



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH MGNREGA IN VIRUDHUNAGAR DISTRICT OF TAMILNADU

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ABSTRACT

This study's main goal is to elucidate how MGNREGA has affected women's empowerment in the research area. The basic data used in this study was gathered from 100 women in the Sivakasi block of the Virudhunagar district of Tamilnadu between 2023 and 2034. A Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) has been developed to measure women's empowerment. Every indication has been calculated using a three-point rating system. The possible CEI score values in this study range from 0 to 16, with 0 denoting the least amount of economic empowerment and 16 denoting the greatest. The majority of the investigated women (95.2%) belonged to the low to medium income strata, indicating that the level of women's empowerment in the study area was not sufficient. economic empowerment, with only 5 percent falling into the strong empowerment category. Therefore, it can be said that although MGNREGA has had an impact on women's empowerment, it has not had the expected effect.

Keywords: MGNREGA; Women empowerment; Underemployment; Poverty; Job card.

Introduction

Rather than unemployment, poverty and underemployment are the real issues facing our nation. Despite having one of the fastest growing economies in the world, 21.92 percent of Indians live in poverty (RBI Report, 2012). The Indian government has implemented various initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and creating jobs. Nevertheless, those programmes had not been executed in a way that would have reduced poverty and increased the number of suitable, well-paying jobs. Unemployment is a problem that is exclusive to rural communities, especially for rural women. As a result, the level of life is extremely low for everyone in rural India, particularly for the female population.

In Indian society, women make up the majority of the disadvantaged groups. The Indian Constitution provides equal opportunities and compensation for labour to every citizen. Numerous aspects of life are rapidly evolving, one of which is the status of women in society. The hard reality of deprivation and degradation persists notwithstanding the provisions outlined in our constitution (Dasarathi, 2006). The outdated belief that women are men's property is nevertheless ingrained in society as a primal instinct. A considerable percentage of women in metropolitan areas have experienced these changes, although rural women have experienced them to a lesser extent. Even under panchayat government, where both men and women are currently represented, male dominance in the villages is evident. obvious. In times of crisis, women are more likely than males to safeguard and raise their family members, which is a huge social and economic contribution (Braidotti et al, 1994). However, for them to truly be empowered, they must be brought from the sidelines into the spotlight (Dasarathi, 2006). They ought to be treated equally in society and allowed to participate equally in decision-making. When women have the autonomy to make their own decisions, they will be on an equal footing with men.

As per the 2011 Census Report, women in India make up about 49% of the nation's overall population. They are therefore thought of as the better half of society. Our culture is still dominated by men, especially in rural areas, and women are not regarded as equal partners, either within or beyond the home's four walls. The silentest contributors to India's economic development are the ladies living in rural areas. Poverty, illiteracy, and bad health bedevile women in the lower echelons of society. To break free from the cycle of deprivation, they require employment. In 2005, the Indian government launched the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), a new employment-generating initiative. This programme was introduced to improve women's empowerment and support the growth of the rural populace.

Concept of MGNREGA

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was a new job-generating initiative launched by the Indian government in 2005 (NREGA). On February 2, 2006, this Act was first implemented in 200 carefully chosen districts. In 2007–2008, the number of districts covered by this Act was raised to 130. This Act became a national law on April 1, 2008. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is the new name for this programme, which was changed by the Indian government effective October 2009. It was a major step towards the fulfilment of the "right to work" and increased household livelihood security in the nation's rural areas. Under this plan, every family with adult members receives at least 100 days of guaranteed paid employment per financial year.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Since women's empowerment is a multifaceted notion with multiple implications, there isn't a single, agreed-upon definition. The concept of empowerment is used differently by professionals and fields. "To give power or authority to someone" is how the dictionary defines the term "empower." It is an innate characteristic of the individual that no outside force can confer. Empowerment, to put it briefly, is the process of gaining control, influence, and power over other people. According to some experts, empowerment can be defined as follows:

Batiwala (1994) defined empowerment as the process of questioning the power structures that currently exist and taking more control over the sources of power. According to the author, empowerment is the expansion of power. "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" is how Kabeer (2001) defined empowerment.

Encouraging women to survive and lead lives marked by humanity, decency, respect, self-worth, and independence is known as women's empowerment. Women's empowerment, according to Pillai (1995), is an active, multifaceted process that helps women to reach their full potential in all areas of life. Power cannot be exchanged for another good or given away as charity. Power must be obtained, and once obtained, it must be maintained, developed, and exercised. Process and agency are the two fundamental components of women's empowerment, as defined by Kabeer (2001). A sequence of events that results in progressive change is called a process. Women who are empowered have more resources at their disposal and are better equipped to make wise decisions in life. The agency component of women's empowerment explains that the key players in the transformation process are the women themselves. It is the method by which decisions are decided. Empowerment must be sought after by the person who wants it; it cannot be given by a third party. When women have complete authority over their own lives, they will be empowered.

A Brief Review of Literature

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and women's empowerment have been the subject of numerous research. A few studies have been mentioned in this study.

Arora et al. (2013) used a field survey with 250 respondents to analyze the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in the Rohtak district of Haryana. The study's noteworthy findings include the achievement of increasing rural household women's work and income, which boosts their purchasing power, contentment, and confidence, among other things. Ninety-five percent of the recipients think the program improved their creditworthiness, and seventy-eight percent of the female beneficiaries think the MGNREGA is the only reason they could begin saving money. Of those surveyed, 76% admitted to spending their pay on everyday groceries and other goods. In their research, Mahima (2013) examined how MGNREGA has empowered rural women, with particular attention to Palakkad. The study's conclusions showed that women gain on an individual basis when they are able to work for themselves, save money, and contribute to family expenses. According to the study's findings, MGNREGA gives women more economic power and paves the way for increased autonomy and self-worth. It has emerged as a guiding light for rural women's empowerment and made a significant contribution to improved living and economic circumstances.

In comparison to non-participating women, Vanitha and Srikantha (2011) believe that MGNREGA women participants had greater control over family spending, savings, and social participation. They also participated more in

decisions about home management and financial management. The authors suggested the following explanation for their increased confidence: taking part in MGNREGA allowed them to earn their own living and had the chance to interact and collaborate with members of the community. As to the writers, MGNREGA has been effective in offering every element necessary to facilitate women's empowerment. According to the report, only 5% of women who did not participate in the study felt as powerful as the 31.67% of women who did. This suggests that MGNREGA is promoting women's empowerment more effectively. The Shihabudheen (2013) examines the key components of the Act, its effectiveness in empowering rural women, as well as its main issues and future possibilities. The research indicates that MGNREGA has a great deal of potential for women's socioeconomic and reasonable political empowerment.

In this study, Xavier and Mari (2014) attempt to assess the effect of MGNREGA on women's socioeconomic empowerment in the Kalakkanmoi panchayat of Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district. According to the study, the MGNREGA plan gives women in rural communities where men predominate much more social and economic decision-making authority and raises household income and expenditures as compared to the pre-MGNREGA period. Thus, the program guarantees a higher level of the living conditions of the weak and impoverished, particularly women.

Saharia (2014) examines the following perspectives on how MGNREGA has impacted women's economic empowerment. Opportunities for employment, salary parity for women as wage earners, their ownership over their MGNREGA earnings, financial inclusion, and bargaining power. The author comes to the conclusion that certain "Gender-Neutral Measures," like having more women participate in MGNREGA planning and social audits, improving worksite amenities, paying workers properly, breaking up projects into phases, promptly resolving grievances, etc., will incite women to demand more work under MGNREGA.

MGNREGA has enhanced asset development, income, employment, saving, and expenditure, among other factors, according to the previously cited literature assessment. The focus of the current work has been on how

Objectives

This article's primary goals are to:

- a) familiarize readers with the idea of MGNREGA and women's empowerment;
- b) assess MGNREGA's effectiveness in the study region; and
- c) describe the extent to which the MGNREGA scheme influences women's empowerment in the research region.

Methodology

The basic data used in this study was gathered from the Sivakasi block in the Virudhunagar district of Tamilnadu during the fiscal year 2023–2034. According to information provided by the Ministry of Rural Development, this district was chosen for study because it excelled in the 2017 Tamilnadu Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) plan implementation. 200 women who have participated in MGNREGA for at least five years have had their data gathered.

200 people make up the sample size. Data from the women under the MGNREGA scheme was collected using a structured interview schedule. The data have also been interpreted using secondary data. Secondary data were gathered from a variety of sources, including government reports, books, research papers, and the NREGA website (www.nrega.nic.in). For examining data, a basic statistical instrument such as the percentage has been applied.

Results and Discussion

Performance of MGNREGA in Virudhunagar district during 2023-34

Tamilnadu is divided into 38 districts, Virudhunagar being developed districts. The total population was 46,04,827 according to the 2011 census report, of which 36,25,308 (78%) were in rural areas. The population density was 1172 people per square kilometer, and the sex ratio was 946. The Ganga and its tributaries' alluvial plain encompasses the entire district. The district of Virudhunagar has 187 Gram Panchayats and seventeen blocks.

In the Virudhunagar district, the MGNREGA program began in the 2007–2008 fiscal year. It has now completed ten fiscal years and is in its eleventh fiscal year. Table 1 displays the MGNREGA's performance in the Tamilnadu district of Virudhunagar. The table indicates that a total of 5.07 lakh of the 7.05 lakh families that receive work cards have them active for the fiscal year 2023–2034. There are 144.23 lakh man-days of employment created overall, with an average of 59.38 days of employment per family.

Table 1: Performance of MGNREGA in Virudhunagar District during 2023-34

Indicator	Total
Total no. of Job Cards issued (in lakh)	7.05
Total no. of Workers (in lakh)	17.55
Total no. of active Job Cards (in lakh)	5.07
Person days Generated so far [In Lakhs]	144.23
Average days of employment provided per household	59.38
Women Person days out of Total (%)	52.14
Person days generated so far (in lakh)	58.29
Average wage rate per day per person (in Rs.)	146.64
Total no. of HHs completed 100 days of wage employment	20194

Role of MGNREGA on women empowerment

Women's employment, income, savings, food security, and other factors rise after enrolling in the MGNREGA plan. The current debate is whether or not the MGNREGA program has empowered women. Eight elements linked to women's empowerment have been taken into consideration, and each respondent has been questioned about the eight indicators, in order to evaluate the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in the research area. These determinants include: (i) her own income; (ii) her family's income; (iii) her own saving; (iv) her family's saving; (v) her personal asset; (vi) her control over household asset; (vii) her decision about family planning; and (viii) her decision regarding her children's schooling. A Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) has been developed to measure women's empowerment. It does so by adding together each person's score from eight indicators (Table 2).

Table 2: Indicators and Their Scores

Sl. No.	Indicators	Scale	Score
1	Control over own income	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
2	Control over family income	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
3	Control over own saving	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
4	Control over family saving	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
5	Control over own asset	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
6	Control over household asset	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
7	Decision of family planning	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2
8	Decision on children's education	Husband only	0
		Husband and wife both	1
		Wife only	2

Source: own survey, 2023-34

Every indication has been calculated using a three-point scale. The possible CEI score values in this study ranged from 0 to 16, with 0 denoting the least amount of economic empowerment and 16 denoting the greatest. By creating a Cumulative Empowerment Index, other researchers (Parveen and Leonhauser, 2004; Parveen and Chaudhury, 2009; Mohammad, 2010) also employed a comparable technique to gauge women's empowerment.

The degree of female empowerment in the research area is displayed in Table 3. The respondents' empowerment level has been categorized into three equal groups: low (0–5), medium (6–10), and high (11–16) based on the CEI score range (0–16). It was discovered that over half of the participants (52.5%) have low levels of empowerment category, 42.5% belonged to the medium category, and only 5% to the high empowerment level. In a different Tamilnadu study, Roy and Singh (2010) discovered that rural women's empowerment was only at a low to medium degree.

Table 3: Economic Empowerment Level of the Sample Women

Empowerment Level	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Low (0-5)	105	52.5
Medium (6-10)	85	42.5
High (11-16)	10	5.0

Source: own calculation, 2024

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned findings and discussion, it is clear that the MGNREGA program has had a significant impact on rural residents' quality of life. Every household whose adult members volunteer to perform unskilled manual labor receives at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per financial year. People in rural areas now have more jobs, income, savings, food security, and the building of assets, among other things.

In terms of women's empowerment, it was discovered that the research area's overall level of women's empowerment was unsatisfactory because the majority of the women under study (95.2%) had low to medium levels of economic empowerment. Thus, it can be said that the MGNREGA program has influenced women's empowerment; nonetheless, it was not as high as the plan anticipated.

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