

MGNREGA-The Public Policy in India: An Empowerment Analysis

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Abstract

Empowerment of women is the process of challenging the existing power relations and gaining control over the source of power. MGNREGA, the flagship programme of India has made room for the rural women for challenging the power relations within the households as well as in the society. Thus, this study seeks to analyze the impact of the MGNREGA program on women's empowerment. The survey was conducted at the household level in Nadia District, West Bengal, India, during 2016-17. Four out of the 17 community development blocks were selected for the study, and a total of approximately 500 households engaged in MGNREGA works were randomly chosen from these gram panchayats. The findings reveal that higher work participation under MGNREGA has empowered women to engage more confidently and actively in Gram Sabha meetings. The study highlights a unique interrelationship between work participation and active involvement in decision-making processes under the scheme.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Empowerment, Power relations, Process Participation, Gram Sabha

JEL Code: H53, J16, O15

1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and multi-layered concept. Generally, development programmes aim at empowering the poor particularly a women. Empowerment of women is a continuous process heralding a shift from unjust to just, subservient to successful, passive to active ability and entity for women (Ghosh 2015). Basically, empowerment is about power and about changing the balance of power (Parvin 2012). It entails a process of change. (Kabeer 1999). The balance of power is generally centered to those who can control the distribution of material and intellectual resources and the ideology. Social relations in both public and private life depend a lot on this control of power. This control in turns confers the power of decision making (Batliwala 1994).

In prevailing patriarchal ideology, any attempt by women to claim their independent rights or their demand for a share of resources is often undermined. Patriarchal ideology nurtures the values of submission, sacrifice, obedience and silent suffering among women (Hawkesworth, 1990; Schuler and Kadirgamar-Rajasingham 1992 as cited in Batliwala 1994). This is one sort of disempowerment. Disempowerment is the consequence of some combination of social, cultural, economic, political, and historical processes (Garba 1999). This disempowerment is to be challenged and it needs to acquire the ability to control the resources and reshape the prevailing ideology. Therefore, empowerment is the process of challenging the existing power relations and gaining control over the source of power (Batliwala 1994).

The policy initiative of the Government of India in terms of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (hereinafter MGNREGA¹) has been conceived primarily to provide households a guaranteed income through employment on public projects. It was initiated in 2006 in a phased manner with a view to designing a wage employment program to more effectively fight poverty. The scheme seeks to provide basic social security to India's rural poor and provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to every rural household in a financial year.

There are several provisions in the Act that allow substantial participation of the women in the works operated under the scheme. This study aims to find out the women empowerment through MGNREGA policy in the year 2016/17. Their participation in the MGNREGA work results in empowerment among them by giving them independent income-earning opportunities and strengthening their bargaining power in the labour market (Dreze 2011). The economic self-sufficiency gained through MGNREGA income is sure to have an impact upon the intra-household power relation which is taken care of in this paper. At the same time, their participation in the Gram Sabha² opens room for their presence felt in the society. It has been also endeavoured in the paper to figure out the inter-linkage between work participation and active process participation of women under the scheme.

MGNREGA and Empowerment of Women

Although women spend a lot of time for household maintenance, management and shopping for own family, care for children, the sick, and elderly as well as for various minor productive activities, their contribution to the household income and to the national economy remains largely unaccounted for (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010). This is because their works are generally unpaid. The MGNREGA, the well acknowledged public works programme, has changed the scenario drastically. The various provisions and guidelines of the Act have aimed at ensuring women easy and equitable access to work, favourable conditions at worksites, equal wage payment and their representation in decision making bodies (MRD, 2012; UNDP, 2015). So, in its mosaic, it entails an explicit aspiration to empower women (Narayan & Das 2014). It has immense potential for empowering the women (Chopra 2019).

Several studies have indicated that improved access to paid work and economic resources has yielded a positive impact on the socio-economic status of the women as well as their general well-being (MRD, 2012). There has been an initial study on empowerment in view of the initiation of the Scheme by Jandu(2008). The study observed that MGNREGA could play a decisive role for empowering the women economically and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem by providing employment at fair wages in the villages. Khera and Nayek (2009) in their study opined that in the intra-household chemistry, women because of economic self-sufficiency gained through MGNREGA income were enjoying more freedom and empowerment.

Considering a wider perspective, Pankaj and Tankha(2010) broadly conceptualized the empowerment process broadly from two dimensions namely, household-level effects and community-level effects. According to them MGNREGA has extended the choices of women

¹ Initially, it was National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). From October 2, 2009, NREGA has been rechristened as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (re-acronym as MGNREGA).

² Gram Sabha is a general assembly meeting held in the Panchayat office with Panchayat functionaries and village people in order to take decision regarding execution and evaluation of development projects of the Panchayat.

to use their earnings and enhanced their capability as active participants in the domain of household decision-making. At the community level too, their presence became being felt. Women increased and active participation in the Gram Sabha and their access to the institutional finance have been the new developments towards the potential benefit of the Scheme in the social sphere.

The gender-friendly design of MGNREGA has enhanced women's share of the benefits by facilitating their participation under the Scheme and addressing some gendered labour market inequalities (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). They concluded that the Scheme has had far-reaching impacts on rural women's livelihoods and significant contribution towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

In their study, Vij *et al* (2017) observed that MGNREGA has able to eliminate gender differences of wages through equal wage rates for both men and women. Apart from managing day-to-day social and economic tasks women could contribute actively to the household income which improved status and respect of the women within the household as well as in the rural community. Thus, the study concluded that women's participation under the Scheme was encouraging and had certainly benefited rural women.

2. METHODS

The paper has been designed to present the findings of a survey conducted at the household level in Nadia District of West Bengal, India during 2016-17. The multi-stage purposive and random sampling procedures have been followed in collection of primary data. In the first stage, district Nadia has been selected purposively on the basis of its average ranking in the human and gender development indices 2004, both stood at 9th position out of 17 districts, on the belief that empowering effects would be more effectively observed in the district where women confront poor socio-economic conditions (Pankaj & Tankha 2010). In Nadia district there were 17 community development blocks at the time of survey, out of which four blocks have been selected randomly. From these four blocks eight-gram (village) panchayats have been chosen randomly again in the third stage taking two-gram panchayats from each block. In the fourth stage, villages were selected randomly taking one or two villages from each of the panchayats. In the fifth stage, 500 odd households working in the MGNREGA works were selected randomly from these gram panchayats, but the target being on female workers, as one of the primary objectives of the study is to deal with the issue of women empowerment as resultant of the scheme. A well-designed structured questionnaire consisting of the variables relating to the objectives and concepts of the study has been used for surveying the women workers.

3. RESULTS

Socio-economic Features

Caste and religion are two very basic and relevant demographic features in the study as these indicate what sections of the society have been benefitted with the scheme. We found a representation of the women across the castes, although unevenly in our sample. While there were 15.2 percent general category women, 36.2 percent were Scheduled Castes (SC) consisting of more than 1/3rd of the sample, 28 percent were Scheduled Tribes (ST) and remaining 20.6 percent hailed from Other Backward Classes (OBCa) category i.e. Muslims. So, almost 4/5th of the women hailed from Hindu community. In question of literacy, the women in the sample had lower literacy rate. Only 41.4 percent women were found to be

literate. The data revealed more illiteracy among the ST women with 87.1 percent being illiterate.

In the study, in presenting the workers by their age, age group was sub-divided into four classes. All the women in the sample were scattered in the different age groups. Almost half of the workers were from the age group 31-45 years comprising of 46 percent. Another 27.8 percent belonged to 46-60 age group while 18.8 percent women were in the 18-30 age group indicating that the scheme was preferred by upper age group women as far as the sample is concerned. There were 7.4 percent workers in the sample who were above 60 years of age.

Apart from doing the MGNREGA work some of the women in the sample did have some other sources of employment or income. Around 58.6 percent women workers in the sample did not have any other assignment apart from household chores. So, MGNREGA endowed these women with the opportunity to come out of home and earning money by way of taking part in economic activity.

Agricultural wage income has come out to be the biggest source of other income among the sample women with 18.4 percent women being absorbed in it. The survey areas cover some gram panchayats famous for weaving industry. During the survey we encountered with some of the women, around 1.6 percent of the sample, associated with the weaving activity. But in most cases, they generally helped the weaving activity of others, might be male family members or some hired labourers by way of spinning; as much as 6.4 percent women in the sample replied to do spinning activity. Around 5.4 percent women were doing the job of Bidi rolling. There were 9.6 percent women in aggregate who were associated with some other kind of activities.

MGNREGA Participation

With a view of getting a wider and in-depth scenario this study has assessed an average participation of the sample women for last three years under MGNREGA instead of only one year as done by earlier studies (Khera & Nayek 2009; Pankaj & Tankha 2010). As the survey was done in 2016-17 financial year, it was the endeavor to find out the number of days of employment enjoyed by the women under the scheme during the last three financial year i.e. 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16.

It is revealing from the data that altogether there were 9.4 percent women in the sample who got 0-15 days of work during last three years and another 21.6 percent women worked for 16-30 days of work during the said period. It implies that 31 percent i.e. almost 1/3rd of the women in the sample got only 0-30 days of employment on average under the scheme during the period. Considering the aggregate data, it can be further stated that around 69 percent women in the sample enjoyed on average 31-100 days of job under the scheme during the last three years, the majority being in the work-days of 31-60 with 48.2 percent.

Empowerment Process

Issue of Participation

In the empowerment process, generally there are five components namely, welfare, access, awareness, participation and control. Generally, participation represents the involvement of the women in the decision-making process (Parvin 2012). In the previous section of the paper, we were concerned with the work participation of MGNREGA workers. However, in the participation dimension of empowerment process in this section, we have tried to encompass the participation in the intra-household decision making process as well as the

community level decision making process. Hence for identification of the relevant variables this indicator of the empowerment process takes into cognizance those items associated with intra-household decision making in view of MGNREGA and the process participation under MGNREGA.

Table 1: Decision making in the family by the women workers

Who decides	Before MGNREGA % of Women Workers	After MNREGA % of Women Workers
Self	18.8	22
With Husband	47.4	56.8
Other	33.8	21.2
Total	100	100

Source: Primary Survey

Participation in Household Decision Making

Decision Making before MGNREGA

In the participation domain of the empowerment process one of the important aspects is the decision making in the family (Garba 1999; Alkire *et al.* 2013). Therefore, in assessing the extent of participation in the family this question has been put before the women in order to understand who has been the decision maker in the family before getting in touch with the scheme. Actually, this parameter measures the level of empowerment a woman already had before she got the employment under the scheme. From Table-1 can assert that 18.8 percent women in the sample were empowered enough to take decision in the family on their own before getting job under the Scheme. In fact, a major part of them were the widows who were head of the family. As in sample 16.6 percent workers were widow, it can be stated in general that there has been less empowerment among the women workers before getting employment under the scheme.

Decision Making after MGNREGA

The scheme has extended the opportunities for personal freedom of the rural women in two ways. First, it has opened a new room from employment for the rural women. And secondly, their choices and capability have been broadened (Pankaj & Tankha 2010). In order to identify to what extent, the capability of the women workers has been broadened due to MGNREGA this study included this item in our participation dimension. Actually, this feature allows us to know whether the employment under the scheme and the earning thereof have yielded any extent of empowerment to the women workers. Here the third category i.e. 'Decision Making by Other' implies the least level of empowerment of the women. It reveals that there is rise in number of women in 'Decision Making by Self' category from 18.8 percent to 22 percent and 'With Husband' category from 47.4 percent to 56.8 percent after MGNREGA. There is also a fall in number in the third category to 21.2 percent from 33.8 percent. So, apparently it appears that MGNREGA job has broadened the capability of women of being able to actively participate in the family decision making process.

Table 2: Female 03-year average participation vs decision making after MGNREGA

Decision Making after MGNREGA (%)	Female 03-Year Average Participation					
	0-15	16-30	31-60	61-90	91-100	Total
Self	10.9	20	51.8	12.7	4.5	100
With Husband	6	15.8	50.7	14.1	13.4	100
Other	17	38.7	37.7	6	0.9	100
Value of χ^2						Sig.
53.24						<0.001

Source: Primary Survey

A cross-tabulation in Table-2 exhibits that bulk of the women who took family decision in their own or with their husband after MGNREGA lie in the employment bracket 31-100 days whereas women who preferred the third option, majority consisting 55.7 percent are in the employment bracket 0-30 days thereby allowing us in drawing the inference that higher rate of participation under the scheme has emboldened the women workers in taking part in family decisions making process. The high significant value of Chi-square also satisfies the inter-relation.

However, this sort of inference may lead us to error as we are not contemplating the issue of how many of them were empowered enough in taking family decision by themselves or in association with their husbands even before the question of MNREGA was introduced. Hence, we can dwell on the third parameter of the participation component, which may lead us to a better conclusion because this parameter includes the term 'more' which itself presents a comparative note.

Table 3: More involvement in decision making after MGNREGA

Extent	% of Women Workers
Largely	27.8
Partly	29.8
Same	42.4
Total	100

Source: Primary Survey

More Involvement in Decision Making after MGNREGA

This feature is supplementary to the second one. A woman can take decision with her husband in both pre and post MGNREGA period. But she can enjoy more involvement in decision making due to her assignment under the scheme in post MGNREGA period. She can feel more empowered even in time of sharing decision with husband. This feature has been designed to address that aspect.

Table-3 reflected that 27.8 percent women have boldly replied that the scheme to a large extent has allowed them to be more involved in the family decision making process and another 29.8 percent have been in favour of partly increase in more involvement after MGNREGA.

Table 4: Female 03-year average participation vs more involvement in decision making after MGNREGA

More Involvement (%)	Female 03-Year Average Participation					
	0-15	16-30	31-60	61-90	91-100	Total
Largely	0	0.7	62.6	23	13.7	100
Partly	3.4	26.2	49	9.4	12.1	100
Same	19.8	32.1	38.2	6.6	3.3	100
Value of χ^2				Sig.		
126.86				<0.001		

Source: Primary Survey

The study reveals that within the highest employment bracket of 61-100 days, 104 women fall into this category, 83 women that means almost 80 percent of them responded to enjoy more involvement in family decision making in post- MGNREGA period either largely or partly while out of 155 women in the very lower employment bracket of 0-30 days, 110 i.e.70.96 percent opined in favour of no change in involvement in household decision making after MGNREGA. The cross-tabulation presented in Table-4 substantiates the relation. So, higher participation of the women workers in MGNREGA job has extended their capability by way of their more involvement in making decision within the household. The significant value of Chi-square also endorses the inter-relation between the two variables.

Gram Sabha Participation

Apart from women participation in the household decision making process the study also insists on the women's involvement in the community level decision making process or it may be coined as process participation. In this context women participation in the Gram Sabha meeting held in the Panchayat office is a very decisive one. In fact, in the post-MGNREGA period, it allows women folk to take part in community-level development process and be involved in the discussion particularly related to matters pertaining to MGNREGA and other. Our sample reveals that around 65 percent women participated in the Gram Sabha meeting and out of them 14 percent women have not only participated in the meeting but they have been very vocal in the meeting, in terms of speaking or interacting with officials.

Active Gram Sabha Participation

It has been overtly stated in the Act that there should be more participation of women under the scheme but the covert objective is to bolster the community development processes

through grass-roots institutions and make decision making at that level more inclusive and participatory (Pankaj & Tankha 2010). A combination of work participation and process participation is instrumental for appropriation of latent objective of the scheme. Not only women participation in work is welcoming but also their active participation in the procedural aspects like selection and implementation of work, social audit and asset management is to be ensured (Pankaj & Tankha 2010). Through the procedural participation women will be acquainted with their rights and be more empowered.

The question of empowerment of women through participation in the community development process has been entertained by the incorporation of the item Gram Sabha participation in the study. Regarding Gram Sabha participation a relevant question that creeps in to the process is whether the women simply attend the meeting or keep vocal there? Mere participation is not important rather to what extent they speak or interact in the meeting is instrumental for the empowerment process. If their vocal participation is coined as 'active' then the immediate question follows- does higher employment under the scheme leave any impact on the active participation of women in the meeting?

Actually, active Gram Sabha participation can be considered as the highest level of empowerment as most of the dimension's empowerment process such as access, awareness, participation and control are engraved within it. Considering the gravity of the parameter the study has delved into the aspect with a view to identifying the factors contributing to it. So, in order to find out the determining variables of empowerment as far as our data is concerned, an econometric model has been resorted to in the study.

In the study, the response variable active Gram Sabha participation is considered to be a binary one where active Gram Sabha participation=1 if yes; otherwise=0. Hence the estimation can be done by using logit regression analysis. Logistic regression measures the relationship between one dependent binary variable and one or more nominal, ordinal or interval independent variables, by using probability scores as the predicted values of the dependent variable.

We assume the following logistic equation:

$$\text{Logit}(Y) = \text{Log} (p/1-p) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + u_i \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

where p is the probability of active Gram Sabha participation and

$p/1-p$ = the odds ratio

X_1 = Women workers' age measured in years,

X_2 = Women workers' level of education measured in years of schooling,

X_3 = Women workers' other work, a dummy variable, 1 for yes, 0 otherwise,

X_4 = Women workers' 3 years average participation in MGNREGA

and u_i is the error term.

Based on the survey data, estimates of the binary logistic regression equation (1) have been computed using STATA. Table-5 presents the estimated coefficients, marginal effects and odds ratio for various co-variates under study. As the coefficient of age is found to be insignificant it is dispensed in the analysis. Now, the coefficient of education level of women workers has come out to be significant and positive which implies that for every one-unit increase in education, we expect 1.199 times increase in the log odds of active Gram Sabha

participation. There are lots of effects associated with education that yield a change in power relationships within and outside the household. It appears to increase women's capacity to deal with the outside world, including government officials and service providers of various kinds (Kabeer 2005). So, education makes the women workers more confident in attitude; keeps them informed about different issues and thereby emboldens them to be more vocal in the Gram Sabha meeting.

Table 5: Results of logistic regression on active Gram Sabha participation

Variables	Coefficients	Marginal Effects	Odds Ratio
Constant	-3.50 (0.759)		0.030 (0.023)
X ₁	-0.014 (0.0139)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.986 (0.014)
X ₂	0.182* (0.041)	0.017* (0.004)	1.199 (0.049)
X ₃	0.671** (0.290)	0.066** (0.029)	1.956 (0.568)
X ₄	0.027* (0.006)	0.003* (0.001)	1.028 (0.006)

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses

LR chi2(4)=56.21, Prob > chi2=0.000

*Significant at 1% level, ** Significant at 5% level

Similarly, women workers having other work have highly positive impact on active Gram Sabha participation. Women already having other work are empowered to some extent which has been reflected in their active Gram Sabha participation. It increases the likelihood of active Gram Sabha participation by 6.6 percentage points. Considering the significant coefficient of MGNREGA participation of women it can be stated that for every one-unit increase in MGNREGA participation of women, we expect 1.028 times increase in the log odds of active Gram Sabha participation. So, increased work participation under MGNREGA has made them more assertive about their space in the public sphere.

4. CONCLUSION

The connotation of women's participation as a dimension of empowerment does not indicate their mere participation in the work process. Rather, it can be deciphered through their participation in the intra-household decision making process as well as community level decision making process which is also named as process participation. Women's involvement in the intra-household decision making process requires equal power sharing that has been ensured and augmented by their assignment under the scheme. Their entry into the productive activities and wage earning to a formidable extent have broadened the capability of the women under study and thereby enabling them taking decision by their own or with their husband in the household matters such as schooling of their wards, purchasing personal needs or family items, creating assets or others. Even, in time of sharing decision with their husband they now enjoy relatively more command than they previously did.

Participation in the community level decision making process has been taken care of by incorporation of Gram Sabha participation in the study. However, it is reflected that mere Gram Sabha participation does not augur well with the true process of empowerment. Mere

participation is not indicative, rather to what extent they speak or interact in the meeting is instrumental for empowerment process. So, it is important to consider active Gram Sabha participation in the analysis of empowerment. The study considers active Gram Sabha participation to be the highest level of empowerment. An introspective treatment has thus resorted to identify the factors contributing to this highest level of empowerment as far as the study is concerned.

The study reveals that education which builds the self-image of the women, making them abreast of the issues around, contributes to a large extent in participating actively in the Gram Sabha. Women having higher level of education have thus found to be more vocal for the sake of their as well as community interests. The significant coefficient for women other work has indicated the level of empowerment they already had. Women already involved in other productive activities necessarily gain some courage and confidence thereof which have been reflected in their active participation in the community level decision making process. The increased participation under MGNREGA has also emerged to have empowering impact on women participating in the Gram Sabha. Thus, the factors that have emboldened women to participate in the Gram Sabha more vocally as a reflection of their empowerment process are found to be the level of education of the women workers, female other work and the MGNREGA participation.

The scheme has been designed to make decision making at the community development process more inclusive and participatory. Encouraging more women in the process participation implicitly vouches for women empowerment. The study reflects a unique inter-relation between work participation and active process participation under the scheme. After the MGNREGA came into being, participation in the Gram Sabha has served as a platform for manifestation of women's empowerment process. They are now making their presence felt in the Gram Sabha meetings. At the same time, higher work participation under MGNREGA has unleashed power within the women, emboldening them to participate in the Gram Sabha more gracefully. Thus, from work participation to active process participation of women it has worked as a truly virtuous inter-linkage.

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