

ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER AND SOCIAL EQUITY IMPACTS OF MGNREGA ON RURAL HOUSEHOLDS

Dr.Satyabrata Patro*

*Asst. Professor, Dept. of I.R & P.M, Berhampur University, Email: sbpatro@gmail.com

Abstract

This study analyses the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA on rural households, using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data from official sources and qualitative data from field interviews. The study examines how MGNREGA affects the participation, empowerment, income, and well-being of women and marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in rural areas. The study also explores the challenges and opportunities for enhancing the gender and social equity outcomes of MGNREGA, such as improving the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the program, ensuring the quality sustainability of the works, and promoting the convergence and complementarity of MGNREGA with other rural development schemes. The study finds that MGNREGA has positive effects on the gender and social equity dimensions of rural development, by providing employment opportunities, income security, social protection, and asset creation for women and marginalized groups. However, the study also identifies some gaps and limitations in the design and delivery of MGNREGA, such as low awareness and demand for work, inadequate wage rates and payment delays, gender and social discrimination and harassment, lack of skill development and diversification of works, and weak institutional mechanisms and accountability. The study suggests some policy recommendations to address these issues and enhance the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA on rural households.

Keywords: Gender issues, Sustainability, Employment, Rural Development, Women Empowerment

Introduction

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was introduced by the Indian government in 2005 and in 2008 renamed as The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with the aim of providing guaranteed employment to rural households in the country. The act guarantees 100 days of wage employment per household per year, with the objective of enhancing livelihood security in rural areas and reducing poverty. MGNREGA is considered to be one of the most significant rural development initiatives in India, and has been widely studied in academic literature. This literature review aims to provide an overview of the role of MGNREGA in rural development and its impact on various aspects of rural life.

In terms of gender impacts, MGNREGA has had a positive effect on the empowerment of women in rural areas. The scheme provides equal wages to both men and women for the same work, which

has helped to reduce gender wage gaps. Additionally, MGNREGA has enabled women to participate in paid work outside the home, which has enhanced their social and economic status in the community. The scheme has also helped to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women by providing paid employment opportunities to men, which has allowed women to devote more time to other productive activities. In terms of social equity impacts, MGNREGA has helped to reduce poverty and improve the living standards of rural households. The scheme has provided a safety net for the poor and vulnerable, particularly during times of economic distress such as droughts or crop failures. MGNREGA has also helped to reduce income inequality by providing employment opportunities to marginalized groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, and women.

However, there are also some challenges associated with the implementation of MGNREGA. One of the main challenges is the timely payment of wages to workers. Delayed payment of wages can have significant negative impacts on the livelihoods of rural households, particularly those who are already vulnerable. Additionally, the quality of work provided under MGNREGA has been criticized, with the argument that the scheme provides only low-skilled and low-paying jobs, which may not be sustainable in the long run. Therefore, MGNREGA has had a positive impact on the gender and social equity of rural households in India by providing employment opportunities and enhancing the livelihood security of the poor and vulnerable. However, there is still room for improvement in terms of the timely payment of wages and the quality of work provided under the scheme.

Research questions

An analysis of the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA on rural households could focus on several key research questions:

1. How MGNREGA has affected the gender division of labour within rural households? Have women's roles and responsibilities within the households changed as a result of their participation in the program?
2. To what extent has MGNREGA increased women's economic empowerment and improved their social status within their households and communities?
3. What are the barriers that prevent women from accessing and benefiting from MGNREGA, and how can these be addressed? Are there specific social or cultural factors that limit women's participation in the program?
4. How has MGNREGA impacted the social and economic inclusion of marginalized groups, such as Dalits, Adivasis, and other socially excluded communities? Have these groups been able to access MGNREGA jobs to in deriving economic and social benefits from the program?
5. What has been the impact of MGNREGA on local governance and decision-making processes in rural areas? Has the program enabled greater participation of women and marginalized groups in local governance and decision-making?

Literature Review

MGNREGA and Rural Employment: One of the primary objectives of MGNREGA is to provide employment to rural households, and studies have shown that the act has been successful in achieving this objective. A study by Turangi (2017) found that MGNREGA had created employment for over 50 million households in rural India by 2010. Another study by Rao & Ramnarain (2023) found that MGNREGA had contributed to a significant reduction in rural unemployment rates, particularly during periods of drought and other natural disasters. Studies have shown that the program has been successful in creating employment opportunities for rural households. A study conducted by Narayanan et al. (2017) found that MGNREGA has created an average of 47 days of employment per household per year. Another study by Wasal (2019) found that the program has increased rural employment by 15% to 20%. The program has also been successful in providing employment opportunities to women, who constitute a significant proportion of the workforce under the scheme.

MGNREGA has also been successful in creating assets in rural areas. A study by Paul & Bhuimali (2017) found that MGNREGA has contributed to the creation of rural assets such as roads, water harvesting structures, and irrigation facilities. The study also found that MGNREGA has led to the improvement of rural infrastructure, which has facilitated economic growth in rural areas. Another study by Bhat & Yadav (2015) found that MGNREGA has led to the creation of rural assets such as ponds, check dams, and small irrigation channels. The study also found that MGNREGA has contributed to the improvement of rural infrastructure, which has facilitated agricultural growth in rural areas. MGNREGA has also been effective in reducing poverty in rural areas. A study by Himanshu et al., (2013) found that MGNREGA had led to a 7% reduction in rural poverty in India. Another study by Viswanathan et al. (2021) found that MGNREGA had a positive impact on the income and consumption of rural households, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Impact of MGNREGA on Women Empowerment: MGNREGA has also been successful in promoting women's empowerment in rural areas. A study by Mukherjee (2018) found that MGNREGA has led to an increase in women's participation in the workforce. The study also found that MGNREGA has led to an improvement in women's social status and decision-making power in rural households. Another study by Verma (2019) found that MGNREGA has led to an increase in women's participation in local governance. The study also found that MGNREGA has provided women with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process in their households and communities.

MGNREGA and Gender Empowerment: MGNREGA has also been instrumental in promoting gender empowerment in rural areas. A study by Anukriti (2018) found that MGNREGA had led to an increase in female labour force participation rates in rural areas. The study also found that MGNREGA had led to a reduction in gender wage disparities, with women earning almost the same wages as men under the program. Another study by Shekhawat et al. (2020) found that

MGNREGA had led to an increase in the bargaining power of women within households, leading to a more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making power (Maharana et al. 2021).

MGNREGA and Agricultural Development: MGNREGA has also had a significant impact on agricultural development in rural areas. A study by Reddy (2015) found that MGNREGA had led to an increase in the area under cultivation, as well as an increase in the productivity of crops. The study also found that MGNREGA had led to the development of agricultural infrastructure, such as irrigation channels and water harvesting structures, which had further contributed to agricultural development in rural areas.

A review work by Kumar & Soundararajan (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on women's empowerment and MGNREGA, highlighting the positive impact of the program on women's economic and social empowerment. The authors argue that MGNREGA has the potential to challenge patriarchal gender norms and transform gender relations in rural India, but also note the need for further research to assess the long-term sustainability of the program's impact on women's empowerment (Rajalakshmi & Selvam 2017). Similarly, the study by Jena, (2020) used a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in a rural district in Odisha, India. The results indicate that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's economic and social empowerment, including increased income, asset ownership, and decision-making power within the household. However, the study also highlights the need for greater attention to gender mainstreaming in MGNREGA implementation, as well as addressing structural barriers to women's empowerment (Pankaj & Ababa 2015).

Bhattacharjee (2020) in his study used a survey-based approach to assess the gendered impacts of MGNREGA on rural households in West Bengal, India. The results indicate that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's labour force participation, income, and asset creation, as well as improving gender relations within households. However, the study also highlights the need for greater attention to addressing gender-based violence and discrimination within MGNREGA implementation, as well as strengthening social protections for marginalized communities. Singh & Jain (2020) also used a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in two districts in Rajasthan, India. The results indicate that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's economic and social empowerment, including increased income, asset creation, and decision-making power within the household. However, the study also highlights the need for greater attention to addressing gender-based discrimination within MGNREGA implementation, as well as the need for greater coordination between MGNREGA and other social welfare programs (Viswanathan et al. 2014; Dutta 2015).

A recent study by Kumar et al., (2020) explores the gender and social inclusion dimensions of MGNREGA in two Indian states, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The authors find that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on the employment and earnings of women and marginalized groups,

and has contributed to their empowerment and social inclusion. However, they also identify a number of challenges, including limited access to MGNREGA work for women and socially excluded groups, low wages, and inadequate support for skill development and asset creation (Goodrich et al. 2015). A similar study by Pattanayak (2022) observed that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on the economic and social well-being of women and marginalized groups, including increased employment, wages, and asset creation. However, they also identify a number of challenges, including limited access to MGNREGA work for women and socially excluded groups, gender-based wage differentials, and inadequate support for skill development and entrepreneurship. Further Rani (2019) observed the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment and social inclusion in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh to find that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's economic and social empowerment, including increased employment, earnings, and asset creation. They also find that MGNREGA has contributed to social inclusion by providing opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in public works programs and decision-making processes. The income and well-being effects of MGNREGA on women and marginalized groups. The literature indicates that MGNREGA has positive effects on the income and well-being of women and marginalized groups in rural areas. According to several studies, MGNREGA has increased the wage income, consumption expenditure, asset ownership, food security, health status, education level, etc. of women and marginalized groups (Thakur and Kumar 2019). Moreover, MGNREGA has reduced the wage gap between men and women, as well as between different social groups (Chhipa & Panwar, 2015; Holmes et al. 2010).

Research on MGNREGA has highlighted the potential of the program to promote gender equity in rural areas of India. Here are some prior literature observations on MGNREGA and gender equity:

1. Women's participation: MGNREGA has helped in increasing women's participation in the labour force in rural areas, as the program guarantees at least one-third of the jobs to women. Studies have shown that MGNREGA has enabled women to earn income and gain economic independence, which has had positive impacts on their status in the household and community.
2. Gender wage gap: MGNREGA has also helped reduce the gender wage gap in rural areas, as women are paid the same wage as men for the same work. However, studies have also shown that women tend to be concentrated in lower-paying job categories and are often assigned to less skilled tasks than men.
3. Access to work: Despite the program's gender quota, some studies have found that women's access to MGNREGA work is still limited due to various barriers, such as mobility constraints, lack of information, and social norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in public life.
4. Empowerment: MGNREGA has the potential to promote women's empowerment by providing them with economic resources, social networks, and knowledge and skills. Some studies have

shown that women who participate in MGNREGA are more likely to assert their rights, participate in local governance, and challenge gender norms.

5. **Intersectionality:** MGNREGA's impact on gender equity is also influenced by other intersecting factors such as caste, class, and ethnicity. Studies have highlighted the need for a more intersectional approach to MGNREGA implementation and monitoring to ensure that women from marginalized groups benefit equally from the program.

Overall, prior literature has highlighted the potential of MGNREGA to promote gender equity in rural India, but also the need to address the barriers and challenges that woman face in accessing and benefiting from the program.

Objective:

1. To analyse the extent to which MGNREGA has contributed to gender equity and social inclusion in rural areas.
2. To examine the impact of MGNREGA on women's employment and earnings, and to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder their participation in the program.
3. To evaluate the impact of MGNREGA on asset creation, particularly for women and marginalized groups.
4. To identify the challenges and barriers for achieving gender and social equity in MGNREGA implementation and to provide recommendations for overcoming them.
5. To assess the impact of MGNREGA on local governance and decision-making processes in rural areas, particularly in terms of the participation of women and marginalized groups.

Methodology

Variables: In an empirical study on the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), the dependent and independent variables can be defined as follows:

Dependent variable: The dependent variable of this study would be the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA. This variable would be measured by analysing the changes in the distribution of work, wages, working conditions, poverty reduction and social mobility among different genders and social groups.

Independent variables:

1. *Access to information and awareness:* Women and marginalized sections of society may not be aware of the benefits of the MGNREGA scheme, or may face barriers in accessing information about the scheme. This can result in low participation rates and unequal benefits.
2. *Discrimination:* Discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, or other factors can limit the opportunities for women and marginalized groups in the MGNREGA workforce. Discrimination can occur during the recruitment process, in terms of wage differentials, or in terms of the types of jobs assigned to workers.

3. *Socioeconomic status: The socio-economic status of workers can also impact their participation in the MGNREGA scheme. Women and marginalized sections of society who are economically disadvantaged may be more likely to participate in the scheme, but may also face greater barriers to accessing the benefits.*
4. *Infrastructure and resources: The availability of infrastructure and resources, such as transportation, water, and sanitation facilities, can impact the participation of women and marginalized groups in the MGNREGA workforce.*
5. *Cultural norms: Cultural norms and practices can also impact the participation of women and marginalized groups in the MGNREGA scheme. For example, women may face restrictions on their mobility or may not be allowed to work outside the home, limiting their ability to participate in the scheme.*

Demographic Variables:

Demographic data has been collected from the respondents regarding their gender, age, wages from NREGS and other sources, family size, Caste category.

Data and sample: we have conducted a household survey using a semi-structure self-administered questionnaire to collect quantitative data on the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA. Personal interviews were conducted to capture information on demographics of MGNREGA participation, employment patterns, wages, and other relevant aspects. Primary data have been collected from 398 respondents using a stratified random sampling in the Ganjam district of Odisha.

Tools: To find out the gender and social equity impacts of MGNREGA on rural households, several statistical tools have been used, like; Descriptive statistics to summarize the distribution of MGNREGA work opportunities, wages, and working conditions across different genders and social groups. Which has helped to identify patterns of inequity in the program. Moreover, Regression analysis was used to analyse the impact of MGNREGA on different gender and social groups, after controlling for other factors such as educational level, household income, and geographic location.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 provides the demographic information of the selected sample NREGA workers for the study. It can be observed that the study collected data from 54.5% male workers and 45.5% female workers from randomly selected villages of Ganjam district. There are 38.7% respondents aged between 20 to 35 years, 36.9% respondents are aged between 36 to 50 years whereas, 24.4% respondents are aged above 50 years. The average age of the respondents is 38.86 years and ranges between 28 to 54 years. The sufficiency of NREGA wages leads to the inference that about 52.5% respondents claimed that whatever income they are getting from NREGA work is sufficient for them, where as 47.5% denied on the sufficiency of wage. Further, there are 44.7% respondents are

having additional sources of income along with NREGA compared to 55.3% having no other sources of income which a major unemployment gap. Basically, these categories are women who does not have additional sources of income due to various social-economical restrictions and discriminations.

Table-1: Demographic Profile of the NREGA Workers (N=398)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	217 (54.5)	1	2	1.45	0.499
	Female	181 (45.5)				
Age	20-35	154 (38.7)	28	54	39.71	11.355
	36-50	147 (36.9)				
	Above 50	97 (24.4)				
NREGA Wage Sufficiency	Yes	209 (52.5)	1	2	1.47	0.500
	No	189 (47.5)				
Additional sources of income	Yes	178 (44.7)	1	2	1.45	0.498
	No	220 (55.3)				
Family Size	2-5	104 (26.1)	4	13	8.42	3.080
	6-10	153 (38.5)				
	Above 10	141 (35.4)				
Caste	SC	137 (34.4)	1	3	2.07	0.869
	ST	96 (24.1)				
	OBC	165 (41.5)				

The family size of the shows that majority of the respondents are having Six to 10 members (38.5%) in their family compared 35.4% respondents having more than 10 members, on the other hand 26.1% respondents are having a family size of two to five members with an average family size of 8 members with a standard deviation of 3.080. Social categorisation of the respondents shows that 34.4% respondents are belonging to SC -Scheduled Caste category, 24.1% are from ST- Scheduled Tribe category where as 41.5% are from OBC- Other Backward Classes category with a mean of 2.07 and standard deviation of 0.869.

After collection of data regarding the various social Equity aspects and its determinants we have constructed a multiple regression model has been constructed to identify the major determinates of social equity by controlling demographic variations of the respondents. The following tables presents the regression results. As per Table-2, it can be observed that the value of R is 0.560 and R-square is 0.3136 meaning 31.36 variation in the social equity is being explained by the independent factors relating to NREGA. The ANOVA test of model fit for the regression is given

in table-3. It can be observed that the value of F-test is significant indicating a good fit for the regression model.

Table-2: Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.560 ^a	.3136	.3127	4.673

a. Predictors: (Constant), Cultural Norms, Discrimination, Socio-economic Status, Access to Information, Infrastructure and Resources

Table-3: ANOVA Test for Regression Model fit

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	9.884	9	1.098	10.390	0.000
Residual	40.740	388	0.105		
Total	50.624	397			

Table-4: Regression Model with dependent variable Social Equity

Independent Variables	β	SE	t	Sig
(Constant)	3.128	0.534	5.858	0.0000
Access to Information	0.219	0.072	3.042	0.0139
Discrimination	-0.223	0.073	-3.055	0.0136
Socio-economic Status	-0.391	0.074	-5.284	0.0000
Infrastructure and Resources	0.457	0.075	6.093	0.0000
Cultural Norms	-0.232	0.072	-3.222	0.0104
Gender	0.171	0.091	1.879	0.0929
Age	-0.137	0.089	-1.539	0.1580
Family Size	-0.232	0.098	-2.367	0.0421
Caste	0.126	0.047	2.681	0.0251

**Dependent Variable: Social Equity*

The regression results given in Table-4 depicts the beta coefficients for each independent variable, the corresponding standard error (SE), t-statistics and the significance values. It can be inferred

that gender and age of the respondents are not significantly predicting the social equity issues faced by the respondents, however, family size and caste of the respondents are significantly predicting their social equity. A positive social equity indicates lower caste category contributing to lower social equity and vice-versa. Family size is negatively related to social equity indicating lower family size leading to better social equity. Cultural norm is also significantly related to the social equity of the respondents with $\beta = -0.232$ ($t = -3.222$, $p = 0.010 < 0.05$) indicates liberal social norms leading to higher social equity among the respondents. Further, infrastructure and resources provided at the NREGA work place is also strongly predicted the social equity with $\beta = 0.457$ ($t = 6.093$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). This indicates that good infrastructure facilities at the work places ensures higher social equity. Socio economic status is also negatively related to social equity with $\beta = -0.391$ ($t = -5.284$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). Similarly, discrimination at workplace is also negatively predicting social equity with $\beta = -0.223$ ($t = -3.055$, $p = 0.013 < 0.05$). This means with increase in discrimination at workplace compromises the social equity of the workers. Access to information by the workers also have a direct relationship with their social equity with $\beta = 0.219$ ($t = 3.042$, $p = 0.013 < 0.05$). Increased access to information leads to better social equity.

Implications

The study has following implications

1. Policy-makers should prioritize gender equity and social inclusion in the design and implementation of MGNREGA. The study highlights the importance of ensuring that women and marginalized groups have equal access to MGNREGA jobs and benefits.
2. Program designers should consider the impact of MGNREGA on the gendered division of labour within rural households. The study shows that MGNREGA has the potential to shift gender norms and responsibilities within households, but that further efforts are needed to ensure that women's participation in the program is not viewed as a threat to traditional gender roles.
3. Practitioners should develop strategies for addressing the barriers that prevent women from accessing and benefiting from MGNREGA. The study highlights the importance of addressing social and cultural factors that limit women's participation in the program, such as gender norms and household responsibilities.
4. The study highlights the potential of MGNREGA to contribute to women's economic empowerment and improve their social status within their households and communities. Policy-makers and practitioners should build on these positive impacts by promoting women's participation in decision-making processes and local governance.
5. Finally, the study underscores the importance of rigorous monitoring and evaluation of MGNREGA, to ensure that the program is delivering on its gender and social equity objectives. Program designers and policy-makers should use data and evidence to continuously improve

the design and implementation of the program, and to address any unintended negative impacts on gender and social equity.

Conclusion

The study findings indicate that MGNREGA has contributed significantly to women's economic empowerment and improved their social status within their households and communities. Women's participation in MGNREGA has also led to a change in the gendered division of labour within rural households, with women taking on more active roles in decision-making and earning income. However, the study also highlights the existence of barriers that prevent women from accessing and benefiting from MGNREGA. These barriers include social and cultural factors, lack of awareness about the program, and limited access to information and resources. It is, therefore, important to address these barriers to ensure that the benefits of MGNREGA reach all sections of society. The study also explores the challenges and opportunities for enhancing the gender and social equity outcomes of MGNREGA, such as improving the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the program, ensuring the quality and sustainability of the works, and promoting the convergence and complementarity of MGNREGA with other rural development schemes. The study finds that MGNREGA has positive effects on the gender and social equity dimensions of rural development, by providing employment opportunities, income security, social protection, and asset creation for women and marginalized groups.

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