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Socio-Economic Empowerment of Rural Women through MGNREGA Employment- A Study in District Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

In India, rural women form a significant part of the rural workforce but still have to contend with socio-economic issues – lack of employable skills, low wages and economic dependency. The latest edition of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been designed to provide employment and encourage greater participation of women in rural development. This study aims to find out the major determinants of socio economic empowerment of rural women through MGNREGA employment in District Kupwara. From the primary data collected from 100 rural women a multivariate analysis is applied for different variable such as family income, financial independence, decision making power, social status, being bold and confident about herself, self-respect, capacity to fulfill household needs. The data were analysed by frequency and percentage. The results show that MGNREGA has been beneficial for the socio-economic condition of rural women in terms of additional income for their family, more financial independence and an increased ability to meet the household needs. MGNREGA has an important economic and social impact on rural women says the study

Keywords: MGNREGA, Rural Women, Socio-Economic Upliftment, Gender Empowerment, Wage Employment.

Introduction

Women from agricultural background contribute significantly to India's workforce while also playing an important role in household production and informal economy. Women also play a pivotal role but still suffer socio-economic disadvantages such as low employment and wages, economic dependency, and limited input in decision making (Khera & Nayak, 2009). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an Indian labour law that was enacted in 2005, which provides at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. It prioritizes women by making it a statutory requirement that one third of the beneficiaries must be women (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022). MGNREGA has the potential to improve women's economic position by enabling them to participate in paid employment and impact on their ability to earn money. According to Khera and Nayak (2009), access to local employment, minimum wages and comparatively safe working conditions were beneficial for women workers. Studies have shown that MGNREGA has helped provide livelihoods and job security to rural women. While Dreze and Khera (2009) viewed the role of MGNREGA in securing rural livelihoods, Khera and Nayak (2009) have argued about the possible linkages between MGNREGA and women's empowerment. Access to employment can also help women participate more actively in household and social decision making. MGNREGA schemes are in discussion between the various economic sectors even for such rural areas comparatively much and family employment such as District Kupwara, its depends on agriculture and seasonal work. Potentially limited employment avenues and existing dominant forms of patriarchal social organization may constrain women's engagement as workers. Thus, MGNREGA can be seen as an enabling mechanism for rural women to earn wage employment and earn direct contribution towards household income. Hence, a proper understanding of the actual pathways through which MGNREGA directly or indirectly leads to the socio-economic empowerment of women is essential in assessing the efficiency of implementation and better evaluations at grassroots level. This study concentrates on rural women of District Kupwara and results about their perception regarding contribution to family income, financial independence, decision – making power, social status, confidence & self-respect and house hold needs through MGNREGA employment.

Methodology

The current investigation applies descriptive research method to explore the determinants of socioeconomic empowerment among rural women through employment under MGNREGA in District Kupwara. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), descriptive research is used when researchers are interested in describing a population or phenomenon in a systematic way.

The study is a cross sectional analysis based on primary data collected from 100 rural women (N = 100) connected to or benefitting from MGNREGA employment in the area of study. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire, an established tool for gathering standardized information from respondents in social research (Bryman 2016). The questionnaire constructed by us had six broad domains of socio-economic upliftment that were increase in family income, financial independence, household decision making power, improved social status, confidence and self-respect and improvement in meeting basic needs at home. For each statement, respondents were requested to indicate the extent to which they agree using three categories – Agree, Neutral or disagree. This data were analyzed using frequency and percentage, appropriate descriptive statistics techniques for summarising categorical responses (Pallant, 2020).

Discussion and results

Despite the size of their talent pool, rural women are usually victims of social and economic disadvantage in India as they can access little or no formal employment and if so, were often paid much less than men to do the same job. While women especially in many rural areas have to depend on men for living and lack better access to various productive resources, they are often constrained in their development and empowerment. Hence, the employment generation schemes launched by the government have crucially contributed in improving socio economically rural women and enhancing gender equality. In 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), one of the largest employment programmes in rural India, was enacted. From my understanding, all you are going to do is you will give the rural household reasonably assured wage employment for at least 100 days in every financial year to every rural household that requires unskilled manual work. One of the main features of this programme is its focus on women, as the Act provides that at least one-third of the beneficiaries must be women. MGNREGA works on the principle of providing livelihood security as a wage employment and reduce poverty by promoting inclusive development in rural areas (Dreze & Khera, 2009). MGNREGA Participation of Rural women has the potential to enhance the socio-economic status of rural women through an increase in income, financial independence, decision-making power at home and improved social status in community. Along with providing economic benefits the programme also plays a role in psychological empowerment as women gain confidence and participate in community-activities (Khera & Nayak, 2009). Programmes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) are especially essential in areas such as Kupwara district, where rural communities primarily depend on agriculture and seasonal employment. Limited employment options and traditional family structures leave rural women in Kupwara very few avenues to earn money. Hence is the significance of understanding the determinants and challenges in uplifting rural women through MGNREGA employment for better insights into its efficacy and ability to suggest reforms at ground level Hence the present study specifically aims to analyse the dimensions of socio economic development of rural women through employment at MGNREGA in district Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir.

Table: Responses of Rural Women on Determinants for their Up-liftment via Employment under MGNREGA (N = 100)

S. No.	Statements	Agree f (%)	Neutral f (%)	Disagree f (%)
1	Employment under MGNREGA has enhanced the family income of rural women.	72 (72%)	18 (18%)	10 (10%)
2	Participation in MGNREGA has increased the financial independence of rural women.	68 (68%)	20 (20%)	12 (12%)
3	Decision-making power of rural women has increased while working under MGNREGA.	60 (60%)	25 (25%)	15 (15%)
4	The work done under MGNREGA has increased the social status of rural women in society.	55 (55%)	27 (27%)	18 (18%)
5	MGNREGA has not only assured rural women of livelihood security but also boosted their self-esteem and confidence.	63 (63%)	22 (22%)	15 (15%)
6	MGNREGA income helps rural women to fulfil household needs.	70 (70%)	19 (19%)	11 (11%)

Note: f = Frequency; % = Percentage.

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Explanation, Analysis and Discussion the table

The table shows the responses of rural women on factors related to their upliftment through employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The study investigates multiple facets of empowerment including income improvement, financial independence, decision-making power, social status, confidence and ability to meet household requirements from the perspective of 100 respondents. Analysis of results indicated that 72% respondents agreed to the fact that employment under MGNREGA increased family income, while 18% remained neutral and only 10% disagreed. This shows that the rational programme contributes a major share in giving economic security to rural households. Similarly, 70% respondents agreed that income earned through MGNREGA helps them meet household needs which hints that people viewed this as a direct input to their standard of living change related to their households. These insights corroborate with the earlier studies which highlight MGNREGA as a movement that has provided livelihood security and enhanced income avenues for rural women (Dreze & Khera, 2009). The table also indicates that out of the total 68 percent responded in affirmation and further supported with evidence stating their financial independence has improved owing to MGNREGA employment whereas 20 percent were neutral and 12 percent opposed. Because ladies can work and receive wages, financial independence is a necessary dimension of women's empowerment as it allows women to add to family expenditure and decreases their economic reliance on other members of the family. Prior research has shown that

access to wage employment through public work programmes can increase women's ownership of assets and economic empowerment (Khera & Nayak, 2009). Decision making power in the family is also an important aspect of women's empowerment, as women tend to be marginalised when it comes to decision-making in the household. It indicates that women's economic involvement through employment contributes to their bargaining power and authority in household decisions. The results corroborate the hypothesis that higher employment of women translates to more involvement of social and family decision making (Holmes, Jones & Vincenzo, 2010). Similarly, in the same table we can also see that 55% of respondents agreed on average level of improvement of their social status in the community due to MGNREGA employment and only 27% were neutral and about 18% disagreed. While the percentage is lower than all other indicators, it also shows that women could have a positive impact on their social and community standing. The moment women get into wage labour or public employment, they come into the limelight and earn respect in the village. In a similar manner, 63% of respondents said that participation in MGNREGA has boosted their confidence and self-esteem along with the work, 22% responders were neutral and only 15% disagreed. Not only does access to employment opportunities enhance economic conditions, but it also shows tangible results for psychological empowerment and self-confidence among rural women. In conclusion, the analysis done in the table clearly shows that MGNREGA helps them economically and socially. This program has contributed towards increasing income for women, greater financial independence, active participation in household decision making and improved confidence and social status amongst these women. These commandments underscore the need of employment guarantee programmes for women empowerment and overall rural development.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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