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Women's Empowerment through MGNREGA: A Study of Gorakhpur District, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is mainly recognized as a fundamental requirement for inclusive and sustainable rural development. In India, rural women continue to face multiple socio-economic challenges such as limited access to paid employment, unequal pay, financial reliance, restricted mobility, and inadequate participation in decision-making processes. The study argues that although MGNREGA has played a significant role in improving women's livelihoods in Gorakhpur district, its transformative potential can be further enhanced through timely wage payments, better institutional support, greater convergence with self-help groups (SHGs), skill development initiatives, and stronger local governance.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, MGNREGA, Rural Development, Gorakhpur, Employment Guarantee, Gender Equality, Financial Inclusion.

Introduction

Women's empowerment has become one of the objectives of development policy across the world. The concept extends beyond economic independence to include social dignity, political participation, educational advancement, health security, and decision-making authority within households and communities. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), recognize women's empowerment as essential for achieving sustainable development. Despite significant progress in education and health, rural women in India continue to experience structural inequalities. Their labour is often concentrated in unpaid household work or informal agricultural employment characterized by low wages, seasonal unemployment, and limited social protection. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), female labour force participation in rural India has improved in recent years but remains constrained by unequal opportunities, unpaid care responsibilities, and gender discrimination. Public employment programmes have therefore become important instruments for enhancing women's economic participation.

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The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, represents one of India's most ambitious social protection programmes. The Act legally guarantees up to 100 days of wage employment annually to every rural household willing to undertake unskilled manual work. Unlike earlier employment schemes, MGNREGA adopts a rights-based approach by making employment a legal entitlement rather than a discretionary welfare benefit. It also mandates equal wages for men and women and encourages women's participation by requiring that at least one-third of workers be women, although nationally women have often exceeded this threshold.

The significance of MGNREGA extends beyond employment generation. It creates durable rural assets such as ponds, irrigation canals, roads, plantation sites, water conservation structures, and flood control measures while simultaneously providing income security during periods of agricultural distress. The programme has become particularly important in states such as Uttar Pradesh, where a substantial proportion of the rural population depends on seasonal agricultural employment.

Review of Literature

1. **Dreze and Khera (2009)** were among the earliest scholars to document the transformative impact of MGNREGA. Their field studies across several Indian states demonstrated that women participated enthusiastically in MGNREGA because of equal wages, local employment opportunities, and greater safety compared to private labour markets. They argued that the programme enhanced women's autonomy and increased their contribution to household income. The authors also observed that women's participation was particularly high in states where local governance institutions were strong.

2. **Khera and Nayak (2009)** examined women's experiences under MGNREGA and found that paid employment significantly increased women's confidence and bargaining power within households. Women reported greater involvement in decisions related to food expenditure, children's education, healthcare, and savings. The study emphasized that the programme's legal guarantee reduced dependence on exploitative employers and provided women with a stronger sense of economic security.

3. **The National Council of Applied Economic Research (2015)**, evaluated MGNREGA across several states and concluded that the programme generated positive outcomes for women through increased employment, improved food security, and enhanced financial inclusion. The study also found that women's participation varied significantly across states due to differences in administrative capacity and socio-cultural norms.

4. **Institute for Human Development (IHD, 2012)** conducted an evaluation of MGNREGA implementation in selected districts of Uttar Pradesh. The study found that the programme successfully generated rural employment but highlighted persistent implementation challenges such as delayed wage payments, insufficient awareness among workers, and limited availability of work. Women appreciated the opportunity to earn independent incomes close to home but demanded greater transparency and regular employment.

5. **Dutta et al. (2014)** Dutta and colleagues examined MGNREGA's effect on rural labour markets and concluded that the programme increased rural wage rates while reducing distress migration. Women benefited disproportionately because MGNREGA established equal wages irrespective of gender, unlike many private labour markets where women received lower wages.

6. **Afridi, Mukhopadhyay and Sahoo (2016)** had analysed female labour force participation in relation to public employment programmes. Their findings indicated that guaranteed employment schemes encouraged women to enter paid work, particularly in regions where private employment opportunities were limited. Participation in MGNREGA also increased women's financial independence and reduced economic vulnerability.

7. **Gupta, Kumar and Kumar (2017)** has examined the socio-economic impact of MGNREGA on rural households and reported improvements in income stability, education expenditure, nutrition, and women's participation in household decision-making. The authors argued that regular wage employment improved women's self-esteem and social recognition.

8. **Mihir Shah Committee (2012)** find the basic differentiating features of MGNREGAs from employment schemes is that the allocation of work based upon demand driven work by wage earners and provided as their legal right. While, earlier employment generation programmes decided to provide work not when people demanded work like, MGNREGA. Previous practices of job kamkhulega tub kammilega, need to be changed to generating awareness among potential wage earners. However, set up a system that facilitates record registration for work issuance of Job cards and applications for work.

Research Gap

The literature demonstrates that MGNREGA has positively influenced women's employment and income across India. However, three important gaps remain:

1. Most studies analyse MGNREGA at the national or state level rather than at the district level.

2. Limited research specifically examines the socio-economic impact of MGNREGA on women’s in Gorakhpur district.

3. Fewer studies integrate employment, financial inclusion, decision-making, and social empowerment into a comprehensive district-level analysis.

The present study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on women's empowerment through MGNREGA in Gorakhpur district.

Need for the Study

Although numerous studies have examined the national impact of MGNREGA, relatively fewer studies focus specifically on eastern Uttar Pradesh or Gorakhpur district. Regional

studies are important because socio-economic conditions, implementation capacity, labour demand, and women's participation vary considerably across districts.

A district-level assessment helps identify local strengths and weaknesses in programme implementation and provides evidence for improving policy effectiveness. This study therefore attempts to analyse how MGNREGA has contributed to women's empowerment in Gorakhpur district while identifying challenges that continue to limit its impact.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the role of MGNREGA in promoting women's economic empowerment in Gorakhpur district.
2. To study the women's participation under MGNREGA in Gorakhpur.
3. Identify challenges faced by women workers under MGNREGA.
4. Suggest policy measures for improving women's participation and empowerment.

Research Methodology:

Research Methodology is important while performing research. It is essential to the research process since it does more than just help formulate the research question. It also instructs him on how to answer questions concerning a certain research problem. Below are the specifics of some general research approach domains. This study is a descriptive and analytical in nature and based on secondary data. Secondary data was collected from a range of publications, research papers, reports, journals, newspapers and websites as part of the study's research approach.

In order to thoroughly evaluate the effects of MGNREGA on rural employment and livelihoods in Uttar Pradesh, this study uses a mixed-methods research methodology that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The plans results can be better understood thanks to the mixed-method approach, which combines statistical analysis with beneficiaries' personal stories and experiences.

MGNREGA and Women's Empowerment

The relationship between employment and empowerment has been always a topic of discussion. Paid employment increases women's control over income, enhances bargaining power within households, improves access to financial institutions, and increases participation in community organizations. MGNREGA contributes to these dimensions through several institutional mechanisms:

- Equal wages irrespective of gender.
- Employment near workers' residences.
- Direct transfer of wages into bank or post office accounts.
- Transparency through social audits.

- Participation in Gram Sabha planning.
- Legal entitlement to employment.

These features distinguish MGNREGA from traditional labour markets, where women often face wage discrimination and insecure employment.

Women in Rural Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state and has one of the largest rural populations. Women in rural Uttar Pradesh continue to face multiple challenges, including low literacy, restricted mobility, unequal ownership of productive assets, limited participation in formal employment, and patriarchal social norms. Although various government programmes have attempted to improve women's socio-economic status, employment opportunities remain inadequate.

In districts such as Gorakhpur, agriculture remains the primary occupation, but employment is highly seasonal. Floods, land fragmentation, and declining agricultural profitability often reduce employment opportunities. Consequently, MGNREGA has become an important supplementary source of income for rural households.

Profile of Gorakhpur District

Gorakhpur district is located in the eastern region of Uttar Pradesh and forms part of the Purvanchal region. The district has a predominantly rural population with agriculture serving as the principal source of livelihood. Major crops include paddy, wheat, sugarcane, pulses, and vegetables. However, dependency on monsoon rainfall, frequent flooding, and fragmented landholdings create seasonal unemployment among agricultural labourers. Women need MGNREGA because it provides them with opportunities for paid employment and a source of income, particularly in rural areas where regular employment opportunities may be limited. By taking part in MGNREGA, women can increase their economic independence, contribute to household income, satisfy basic requirements, and boost their decision-making power within the family. Additionally, it gives women the chance to obtain professional experience and work near their homes, which can be crucial in situations when their mobility and caring obligations prevent them from pursuing other careers. Additionally, women's involvement in MGNREGA can lead to financial stability, increased economic empowerment, and poverty reduction, making the program a crucial source of livelihood support for rural women.

Women in Gorakhpur are actively engaged in agricultural operations, livestock management, household enterprises, and unpaid domestic work. Despite their significant contribution to household economies, their participation in formal wage employment has historically remained limited. MGNREGA has created opportunities for women to earn independent incomes while participating in public works undertaken within their villages.

Status of Women's Workers under MGNREGA in Gorakhpur

Year	Registered Workers			Active Workers			% of Active Women Workers and Registered Women Workers
	Total Workers	Women Workers	%	Total Workers	Women Workers	%	
2019-20	458331	211618	46.17%	178827	89333	49.95%	42.21%
2020-21	455226	210293	46.19%	178635	89247	49.96%	42.44%
2021-22	455226	210293	46.19%	178635	89247	49.96%	42.44%
2022-23	455226	210293	46.19%	178635	89247	49.96%	42.44%
2023-24	451664	209111	46.29%	178634	89247	49.96%	42.68%
2024-25	450735	208721	46.31%	178633	89246	49.96%	42.76%
2025-26	450735	208721	46.31%	178633	89246	49.96%	42.76%

Source: www.mgnrea.in

The data covering the period from 2019–20 to 2025–26 provide insights into the trends in women's participation under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The number of registered workers declined from 458,331 in 2019–20 to 450,735 in 2024–25, indicating a decrease of approximately 1.66%. During the same period, the number of active workers remained relatively stable, declining marginally from 178,827 to 178,633. This pattern indicates that the recorded workforce experienced limited numerical variation during the period under consideration.

Women's participation presents a particularly important dimension of the analysis. The proportion of women among registered workers increased slightly from 46.17% in 2019–20 to 46.31% in 2024–25. Similarly, women accounted for approximately 49.95–49.96% of active workers throughout the period. These figures demonstrate that women constituted nearly half of the active workforce, highlighting their substantial representation in MGNREGA's rural employment structure.

In absolute terms, however, the number of active women workers decreased marginally from 89,333 to 89,246. Therefore, the increase in women's percentage share should not be interpreted as evidence of a substantial increase in the number of women participating in the programme.

Rather, the figures suggest that women's representation remained stable despite a slight decline in their absolute numbers.

Furthermore, the proportion of registered women who were active increased from 42.21% to 42.76%. Although this represents a modest improvement, the data indicate that a considerable proportion of registered women were not counted as active workers. This distinction highlights the need to examine the factors influencing the transition from registration to actual participation in employment activities. In particular, further investigation into employment demand, work allocation, person-days generated, wage payments, and the availability of work within reasonable distances would help assess the extent to which MGNREGA provides meaningful employment opportunities to rural women.

Overall, the data suggest that women's participation in MGNREGA remained significant and relatively stable during the period examined. Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that high representation among active workers should not be equated with universal access to employment, increased earnings, or women's empowerment. A comprehensive assessment of the programme's contribution to women's economic empowerment would require additional indicators relating to employment duration, income, control over earnings, decision-making, and working conditions.

Forms of Women Empowerment through MGNREGA

1. **Economic Empowerment:** MGNREGA provides guaranteed wage employment for up to 100 days per household annually. In Gorakhpur, Women receive equal wages as men. Income helps reduce dependence on informal credit and moneylenders. Earnings are used for food security, children's education, and healthcare. Seasonal unemployment is partially reduced. Thus, MGNREGA acts as a supplementary income source for rural women.

2. **Financial Empowerment**: One of the most important impacts is financial inclusion: Wages are directly transferred into bank or post office accounts. Women gain experience in operating bank accounts. Savings behaviour improves in many households. Financial decision-making shifts partially towards women. This enhances women's control over economic resources.

3. **Social Empowerment:** Participation in MGNREGA has improved women's social position: Increased mobility outside the household. Greater participation in Gram Sabha meetings. Enhanced confidence in interacting with officials. Reduction in social isolation in rural areas. Women working together at worksites also strengthens solidarity and collective awareness.

4. **Decision-Making:** Studies indicate that women earning through MGNREGA in Uttar Pradesh are more likely to participate in household decisions regarding: Daily household expenditure, Children’s education, Health-related decisions, Small savings and investments. This shift reflects improved intra-household bargaining power.

Challenges Faced by Women Workers in Gorakhpur

Despite positive outcomes, several challenges limit the effectiveness of MGNREGA:

1. **Irregular Employment:** Many women do not receive the full 100 days of employment. Their work availability depends on local administration.
2. **Delay in Wage Payments:** Payment delays reduce trust in the scheme. Financial stress increases among poor households.
3. **Lack of Worksite Facilities**: Mothers with young children are impacted by the lack of childcare facilities and some locations lack shade and drinking water.
4. **Social Constraints**: Patriarchal norms restrict women's participation in some villages. The concept of mobility constraints still exists in conservative households.
5. **Awareness**: MGNREGA rights and privileges are not well understood due to low knowledge of the procedures for resolving grievances.

Findings of the Study

Based on the analysis of secondary data and the examination of women's participation under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Gorakhpur district during the period 2019–20 to 2025–26, the following findings emerge:

1. Substantial Representation of Women: The study reveals that women constitute a significant proportion of the workforce under MGNREGA in Gorakhpur district. Their share among registered workers increased marginally from 46.17% in 2019–20 to 46.31% in 2024–25, indicating their consistent representation in the programme.

2. Nearly Equal Participation in the Active Workforce: Women accounted for approximately 49.95–49.96% of active workers throughout the study period. This indicates that women's representation among active workers was almost equal to that of men, demonstrating the importance of MGNREGA as a source of rural employment for women.

3. Marginal Decline in the Absolute Number of Women Workers: Although the percentage share of women increased slightly, the absolute number of active women workers declined from 89,333 in 2019–20 to 89,246 in 2024–25. This suggests that women's participation remained largely stable rather than experiencing substantial numerical growth.

4. Improvement in the Active Participation Rate: The proportion of registered women workers who were active increased from 42.21% in 2019–20 to 42.76% in 2024–25. Although the improvement was relatively small, it indicates a gradual increase in the proportion of registered women participating in the programme.

5. Contribution to Economic Empowerment: MGNREGA provides rural women with opportunities to earn independent wages and contribute to household income. This additional income helps women meet essential household requirements, including food, healthcare, children's education, and other daily expenses. It also reduces their dependence on irregular agricultural employment and informal sources of income.

6. Promotion of Financial Inclusion: The provision of wage payments through bank and post office accounts has strengthened women's connection with formal financial institutions. It provides opportunities to develop saving habits, operate bank accounts, and participate more actively in household financial decisions. However, account ownership alone does not establish complete financial autonomy or control over earnings.

7. Improvement in Social Empowerment: Participation in MGNREGA provides women with opportunities to work outside their homes, interact with other workers, and engage with local administrative institutions. Such participation can contribute to greater confidence, social interaction, mobility, and awareness of their rights.

8. Strengthening Household Decision-Making: Women's contribution to household income has the potential to improve their bargaining position within families. Their earnings may increase their involvement in decisions concerning household expenditure, children's education, healthcare, savings, and other family matters.

9. MGNREGA as a Source of Livelihood Security: The programme provides an important supplementary source of employment in Gorakhpur, where agriculture remains a major occupation and employment opportunities are often seasonal. It is particularly relevant for women belonging to economically weaker rural households.

10. Existence of an Implementation Gap: Despite substantial female representation among active workers, the proportion of registered women who were active remained below 43%. This indicates that registration does not necessarily translate into actual employment. Effective implementation, availability of work, and timely employment allocation remain important concerns.

11. Persistent Challenges Faced by Women: Delayed wage payments, inadequate worksite facilities, insufficient employment opportunities, lack of awareness, childcare responsibilities, and social restrictions continue to affect women's effective participation. These challenges limit the programme's potential to achieve comprehensive empowerment.

Overall, the findings indicate that MGNREGA has emerged as an important instrument for promoting women's participation in rural employment in Gorakhpur district. However, its contribution to comprehensive empowerment depends not only on women's numerical participation but also on the quality, continuity, accessibility, and economic benefits of employment.

Suggestions

To enhance women’s empowerment through MGNREGA in Gorakhpur district, the following measures are suggested:

1. Ensure timely payment of wages through improved digital systems. Increase awareness campaigns about rights under MGNREGA.
2. Provide guaranteed 100 days of employment based on demand. Improve worksite facilities such as crèches, drinking water, and shade.

3. Encourage greater participation of women as worksite supervisors (mates). Strengthen grievance redressal mechanisms at Gram Panchayat level.

Conclusion

The present study, entitled "Women's Empowerment through MGNREGA in Gorakhpur District", examines the role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in improving the socio-economic position of rural women. Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept that encompasses economic independence, financial inclusion, social participation, mobility, dignity, and decision-making authority. In this context, MGNREGA represents an important policy intervention aimed at strengthening women's economic position through guaranteed wage employment and equal remuneration.

The study reveals that MGNREGA has provided rural women in Gorakhpur district with an important opportunity to participate in paid employment. The analysis of data from 2019–20 to 2025–26 indicates that women constitute nearly half of the active workforce under the programme. Their share among active workers remained approximately 49.95–49.96% during the period under consideration. This demonstrates that women have become an important component of the rural employment structure under MGNREGA. However, the marginal decline in the absolute number of active women workers indicates that their participation has remained relatively stable rather than showing substantial expansion.

The programme has contributed to women's economic empowerment by providing opportunities to earn independent wages, supplement household income, and reduce dependence on traditional sources of employment. The principle of equal wages for men and women is particularly significant in rural areas, where women have historically faced wage discrimination in agricultural and informal labour markets. By providing employment opportunities within or near their villages, MGNREGA also reduces certain mobility-related barriers and enables women to participate in economic activities alongside their domestic responsibilities.

Another important contribution of the programme is the promotion of financial inclusion. Wage payments through bank and post office accounts provide women with opportunities to access formal financial services and develop financial awareness. Their participation in paid employment can also strengthen their involvement in household expenditure and financial decisions. Furthermore, working collectively at MGNREGA worksites creates opportunities for social interaction, increases awareness of employment rights, and may strengthen women's confidence and social recognition within rural communities.

The study also highlights the importance of MGNREGA in the context of Gorakhpur district, where agriculture remains a major source of livelihood and employment opportunities are often seasonal. For women belonging to economically weaker households, the programme acts as a supplementary source of income and provides a degree of livelihood security during periods of limited agricultural employment. Thus, MGNREGA has significance not only as an employment generation programme but also as an instrument of rural social protection and gender-inclusive development.

Despite these positive contributions, the study identifies several limitations that restrict the programme's transformative potential. The availability of employment does not always correspond to the actual demand of workers. Delayed wage payments, inadequate worksite facilities, insufficient awareness regarding employment entitlements, administrative difficulties, and social restrictions continue to affect women's participation. In particular, the difference between the number of registered women workers and the number of active women workers indicates that registration alone cannot ensure meaningful access to employment. Similarly, high female participation does not necessarily establish that women receive adequate workdays, control their earnings, or enjoy greater decision-making authority.

Therefore, the effectiveness of MGNREGA should be assessed not merely through the number or percentage of women registered and employed but also through the quality of employment, regularity of wage payments, actual income received, and improvements in women's socio-economic status. Greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening institutional support, ensuring timely wage payments, providing childcare facilities and other essential worksite amenities, improving awareness of workers' rights, and encouraging women's participation in local planning and monitoring institutions. Convergence between MGNREGA, Self-Help Groups, financial institutions, and skill development programmes can further expand the opportunities available to rural women.

MGNREGA has emerged as an important instrument for promoting women's economic participation and supporting gender-inclusive rural development in Gorakhpur district. The programme has created opportunities for women to become wage earners, contribute to household livelihoods, access formal financial institutions, and participate more actively in community life. Nevertheless, employment participation should be viewed as an important step towards empowerment rather than its final achievement. The real success of MGNREGA lies not simply in providing employment to rural women but in enabling them to exercise greater economic independence, financial control, social dignity, and decision-making power. Strengthening the implementation of the programme and addressing the existing institutional and socio-economic barriers can make MGNREGA a more effective instrument for achieving sustainable women's empowerment in Gorakhpur district and the wider region of Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

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