Table III: Challenges in Completing 100 Days of Work in a Financial Year

Challenges	Per cent
Work was not available	15.0
Was not feeling well	13.6
Not in station	3.6
Was not informed in time about the work	1.8
Had gone for other works	26.1
Any other reasons	0.6

Source: Field Survey (Primary data)

Table IV: Access to Formal Financial Sector (Whether MGNREGS was the reason to open a Bank / Post Office Account?)

Options	Per cent
No	23.85
Yes	75.26
Not responded / Not sure	0.89
Total	100.00

Source: Field Survey (Primary data)

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