

Women's Work Participation and Income Generation of MGNREGA: Evidence from Manipur

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Abstract-

MGNREGA has been projected as one of public employment programme for securing rural livelihood in the country. Employment of women workers and its popularity has been expanding over the years. Special facilities like reservation of works for women, shade in the worksites, less hardship of works, convenient time and place of working, equal wages etc. are some of the reasons for its popularity among women workers. However, its contribution in income generation is far less than its potential as number of days of employment is very less. Its role in reducing rural poverty is disappointing as income impact is marginal. The programme fails to rectify and solve many weaknesses found in its effective and transparent implementation even after 20 years of its commencement. The programme in its present form will not be possible to fulfill its core objectives. There is a huge gap between people's aspiration and opportunities of the programme. Sincere efforts on the part of all stakeholders are very much imperative to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of assured and guaranteed wage employment.

Key words: livelihood security, employment, rural poverty, potential income.

I. INTRODUCTION

Manipuri women have been widely appreciated for their courage, hard-working and significant role in socio economic development of the state. Besides their household tasks, they have been contributing in all aspects of life ranging from sports, culture, social, political, economic to maintenance of law and order etc. Their responsibilities in supplementing family income and securing their livelihoods have also been increasing over the years due to lack of gainful employment opportunities among male counterparts. Unemployment rate in the state is one of the highest in the country due to many factors like geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, law and order problems, absence of industrial development, lack of government initiatives, social unrest etc. It brings many tribulations with far reaching ramifications in socio-economic fabrics of the state. The incident of unemployment is more serious among the women due to dying of many handlooms and handicrafts which once provided large employment in the state. In this economic situation of the state, Public Employment Programmes (PEPs) is the only hope to generate sufficient productive employment. As a component of broader employment and social protection policies, PEPs not only support private sector job creation but also address unemployment and underemployment challenges in poor states like Manipur.

The income earned boosts consumption of goods and services, benefiting communities and local businesses. PEPs focus on aiding society's most vulnerable segments by providing employment, income support, and skill development. Additionally, they contribute to the construction of infrastructure and services that foster social and economic progress, often through integrated, multi-sectoral strategies.

Public works and employment guarantee programmes contribute to reducing hunger and poverty through various channels. Firstly, they increase individual or household income, especially during specific periods of the year. Secondly, they provide assets or services, for example irrigation infrastructure or land restoration, which can increase local agricultural productivity and provide basic services. Thirdly, they strengthen the agency of individuals and communities by enabling them to prioritize and plan the work to be carried out. And fourthly, they can provide opportunities for skills development and gaining work experience thus improving future livelihoods and labour market prospects. Lastly, some public works programs provide remuneration in the form of food (food-for-work programs) and have a direct and measurable impact on hunger.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study aims :

1. To find out whether adequate employment and income are generated for women under MGNREGA.
2. To investigate whether rural poverty could be reduce or not.
3. To analyse the factors which make the programme more popular among women and the challenges associated with its implementation in the state.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Keerthi and Kamala (2016) in their study on “Socio Economic Empowerment of Women under MGNREGA- a Review” found that MGNREGA helped in empowering women through improvement in economic security, increasing their bargaining power, gender equity and fair opportunities to underprivileged rural people. It had enabled to broaden their choices and potentials. Incomes from MGNREGA not only facilitated in their children’s higher education, health, nutrition of families but also increase their self confidence and sustainable development.

Ravindar (2016) in his article “Empowerment of women through MGNREGS: A study in Warangal District of Telangana State” expressed that after working under MGNREGA dependence of women on male declined. Income of the participating women increases by 30 percent along with more transactions with banks. Women participation in family decision making was greater than before. All the workers wanted to increase number of days of employment under the programme. However, number of days of employment was not only very low but also works were not given on demand.

Arya and others (2017) in their paper “Study on Mahatma Gandhi national rural employment guarantee act (MGNREGA) and women empowerment with reference to Kerala” argued that NREGA was able to improved living conditions of the participating workers through increase in their income. But majority of the workers were not satisfied with wage rate and number of days of employment. Certain issues like wage discrimination, caste discrimination; gender discrimination still existed even though some of them were redressed.

In the paper (2018) “An Analytical Study of Awareness of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) Functionaries in Different Regions of Punjab, India” by Balwinder and Varinder revealed that MGNREGA have been implementing by village level functionaries. Although these functionaries had good knowledge of various provisions under MGNREGA, they could not implement the programme effectively due to excessive workloads. Judicious planning and capacity building were very much necessary for successful implementation of the programme.

Abhishek (2019) in his paper entitled “Government Intervention in Rural Labour Market and its Implications for Women: How MGNREGA Made Women Economically Well-Off” studied impacts of MGNREGA in providing employment opportunities and better wage. He found that the programme had been quite

successful in providing wage equality and gainful employment ensuring livelihood security and higher wages to the women in general, and that of marginalised sections in particular.

Appu and others (2020) in their paper “A Study on Socio Economic Impact of MGNREGA on Beneficiaries in Kalburgi District of Karnataka State” found that after the implementation of MGNREGA women could earn more income than before. Besides, migration was reduced considerably after its implementation.

Lokhande and Gundimeda (2021) in their study on “MGNREGA: The guaranteed refuge for returning migrants during COVID-19 lockdown in India” concluded that during lock down period of COVID – 19, MGNREGA works secured the incomes of millions of rural seasonal migrant workers (nearly 68.3 million) which otherwise they would have lost due to economic inactivity due to the lockdown. MGNREGA could support each one of them by giving at least 23 days of work during the crisis. However, MGNREGA need to go extra mile to solve many income problems faced by workers.

Ravichandran (2023) in his paper “A Comprehension analysis of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India” highlighted that MGNREGA could successfully provide livelihood security to rural poor. Nevertheless, the programme must evolve from a partially effective livelihood programme into a fully transparent, corruption free and efficient implementation to fulfill its objective of employment generation and inclusive growth in our rural economy.

Muthupandil and Selvi (2024) in their paper “Empowerment of women through MGNREGA in Virudhunagar district of Tamilnadu” showed that MGNREGA had significantly improved quality of life in rural areas. People in rural areas now have more jobs, income, savings, food security, and assets. The program had supported women's empowerment; however, it was not as high as the plan anticipated.

Pihu Porwal and others (2025) in their study on “Empowering Rural Women: An Assessment of MGNREGA’s Impact on Generating Employment and Independence for Women” revealed that MGNREGA had transformed rural women’s live by providing financial independence. The scheme strengthened rural sustainability by addressing rural poverty through 100 days employment to millions in spite of many challenges. It demonstrated how targeted government intervention within India's democratic framework can drive meaningful economic growth and social transformation.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is primarily based on both primary and secondary data. A random sampling method is applied to represent majority of the Gram Panchayats in Valley districts. Hill districts could not be covered due to prevailing law and order problems in the state Manipur. Mixtures of different methods of data collection like interview, questionnaire, scheduled methods etc. are used to collect primary data. Another well structured schedule is also applied to collect relevant information and views of the officials at the district, Zila Parishad and Gram Panchayat levels. The secondary data is mainly collected from official website of MGNREGA, elected representatives, government published sources at district and Gram Panchayat levels. The study is descriptive in nature. It compares the level of women employment generation during different financial year of 2022-23 to 25-26.

Data Analysis and Findings:

The involvement of women in MGNREGA is increasing over the years as seen from aggregate data of the state (Table No:1). Women’s participation rate in the state has been more than 50 percent throughout the period. Their participation has been continuously increasing since FY 2023-24 and could reach even more than 70 percent till the middle of FY 2026-27. However, average days of employment shows disappointing figure

seeing the objectives and needs of the programme in the rural areas. Number of total households completed 100 days of employment is still under a very pitiable condition. There is no significant improvement in this part during the last many years. All the women participants strongly demand 100 days of employment under the programme. They believe that if number of days of employment is increased their economic condition will be improved to a great extent as majority of them depends on this programme for their employment. Present situation hardly fulfill their financial requirements as it gives a very less income. Regarding payment after works, there is a good improvement. Percentage of payments within 15 days has been constantly larger than over the financial years even though it requires more improvements to be done to achieve 100 percent. Another important complaint raised by women workers is about huge gap between market wage and MGNREGA wage rates. They said that wage available under the programme is very less as compare to existing unskilled market wage rate in rural areas. The gap varies from 167 to 217 on average according differences in places and seasons. Majority of them are calling for reducing the gap as much as possible as their major source of income is mainly limited to this programme.

Another atypical vista found in the data analysis is that among the north eastern states, performance of MGNREGA in women participation is moderately good in Manipur. Meghalaya and Sikkim are doing well in most years. There have been fast improvements in women work participation in MGNREGA in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland states too. During the period of this analysis, all the north eastern states are below all India average of women work participation rate. Meghalaya is able to cross national average since FY 2024-25 while Manipur could reach national average in FY 2025-26. Others state are not able to reach national average till date in spite of women take major responsibility in social and economic life in our society.

Table No:1

Work Participation of Manipuri Women in MGNREGA

Progress	FY 2021-22	FY 2022-23	FY 2023-24	FY 2024-25	FY 2025-26	FY 2026-27
Women Persondays out of Total (%)	52.58	50.95	52.99	57.41	60.49	70.72
Average days of employment provided per Household	54.5	20.72	30.57	46.56	47.21	11.57
Average Wage rate per day per person(Rs.)	250.97	250.94	259.91	271.63	283.38	283.44
% payments generated within 15 days	1.43	16.57	14.89	30.48	52.79	95.74
Total No of HHs completed 100 Days of Wage Employment	1859	64	271	596	534	0

Source:www.nrega.ac.in

Table No: 2
Work Participation of Women in MGNREGA among North East States

Name of North East States	Women Persondays out of Total (%)					
	FY 2021-22	FY 2022-23	FY 2023-24	FY 2024-25	FY 2025-26	FY 2026-27
Arunachal Pradesh	44.73	45.9	47.82	48.95	49.42	49.79
Assam	47.57	47.55	50.6	54.44	55.09	58.71
Manipur	52.58	50.95	52.99	57.41	60.49	70.72
Meghalaya	50.61	51.55	57.43	62	63.81	74.04
Mizoram	47.75	48.04	49.08	47.75	48.79	50.87
Nagaland	38.15	42.92	44.77	48.31	49.18	48.68
Sikkim	52.65	54.54	55.42	55.14	55.22	64.99
Tripura	47.53	48.46	49.56	50.53	53.11	59.75
India	54.82	57.47	58.9	58.08	57.25	62.06

Source:www.nrega.ac.in

The gap between potential income and actual income of MGNREGA need to be reduced to the minimum extent possible. As of now the difference between the two is very enormous which indicates failure of the programme in many fronts. The programme was able to reached 54.50 percent of potential income only in the year 2021-22. In all the remaining years it is less than 50 percent of potential income. In the year 2022-23 and 2024-25 its actual income generation was only 20.72 percent and 46.56 percent of the potential income. It corroborates that there is only marginal impact on the income of the workers as reported by beneficiaries during surveys. With this meager income it will be difficult to bring significant decline in poverty in the rural areas. Poverty reduction requires large scale income upliftment of rural women workers. It will be possible only when rural poor workers are able to get up to the potential income of the programme.

Table No: 3
Potential and Actual Income Generated (in Rs) under MGNREGA

Financial Years	Average number of employment days per household	Average Wage Rate	Income Generated	Potential Income
2021-22	54.5	250.97	13,677.86	25,097
2022-23	20.72	250.94	5,199.47	25,094
2023-24	30.57	259.91	7,945.45	25,991
2024-25	46.56	271.63	12,647.10	27,163
2025-26	47.21	283.38	13,318.86	28,338
2026-27	11.57	283.44	3,279.40	28,344

Reasons for why MGNREGA is popular among women workers:

MGNREGA is very popular among women as various provisions of the Act ensure equitable and easy access to work for women in rural areas where employment opportunities are highly limited. It gives employment and

income earning opportunities to women who would have otherwise remained unemployed or underemployed. Some of the important reasons why the programme is very popular especially among women are

- 1) The programme reserved 33 percent of the total works for women. It increases employment opportunities for women.
- 2) 97 percent of the women said that they are given works nearby their residences which reduce many inconveniences involved in search of work. It also facilitates older and weak women in their participation.
- 3) Works under MGNREGA are not very hard nature. Besides women are working together with their local friends, elders and youngsters. It gives sense of pleasure along with ideas of cooperation and better understanding.
- 4) Under the programme male and female are given equal statutory minimum wages fixed by the Central government. It protects them from wage discrimination and gives sense of gender equality.
- 5) Working conditions under MGNREGA are very flexible and convenient. They can come for work after completing their household activities and can leave work before the end as per their requirements. It enables them to look after their families without any difficulties.
- 6) Pregnant women, lactating mothers and older women are given special consideration under the programme and provided effortless works with same wage rate.
- 7) Wages are directly paid to workers through their bank accounts which brings greater financial transparency.
- 8) Works are generally distributed among women according to their physical abilities.
- 9) Facilities such as medical aid, crèche, drinking water, resting place etc. in the work site are very convenient for women workers.
- 10) Differently able workers are given opportunities to earn income under MGNREGA without any exploitation and discrimination of wages.

Barriers to Women's participation in MGNREGA:

Despite popularity of the programme by women, it has many serious problems too which create major hindrances in their participation. Some of the major obstacles highlighted by women workers during field survey are as follows:

1. Many women reported that their husbands, brothers or parents sometimes do not want to send them outside their homes to do manual work because of the fear of losing social respect. When women work together with other male workers outside, it is often suspected them by local people for developing illicit relations. This fear of social criticism and stigma discourage women participation in MGNREGA.
2. Majority of MGNREGA workers are from very poor families who desperately needed regular income. They cannot wait long time for their wages. However, they said that in MGNREGA works, delays in wage payments are very common in most time which makes them reluctant to join MGNREGA.
3. 87 percent of the respondents do not know that the programme is a right based initiative and therefore they keep on waiting for works until and unless they are called for works by their respective Pradhans or members. This lack of awareness about the program also lead to women's low participation.
4. Average days of employment given under the programme have been very less over the years. The inefficiencies among the various implementing stakeholders cause low women participation.

5. 27 percent of the women respondents reports that certain types of works such as rural connectivity, earth works, renovation and making of canals etc. requires more physical works which generally preferred male workers to female thereby reducing their demand in such works.

Suggestions: Some of the important suggestions for the successful implementation and increasing women's participation may be discussed as follows:

1. Workers especially women should be given proper awareness regarding various provisions of MGNREGA through all suitable means. It will ensure rights and participation of the workers.
2. Regular and timely sanctioning of funds is very important to provide 100 days of employment and completion of payments within 15 days just after works.
3. MGNREGA wage rate should be fixed in such a way that it can attract the unskilled and semi skilled rural workers specially women.
4. Qualified, skilled and efficient staff should be employed at different administrative capacities and regular training should be given to them as per changing dynamics of the programme.
5. The scope of permissible works under the programme should be increased to gainfully accommodate physically challenged and destitute rural women.
6. Meaningful and efficient social audit is very important to ensure transparency and accountability.
7. Government should take up adequate measures to reduce exploitation of workers. It should provide more employment during lean seasons and adequate care should be given to accommodate maximum number of available unemployed workers.

CONCLUSION: MGNREGA is considered as one of the most innovative response to the never ending problem of rural poverty and unemployment in the country. Majority believes that creation of durable community, social and economic assets under the programme will be able to provide sustainable livelihood security to the rural poor. It will enhance women work participation and their empowerment through gainful employment under the programme. However, the programme fails to bring impressive achievements in rural employment, poverty reduction and women empowerment till date. It is found that various innovative and corrective measures under the programme fail to provide mandatory 100 days works. The programme has become a short-term and lopsided arrangement for few days' employment contrary to its basic objectives. The nexus between politicians and officials makes the programme a complete failure which has serious repercussions in the overall economic development of the state. As pointed out by many respondents and stakeholders, corruption, other malpractices and inefficiencies are the main cause of ineffective implementation of the welfare scheme in the state. All the stake holders need to redesign, reform and formulate the programme to bring more transparency, accountability and efficiency in its operation. They should find ways and means to provide mandatory 100 days gainful employment to all the rural poor workers in the years to come. The gap between peoples' aspiration and opportunities need to be abolished. If these weaknesses of MGNREGA are able to remove at the earliest possible, every rational person will agree that the programme has huge potential to bring meaningful progress in women employment generation, reduction of rural poverty, empowerment and inclusive economic growth along with livelihood security in the state.

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