MGNREGS and Women Empowerment in Tamil Nadu: Prospects and Challenges amidst the existing Socio-Cultural Reality

Abstract: The introduction of MGNREGS is one of the powerful initiatives ever undertaken for the transformation of rural lives in India. It is a gender-sensitive programme besides its primary goals. There is overwhelming participation of women in MGNREGS in Tamil Nadu. Though MGNREGA has made a significant contribution in improving the wellbeing of women, the question remains whether the employment scheme has empowered the women or engulfed the women into yet another invisible oppressive cultural setting. The paper presents the results of the empirical work conducted in four panchayats from two blocks in Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu. It is a descriptive study using a mixed-method. Simple random sampling is used to select the samples for the study. To address the emerging question, the paper tries to analyse the extent of the higher participation of women in the scheme that has been perceived as empowering the women amidst the existing oppressive socio-cultural structure, which remains intact in the rural society.

Keywords: MGNREGS, Transformation, Participation, Women Empowerment, Social Structure.

INTRODUCTION

Employment, Empowerment and Emancipation are the buzz words that deal with the issues of development be it at the macro level or micro level. Moreover, in countries like India, the micro-level development of the most deprived, disadvantaged, and marginalized sections of the society especially the women are the prerequisites for the macro-level development of the society. Although women comprise nearly half of the population, their status is not at par with the men in Indian society. The status of women is undermined historically either by the customs or by the law in their personal, social and political life (Varghese, 2012). Women had inferior ascribed status in traditional India. They were seen only as a member of the family or a group but not as individuals with identity, aspiration and right of their own (Ghosh, 1996). They are being deprived, discriminated and subjugated in all spheres. In fact, “the subordination of women in society is an extension of their subordination in the family” (Varghese, 2012). They are under the control of their parents before marriage and husband/sons after marriage. Therefore, it has been envisaged that the development of women is imperative for the development of the nation. Perhaps, the eleventh five-year plan goes beyond empowerment and considered women as agents of sustained socio-economic growth and change. Moreover, the twelfth five-year plan emphasized that women and children should be given special attention as they constitute about 79 per cent of the population. Perhaps emphasized women participation in all the development process (Mittal, 2015) wherein the work participation of women occupies a pertinent place.

The workforce participation rate of women not only reflects the economic status or empowerment in society but also significant in reducing poverty and enhancing the social status of women. In India, although women constitute almost half of the population, their work participation is less than one third (this is in terms of economic activity outside the family). Perhaps, their work contribution is under enumerated and undervalued (Mittal, 2015). This describes the domination of the socio-cultural and structural aspects (chaunvistic and economic deterministic aspect) of the society. Though economic growth is viewed as a pivotal mechanism for reducing poverty, the role of social and cultural institutions play a crucial role in determining everything including empowerment and development of women (Kelkar, 2009).

Statement of the problem

It has been perceived that the empowerment of women is crucial for the development of the community as a whole. Because, women have been marginalized and discriminated against in access to education, work, economic assets, participation in the governments etc. despite the planned development for the last 7 decades (Mittal, 2015).
Women are the vital, p.51). In a country like India where labour is the only economic asset for millions of people, gainful employment is a prerequisite for the fulfilment of other basic rights such as the right to life, the right to food, and the right to education etc. Moreover, one of the empowerment strategies is to assist the marginalized people with employment opportunity and work participation which would in turn enable them to empower themselves (Jandu, 2008). In the context of developing nations, public actions play a pivotal role in providing food security, reducing poverty and gender disparity, promoting equality, liberty and fraternity (Khera & Nayak, 2009a). The introduction of MGNREGS ranks among the most powerful initiatives ever undertaken for the transformation of rural livelihoods in India. It is a legally guaranteed employment programme. MGNREGS is a gender-sensitive programme besides its primary aims of ending food insecurity, creating productive assets in rural areas and empowering the rural communities on the whole (GoI, 2014). Perhaps, the various provisions of the scheme such as equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, the equal wage for both men and women, one-third reservation for women and representation of women on decision-making bodies did play a pivotal role for the higher participation of women in the scheme (GoI, 2014; Khera & Nayak, 2009; Shah, 2012; (GoI & MoRD, 2008). Moreover, MGNREGS came in as a safety-net when employment opportunities were scarce and seasonal for women in the rural areas which eventually pushed them to the more vulnerable position. Hence, overwhelming participation of women has been observed in MGNREGS throughout the nation.

The southern states namely Tamil Nadu and Kerala witnessed higher participation of women from the inception of the scheme wherein Tamil Nadu topped over Kerala in the first two years (2006-07 & 2007-08) with more than 82 per cent and thereafter Kerala topped with above 90 per cent and Tamil Nadu securing the second position with an average of 86 per cent (Jandu, 2008). MGNREGS had opened up new employment opportunities for the women (Khera & Nayak, 2009a) which is even available in the village itself (Narayanan, 2008) as agricultural works are only intermittently available. Furthermore, it lessens the worries of women who would otherwise have to hunt for jobs from place to place. More than half of the women had said in a study conducted in north India “had they not worked on the NREGA worksites, they would have worked at home or would have remained unemployed” (Khera & Nayak, 2009, p.51). MGNREGS primarily aimed to alleviate rural poverty and distress through employment (Chavda & Bhatt, 2018). While the main focus of MGNREGS is to generate employment opportunities rather than a quality of assets although it was one of the aims (Kelkar, 2009), the provisions of the scheme can enhance the socio-economic development especially of women in rural areas.

Although many studies have exhibited that MGNREGA has made a significant contribution in improving the wellbeing of women (Carswell & Neve, 2013; Jeyaranjan, 2011; Khera & Nayak, 2009b; Shah, 2012; Xavier & Mari, 2014), the status of women in India is determined by their role in decision making in the family and the community, their educational status, their participation in social, political and economic activities etc. (Michael, 2011). Moreover, the socio-cultural structure of the society is such that the mere earning would hardly challenge the existing hegemonic culture. Therefore, the question is, what is it that women find useful and empowering from MGNREGS? how far employment in MGNREGS has empowered women? Has it empowered women or engulfed the women into yet another invisible reality by its socio-cultural structure? This paper tries to find empirical evidence for the aforesaid questions and analyse how far the higher participation of women leads to gender development and empowerment without doing away with the persistent oppressive socio-cultural structure in rural Tamil Nadu.

**Objectives**

- To unearth the significance of the scheme in the life of the women in Tamil Nadu.
- To examine the impact of employment under MGNREGS in empowering the economic lives of the women in Tamil Nadu.
- To analyse the degree of social development of the women through the scheme.
- To unpack the unchallenged socio-cultural structure that deprives women of empowerment.

**Research Methodology**

The scheme was first implemented in 200 most backward districts in India under phase-I and six among them were from Tamil Nadu. As Tamil Nadu along with Kerala tops on the higher participation of women in MGNREGS, the study was conducted in Villupuram, one among the six districts from Tamil Nadu where there is higher participation of women. Four panchayats from two blocks in the district were chosen for the empirical study. It is a descriptive study using the mixed method to describe the impact of MGNREGS on gender development and empowerment. Simple random sampling is used to select the samples for the study. The sample size for the study was 200 households across four panchayats in proportion to their population. The study used both primary data collected directly from the field (Household survey, Focus Group Discussions and case studies) and secondary data from the sources like MGNREGS website, articles, journals etc to study the stated objectives.
MGNREGS- An Employment Scheme for Women Empowerment

The government has been making strenuous efforts in implementing several rural welfare and development programmes in this context of widespread social-economic inequality. Moreover, they are implemented in raising the socio-economic growth of rural area especially women who are socially, economically weaker besides eradicating famine. MGNREGA was initiated as a unique wage employment intervention not only to address the issues of rural distress but also women empowerment (GoI & MoRD, 2008). The Act was enacted by legislation on August 25, 2005, and became effective from February 2006 in 200 most backward districts and was later expanded to all rural districts in the country by March 2008. The scheme provides 100 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household in a financial year at the statutory minimum wage. MGNREGA is the first tangible commitment of the government and a right to the poor wherein they could earn their living with dignity (Mathur, 2007). It is a decentralized and bottom-up approach that envisage active participation of the common masses in the decision making, implementation and monitoring of the programme. It provides livelihood security and reduces distress migration. Moreover, it is an inclusive programme that can play a pivotal role in generating employment for rural women at fair wages which would economically empower the women, create self-esteem and greater independence (Jandu, 2008). MGNREGA is a gender-sensitive scheme and provides equal wage for both men and women and one-third priority to women as the beneficiaries of the scheme to strengthen their dignity in society. It also provides some more explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation such as crèche at the worksite, first aid etc. (GoI & MoRD, 2008).

Employment Generation and Women Participation

One of the major causes of poverty among the poor is the lack of employment opportunities (Antonopoulos, 2007). MGNREGS is an alternate employment opportunity in the rural area especially during the off-season which controls out-migration (Gikshit & Sharma, 2018; Sharma, 2014 in Chavda & Bhatt, 2018). Shah (2012) in Sameeksha-I, the first national-level anthropological study reported that more than 200 crore man-days of employment were generated an average in a year wherein at least 5 crores rural households benefit from it. Priya (2008) asserted from her study that by 2008, MGNREGS could generate more than 60 core man-days to women (in Kelkar, 2009). Moreover, it was not only overwhelming participation of women exceeding the statutory minimum requirement of 33 per cent was observed but also the quantum of person-days shared by women which were close to 50 per cent at the national level. It varies across states wherein Kerala and Tamil Nadu have displayed the largest share of person-days to women (Shah, 2012). Tamil Nadu is one among three States in India to exceed the projected man-days target. It was able to generate 38.99 crore person days as against the target of 38.91 crore person days during 2012-13 and 33 crore person days as against the target of 30.02 crore during 2011-12. It is said to generate an average of 1.25crore person days of employment per district in a financial year (Michael, 2016).

While the share of person-days for women remain around 50 per cent at the national level, Tamil Nadu displays a great share of women (above 80 per cent), of the total man-days generated under the scheme. The district under the study also shows proximity to the state. As Sharma (1997) observed, differentials in work participation affect other aspects of women’s status, welfare and the quality of their life. Moreover, work is the prime mover of women’s status and productive labour by women over some time can bridge status-hiatus between men and women (Michael, 2011).

Participation of Women in MGNREGS

Work participation for sure whether brings economic/political development or not but it will certainly reduce the dependency and marginality of women (Ayekepam, 2016). Though India has implemented at least 17 types of major works programmes between 1970-2005, hardly one-fourth participation of women was observed (Mahapatra, 2006). Similarly, although women constituted only 28.7 per cent of the nation’s workforce (NSS, 2004-05), the official MGNREGS web data indicates impressive participation of women in the scheme. This was also true in the case of Rajasthan wherein the work participation rate of women was 33 per cent but their participation rate in MGNREGS was 70 per cent (Sudarshan, 2010) e.g. women participation rate was about 40 per cent in 2006-07 and 44 per cent in 2007-08 without many hikes at the beginning at the national level but it did exhibit a constant increase in the following years up to 56 per cent (Mahapatra, 2006). However, there were great variations observed across the states. The data indicates impressive participation of women more than 33 per cent in 15 states wherein Tamil Nadu topped with 82 per cent and Kerala and Rajasthan with 71 and 69 per cent respectively during 2008-09 (Jandu, 2008). It was empirically captured that the participation of women in MGNREGS was 85 per cent in Palakkad district (Narayananan, 2008), while their work participation rate was only 21 per cent and 15 per cent at the district and state level in Kerala (Census, 2001). Because, implementation of MGNREGS was entrusted to the Kudumbashree in Kerala and it did play a role of an agency and mobilized lots of women towards MGNREGS and the women also felt free to join.

In the case of Tamil Nadu, Study in Sivagangai district revealed that about 86 per cent of women participation at the district level as that of the state (2013-14), 93 per cent of women participation was observed in one of the panchayats namely Kalakkannpooi and increased the household income (Xavier & Mari, 2012).

2014). Lakshman (2007) reiterated the same from her study in Villupuram district that more than 82 per cent of the women have found employment in MGNREGS and earned Rs.80 per day as opposed to the largely arbitrary and discriminatory wages that they earned previously in the non-MGNREGS works.

**Socio-Economic Empowerment**

The major thrust of women development programmes mostly focuses on the social and economic status of women. Employment is considered to be one of the basics and most important influential factors to make women economically independent and self-reliant which in turn determines the standard of living and status in the society (Michael, 2011; Michael, 2016). Similarly, West (2006) viewed employment as a fundamental component of economic empowerment. Moreover, economic forces do play a vital role in establishing gender equality and women are aware that the job brings not only money but also power (Jagannathan, 2010). MGNREGS has made a significant contribution to improve the wellbeing of women by paying decent wages and make women more productive in rural areas (Jagannathan, 2010). It has made women economically independent and it was the first time that women are paid on par with men. Secondly, women's economic contribution in the family became more visible (Khera & Nayak, 2009a) and it gives economic freedom to women (Mahapatra, 2006). Studies have revealed that wage earned from MGNREGS has enabled the people to meet various expenditure such as meeting the household expenditure, paying back their debts, retrieving pawned gold, children's education, medicines, and saving. Hence, it has become the lifeline especially for the poor women and they consider it indispensable (Narayanan, 2008). It has substantially reduced the rate of rural unemployment along with a significant contribution to the independence and social empowerment of rural women (Patnaik, 2005).

The earnings of women from MGNREGS has enabled them to meet their daily livelihood (at least two meals per day) besides adding to the household income (Jandu, 2008). Also, about 41 per cent have claimed that MGNREGS had come in as the safety-net when there were no agricultural works. Hence, people said they would have starved if there was no MGNREGS work (Narayanan, 2008). The scheme has helped 69 per cent of the workers to avoid hunger, 57 per cent from migration and buy medicines. It has been found from the study that MGNREGS has been a boon for widows in many ways. Firstly, if MGNREGS was not there, the widows would have migrated to faraway places to work in the stone quarries but now they can get work locally. Secondly, the women could earn higher wages in MGNREGS e.g. one said that earlier she could hardly earn Rs.35 but now Rs100 in MGNREGS and another said that earlier she could earn only Rs.15 but now Rs.75 in MGNREGS (Khera & Nayak, 2009a). The scheme has positively impacted the rural society by enhancing the purchasing power of the people, buying assets, increasing per capita food and non-food expenditure, health and education which leads to socio-economic empowerment. The women started saving their earnings from the scheme and as a result decreased dependence on their husbands. Meanwhile, they also have learnt the bank transactions, mingling with others and gained social and political awareness (Ambility, 2016; Babu & Shankar, 2014 in Chavda & Bhatt, 2018).

**Political Empowerment**

Though MGNREGS guarantees 100 days of employment per household, it is at the discretion of the household members to decide who would participate (Sudarshan, 2010). MGNREGS came in as an employment opportunity available within the village when the women had scarce employment opportunities.
in rural areas. Also, they could earn a decent wage on par with the men besides taking care of their household chores (Khara & Nayak, 2009a). It has made the women feel empowered and independent e.g. Sumathi from Tamil Nadu claimed that she used to depend on her husband for all the household expenditure but now she could take care of the household expenses on her own and feels independent (Jandu, 2008). Secondly, women were able to interact with others and officials. Moreover, MGNREGS has greatly benefited the widows viz able to mingle with all and share their feelings and get self-respect and participate in the Gram Sabha meetings (Chavda & Bhatt, 2018). Thirdly, MGNREGS is perceived as a major intervention for the empowerment of women in rural areas (Sabana, 2016 in Chavda & Bhatt, 2018) by providing livelihood security, democratic governance and social protections (Kaushal & Singh, 2016). Women can contribute to the family income and have a say in the family besides spending their earning for their personal needs (Ananta, 2016; Nath, 2016; Tripathi, 2013 in Chavda & Bhatt, 2018). Independence and self-esteem among women are the major outcomes of MGNREGS.

Socio-Cultural Determinants

The structure of a society determines the social position of women in society (Michael, 2011). Women have remained largely invisible even though they are employed and enjoy a degree of economic independence. Though the quantum of employment generated under MGNREGS at the macro level gives a positive figure, in reality, it is an eye-wash and does not empower the women (Michael, 2016). The women seemed to face invisible social constraints such as that they could work in the fields of their community or where persons from their community work (Khara & Nayak, 2009a). Though it was claimed that MGNREGS provided a culture of economic independence among women (Chavda & Bhatt, 2018), it was learnt from the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS) that it gave economic gains but it did not transform into gender empowerment (Krishnaraj et al., 2004 in Kelkar, 2009). Because, women in India are perceived as housewives, mothers and their productive works at home and farm are not considered as works. It is neither the society nor the women who have perceived their economic role at home and in the society at large. Moreover, besides education, the culture of the society determines the status of women across the country irrespective of their religion, caste and state/community (Srivastava, 2010; Das & Khawas, 2009 in Mittal, 2015). The women have to adjust their entire lives according to the stereotyped or chauvinist social structures in which they live (Michael, 2011).

There is still feminization of works taking place in the scheme. “The choices women make are determined by hegemonic cultural norms” (Gagné & McCaughey, 2002, p.814) e.g. There is strict segregation of tasks on the worksites; while men work with tools (digging), women generally do the lifting work and they have to depend on the number of men in their workgroup (Banerjee, 2008 in Kelkar, 2009). Also, the purchase and sharpening of the shovels used by men are done with the MGNREGS money but it is made invisible (Kelkar, 2009). It has been noted from the field in Ananthpur district, Andhra Pradesh that there is wage negotiation done between men and women e.g. two men dig and four women do the lifting work. And when the payment comes, two men take half of the wage of two women and the remaining will be shared among the four women. Hence one woman’s wage goes into the hands of men (Kelkar, 2009). This is where socio-cultural dominance works despite the progress made by women in all the spheres. Hence, higher work participation would not necessarily lead to women empowerment without education (Mittal, 2015).

Conceptual and Theoretical Discourse

Employment, Empowerment and Socio-Cultural structure are the three key concepts that have been used in the study to understand how far the employment under the scheme has empowered women and brought development specifically in rural society. While employment generated under the scheme had claimed to have empowered women to a certain extent, it is equally important to analyse its role in challenging the existing socio-cultural structure to women empowerment. Let us explore the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the above before discussing the specific inquiry of the study.

Employment and Women Empowerment

Employment is seen as a fundamental component of economic empowerment. It is widely accepted that there is a link between employment and women’s empowerment, both in terms of economics and gender relations (West, 2006). Amartya sen also viewed that employment not only gives income to the employed but also gives the person recognition of being engaged in something worthwhile (Panichammy, 2011). The empowerment of women is very well connected with their work participation and economic conditions. Gikshit & Sharma (2018) have specified that the higher the work participation of women, the greater will be their level of empowerment. More specifically, cash in hand not only makes the women independent but also their participation in the household income triggers positive gender relations or power dynamics both in the family and out as well (Jandu, 2008). Perhaps, West (2006) reiterated the most common argument that women’s participation in income-generating activities will lead to women’s empowerment because by having access to resources, a woman can improve her bargaining position, thereby allowing for greater control over decisions and life choices. Therefore, she is less dependent on her husband or others for survival. Also, Greater bargaining power in the household is seen as an empowering factor because it affords a woman greater control over her and her family’s life. Hence, work participation may contribute to empowerment because it allows not only the women to participate in the public.
sphere but also interact with a wider network of individuals which in turn can increase their self-esteem or self-worth e.g. the studies with Bengali women in India and with poor women in Bangladesh reported that paid work was empowering the women and that women who were working more likely had a say in the decision making at home, controlled the resources, had greater mobility and were better able to accumulate assets and secured their own well-being (Dutta 2000; Salway, 2005). Thus, it is apparent from the discourse that employment leads to empowerment. MGNREGS is a unique employment guarantee programme that attempted to encourage work participation of women which would provide them not only cash in hand but also enhance the self-confidence and make them independent, change gender relations. Hence, the study attempts to examine how far the employment scheme (MGNREGS) would empower the women and bring any change in the existing socio-cultural structures that hassle women development.

Women Empowerment

While the ‘Community In-Power and Development Association’ (CIDA) report (1999) defined “empowerment is all about people both men and women taking control over their lives: setting their agenda, gaining skills, increasing self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. It is both a process and an outcome”, the World Bank (2002) defined empowerment as the “expansion of the assets and capabilities [of individuals]...to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (West, 2006.p5). Both seemed to emphasise primarily the capabilities at the individual level that are essential in challenging the existing socio-cultural power structures that prevent empowerment. Hence, as West (2006) claimed, empowerment is a process that involves changes in the existing power structures which will enable women from the state of disempowerment to empowerment. Therefore, “Empowerment among females means encouraging women to be self-reliant, economically independent, have positive self-esteem, and generate confidence to face any difficulty and active social and political participation” (Gikshit & Sharma, 2018, p.92). Therefore, “Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their potential and powers in all spheres of life” (Varghese, 2012.p52). Moreover, empowerment is a social process that occurs in relationship with others at different levels, such as individual, group and community.

Indicators of Women Empowerment

While United Nations (1975) described knowledge, economic resources, political power and personal autonomy compared to men as important for women development and empowerment, the international women’s conference at Nairobi (1985) defined “empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women” (in Varghese, 2012.p53). The conference further emphasised different parameters for an empowerment such as self-esteem and self-confidence, participation in decision making, ability to think critically and make their own choices, economic independence etc. Meanwhile, WHO (1989) asserted that the higher the education, the better will be the position of women in the house. On the other hand, Hogan et al. (1999) clarified that education alone would not enhance the status of women unless they engage themselves in gainful employment. Also, women’s ability to communicate and convince their spouses and family members, do matter in the elevation of their status (Bhasin, 2007). West (2006) developed three more indicators for women empowerment. They are; a) The ability to make decisions that affect one’s life, b) The ability to move beyond the sphere of the home freely (autonomy) and c) women’s control over resources. Bhasin (2007) also identified education, employment and intra-household decision making power as the three major indicators used to measure women development. On the other hand, Blumberg (2005) contended that gender inequality can be reduced and self-confidence would be increased for women by enhancing their economic power (control over resources). Moreover, women will have a greater voice in the household and begin to have control over life options and they can have a greater influence in community affairs.

Hence, there is no single definition that is unanimously accepted to evaluate the indicators of empowerment. However, the study uses education, employment, gaining skills, control over the resources and economic independence, exposure to wider society and knowledge (political and social) as the indicators of development and empowerment.

Social Structure and Gender Roles.

Though we live in the modern era, we still are confined to the patriarchal forms of societies wherein one is identified by his/her gender role. Women and men are socialized differently wherein the gender roles determine how people perceive themselves and the world. Gender roles are determined based on the culture of the society. In fact, “gender roles are historically structured and shaped in a way that they’ve become social norms and are not seen as gender inequalities per se” (Hasani, 2016, p.2). These socio-cultural practices eventually restrict the personal, educational or artistic potential of women and men in society (Hasani, 2016). Women are always treated as second-grade citizens and discriminated against in all spheres of life. Gender categories such as male, female and others are culturally constructed and they are associated with culturally defined patterns of thought and behaviour that are subjected to hierarchical distinctions, advantages and disabilities (Bhasin, 2007, p.2). It is the “patriarchal control in all aspects of life severely limits the potential and scope of women’s actual and de facto participation in public life” (Varghese, 2012.p51). The political, socio-economic system has given power and
advantages to males. In addition, societies have developed institutions and ideologies that have perpetuated the concentration of power on male hands and led to the creation of cultural hegemony. The women are made to believe their situation as natural, inevitable and sometimes even preferable (Hasani, 2016).

Mere employment would not be converted into women empowerment e.g. simply being employed is probably not enough to ensure women’s empowerment because working does not necessarily allow women to challenge the power structures that prevent their agency and full participation in society (Sunder, 2019). Similarly, participation in income-generating activities does not erase women’s domestic responsibilities. While some research suggests that “paid employment has the potential to alter deeply embedded cultural norms” (Dutta, 2000), both gender ideologies and women’s lower education levels elucidate that the jobs available to most women require little skill, afford no security and involve poor working conditions and pay (West, 2006). Employment for women is very often survival-driven and does not affect changes in gender relations. Moreover, employment neither relieves the women from the burden of domestic responsibilities nor increases their political participation. Likewise, unskilled and low paid employments neither lead to equal property rights nor guarantee them the social protection (Pearson 2004; Baruah 2005). Hence, empowerment of women is hindered by every possible means by the existing socio-cultural norms and customs with the chauvinistic enforcements.

**Study Outcome**

**General Profile of the respondents**

It has been found from the study that at least one person from almost all the households in the selected panchayats has registered for MGNREGS work. Though 100 days of employment is guaranteed under the scheme to every rural household which includes both men and women, it is mostly the women who turn up for the work when it is provided. Hence, three fourth of the respondents (74.5%) were women in the study.

**Vulnerability and Employment Opportunities**

The availability of works with an adequate income is an important factor for the socio-economic well-being of women and their empowerment. It not only gives them the income for their livelihood but also space and recognition in their life. The availability of employment opportunities with decent wage was scarce in the study area. More than 84 per cent of the respondents get less than 180 days of employment which reveals that a vast majority of the people in the study area are marginal workers and live below the poverty line. Failure of monsoon resulting lack of cultivation were the major reasons for lack of employment opportunities in the agriculture and allied sectors. Additionally, about 67 per cent of the women claimed that the wage paid per day was below Rs100 and was insufficient.

![Figure 2. Distribution of Main and Marginal Workers](figure2.png)

**It has been found that about 49 per cent of the respondents in the study take up only MGNREGS work and they don’t go for any other works. On the other hand, about 48 per cent of the respondents usually engage themselves in agriculture and allied works as their primary work and take up MGNREGS when employment opportunities are scarce in agriculture and allied areas. Hence, MGNREGS is one of the major sources of employment in rural area.**

**Employment Generation under MGNREGS**

Though women participation is higher with 80 per cent and above in the state and district, in the contrast, the average days of employment provided to a household in a financial year come about 50 days. However, the number of days of employment and the wage depend on the way the scheme is implemented in the respective panchayat. The study revealed that Meenambur has been generating a higher number of days (range from 67 days to 97) and Renganathapuram also doing fairly well. On the other hand, Devadanampettai panchayat can generate an average of 50 days per annum while Neelamangalam is underperforming with less than 20 days per household in a year. It is evident that though MGNREGS
guarantees at least 100 days of guaranteed employment, in reality, it is unable to generate even half of it.

**Participation of Women in MGNREGS**

![Figure 3. Average Person Days Generated per Household at the Panchayat Level. Source: compiled from MIS data from the website](image)

Participation of women in MGNREGS was overwhelming in the study area although employment is provided to every adult member of the household which includes both men and women. About 91 per cent of the respondents have expressed that it is mostly women who participate more in the scheme except a few who have claimed that there is equal participation of men and women in the scheme. The average participation rate of women in the scheme is almost double in Tamil Nadu and the district (Villupuram) when compared to the national average.

![Figure 4. Participation of Women in MGNREGS at the Panchayat Level. Source: Compiled from MIS data from the website](image)

In two panchayats namely Meenambur and Neelamangalam, the participation rate of women is very high (above 80-90 per cent) while it is three fourth in Devadanampettai. Whereas Renganathapuram seems to be having a moderate participation rate of women but above 55 per cent. Hence higher participation of men is observed only in this panchayat. As the number of studies and web data have revealed that women participation is very high in MGNREGS all over the nation and in the study area as well.

**Reasons for Higher Participation of Women**

While probing the reasons for the higher participation of women in the scheme, the majority (67.5 per cent) of them have stated that women get higher wages in MGNREGS work than in agricultural work. It is an easy work besides the claim of a few that they take up MGNREGS work and earn a decent wage instead of simply sitting at home. Most importantly, while women get higher wages in MGNREGS work,
men get higher wages in non-MGNREGS work. Moreover, there is an unwritten rule that one person from a household alone can take part in the scheme as the panchayat is unable to accommodate all the workers at a time. Hence it is a win-win strategy of the people to utilize the opportunities to the maximum e.g. while women take up MGNREGS work and the men opt for non-MGNREGS work to maximise their household earning besides a few opinions where some men feel ashamed to work with the women and get equal wage on par with them. It is also a widely conceived notion that the old, sick and the women alone mostly go for MGNREGS work. There is a small portion that has said that the women go for MGNREGS work during the lean and agricultural season while the men prefer MGNREGS work only during the lean season. Hence there is low participation of men during the agricultural season but more or less equal during the lean season.

Impact of MGNREGS in the Lives of Women

It is evident from the study that access to paid works under MGNREGA has a positive impact on the socio-economic status and general well-being of women. There are certainly qualitative and quantitative improvements in gender relations that have taken place which paves the way for women empowerment. The major outcomes of various aspects of the study are described below.

Employment Opportunities

One of the significances of MGNREGS is that work is made available to the people in their village itself not beyond a 5km radius. About 38.5 per cent of the respondents have stated that they get employment within their village especially women who found it very handy that they take up MGNREGS work besides taking care of their household chores. Secondly, employment under the scheme has assured livelihood opportunities at least for one-fourth of the respondents’ households. Moreover, the time of this employment is rather significant that they got this employment when there were no employment opportunities available in agriculture and allied sector due to the drought as the result of monsoon failure for last 8 years.

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<th>Overall Impact of MGNREGS</th>
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**ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT**

Employment in MGNREGS has not only earned them a decent income but also recognition in the family. It is evident from the study that it has brought additional income to 19 per cent of the respondents’ household e.g. while the men go for other works to earn higher wages, the women go for MGNREGS work to earn higher wages. Because the wage paid under the scheme is higher than the prevailing wage rate in agriculture and allied works for women in the villages.

**a). Additional Income to the Household**

Women were fully dependent on agriculture and allied works before the implementation of MGNREGS but now MGNREGS has become an additional employment opportunity that gives additional income to the household. Thus, MGNREGA has led to a direct increase in employment and wage income for women. More importantly, it has doubled the wage rates for women and thereby their income from agriculture.

**b). Increased Wages for Women**
One important consequence of MGNREGA has been an increase in the wage level for women. The wage revision in MGNREGA has been taking place from time to time based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). It has enhanced agricultural wage. In an already tight supply situation, MGNREGA entered the arena offering work to all who were willing to work. The work conditions were also easier but more importantly offered higher wages for women. This makes women prefer MGNREGS work. However, the full wage which is stipulated under the scheme is not paid at all.

c) New Women Workforce
The inception of MGNREGS has brought out a new workforce to the society e.g. some respondents have never gone for any other works but MGNREGS alone. They are non-workforce but brought into the workforce or otherwise new entrants to the workforce as the result of MGNREGS. They are mostly women.

d) Control over Income
More importantly, the women can have control over their earning from MGNREGS which is credited into their respective account. They can decide over their earning though it is spent on household expenditure and children’s education. Hence, it has not only increased the workforce in the household but brought additional income to the household besides enhancing the socio-economic and political traits of the women.

e) Less Impact on Poverty and Migration
Though there is a belief that MGNREGS has made the people demand higher wages in the agricultural and allied works, it could hardly boost the savings of the people as the wage paid under the scheme being very meagre and that too is paid with greater delay. Hence, the impact of the scheme on reducing poverty and migration is very meagre though it was one of the major objectives of the scheme. However, it has reduced the migration of women to a certain extent.

Socio-Political Empowerment

a) Network and Familiarity with Banking System
It can be inferred from the study that the wage payment directly into everyone’s account, has not only connected the people especially the women with the banking system but also brought familiarity with the same and its proceedings at least for 16.5 per cent of the respondents. It is perhaps a positive sign especially for women to deal with the income that they have earned.

b) Opening Bank Account and Maintenance
Secondly, women were not having an individual account earlier but a joint account with their husband. Now every woman in the village is having an individual bank account and handle the money which is paid in their account.

c) Exposure to the Public sphere
Thirdly, the people come in direct contact with the officials either at the gram panchayat or at the bank wherein they are able to articulate their needs and grievances. This has not only increased their self-confidence but also their status in the family to a certain extent. Due to the policy of reservation for women in MGNREGA, women have been able to seek representation in decision-making bodies, including the Village Employment Councils (VECs) and Gram Sabha.

Women Empowerment and Socio-Cultural Changes
MGNREGS has been argued to promote gender development and empowerment. As women begin to contribute to the household income, their position or status in the family is recognized and they are respected. However, as the studies (Sunder, 2019; Dutta, 2000; West, 2006) prove that mere employment and money in hand alone are enough to challenge and change the existing oppressive socio-cultural reality in the rural society. While discussing empowerment, a few more things have to be taken into account such as: the number of days, the type and nature of work, status attached to the work, the wage, what makes one work; whether her interest or demand from the family which is rather forced and finally whether women are allowed to go for work on their discretion etc. All these things can be explained under three broad categories namely Quantum value, Wage value and Status value. It can be correlated with the indicators of women empowerment and development to assess the role of MGNREGS in empowering women in rural society.

a) Quantum Value
The quantum value refers to the number of days that a person gets employment in a month/year. Though MGNREGS guarantees 100 days of employment, the average number of days of employment given to a household is around 50 days. It varies across panchayats e.g. the average person-days generated per household in Meenambur was 67 days in 2011-12 and the participation rate of women was 57 per cent. If the total man-days per household are multiplied by the share of women participation rate, the approximate person days worked by women would be 38 days for the year 2011-12. It varies over the years.

\[
\text{Person Days worked by Women} = \frac{\text{Total Person Days per HH}}{\text{Women Participation rate}} \times 100
\]

If it is applied to the rest of the panchayats, Devadanampettai, Renganathapura and Neelamangalam, the approximate person days worked by women in a year range from 7 days to 83 days. Of course, wide variations are observed not only across the panchayats but also over the years in terms of work participation of women and the number of days worked by women (figure 9).
Figure 6. Estimated Person Days Worked by Women in Meenambur Panchayat

Figure 7. Estimated Person Days Worked by Women in Devadanampettai Panchayat

Figure 8. Estimated Person Days Worked by Women in Renganathapuram Panchayat

Figure 9. Estimated Person Days Worked by Women in Neelamangalam Panchayat
While the women in Meenambur approximately worked above 50 days per annum between 2012-2017 and thereafter came down to 25 plus, the other panchayats display lower person-days. Renganathapuram could raise to 52 days from 26 days between 2011-14 and thereafter came down to an average of 20 days. Meanwhile, Devadanampettai could raise to 38-40 days only for two years and the rest of the years it keeps an average of around 20 days. Whereas Neelamangalam though has the second-highest participation rate of women next to Meenambur, the average person days worked by women remains around 10 and sometimes it goes down to 7 days per annum.

It is evident from the discussion that though women participation rate seems to be higher but the actual number of days worked by them remains very less. Moreover, MGNREGS work is unskilled manual labour and no greater status attached to the work. Also, though the wage under the scheme seems to be higher than the casual wage for women, the full wage is not paid at all.

Hence, it is over-ambitious to think and believe that these few days of unskilled employment with meagre wage is capable enough to empower the women or would challenge the existing socio-cultural settings that hinder women empowerment.

b) Wage Value

Secondly, Wage Value refers to the amount of money earned from the work per day and annum. Initially, Rs 80 was fixed for MGNREGS work and there was no change in the wage at least for three years (2006-09). However, MGNREGS wage was higher than the minimum wages. There was also an annual revision of wage since 2009 and the annual average wage hike is Rs 15 for Tamil Nadu. But in reality, the prescribed full wage under the scheme was not paid to the people. There was no clear ‘schedule of rates’ in place and also the respondents claimed that they don’t know how much they would get but for sure that they do not get the stipulated wage under the scheme. The MGNREGS workers are paid only 60-75 per cent of the wage and not more e.g. Majority of the respondents were paid below Rs 120 in 2015-16 against the prescribed wage of Rs 183. Of course, it varies across panchayat and over the years as well. It is evident from the study that people are paid far below the prescribed wage. If the number of days worked by the women and the average wage earned per day by them would be trivial. It helps them only to meet their daily livelihood expenditure rather than bringing a great economic transformation in the family.
c) Status Value

Finally, the important aspect of the discussion is the Status Value that includes the recognition and status attached to work which eventually determines one’s status in society. In other words, it is the recognition one gets from the work and the income earned. The status attached to the MGNREGS work is not something great rather it has been called ‘women work’. Hence stigmatizing the work with gender. As a result, the expected empowerment effect is hardly felt by the women.

These three values could be applied to the women who worked under the scheme and examine how far the employment under the scheme could empower the women. Secondly, correlating the impact of MGNREGS with the indicators of women empowerment shows partial growth but not fully. That is; the total number of days worked by women is very less and the wage earned from them also is very meagre. Though the study exhibit that the income from the MGNREGS has made the women self-reliant, helped them overcome food deprivation and enhanced the decision-making power of the women and have control over their earning, it is neither a skilled and employment with any status attached nor produces higher income. Notwithstanding, employment in MGNREGS and the income from it does matter in the lives of rural women for their subsistence and livelihood. Moreover, MGNREGS is a wage employment programme to the last resort to address poverty and rural unemployment. What makes the women work in the scheme is due to poverty and lack of employment opportunity in the village especially for the SC/STs and landless labourers. Though the women receive their wage, they are mostly spent on food and livelihood. Hence, it would be too sanguine to believe that the little income earned from MGNREGS could empower and help to break the socio-cultural norms. So, women empowerment remains a continuous challenge.

CONCLUSION

No doubt that MGNREGA is the first Act in its type which is more inclusive. Though the Act insists a one-third reservation of work for women, their participation is overwhelming with 50 per cent at the national level. It is high especially in Tamil Nadu with 85 per cent next to Kerala. The involvement of women in MGNREGS is moving upward. Since it is a right to works programme and motivates especially the women to actively participate and enhance their economic productivity at home and the nation as well. Participation of the people becomes the vital element for the successful implementation of the scheme. The major reasons that attract women towards MGNREGS are; women do not have many employment opportunities in the rural areas, in the sense that work is available within the village which makes it feasible for women. They can very well take care of the household work besides taking up MGNREGS work. Secondly, it is perceived as government work and the wage is given by local self-government rather than a private employer which attracts all women irrespective of their caste etc. Thirdly, it provides work with regulated hours of work with dignity and without exploitative work conditions besides providing equal wage for both men and women.

Though the provisions of this scheme motivate the women to participate in this scheme actively, the major concern is that it should bring changes in their lives especially relieving them from the clutches of the chauvinistic socio-cultural reality. Since it provides equal wages for both men and women, the men consider it less prestigious to work along with the women and earn equal wages. They even claimed MGNREGS as women’s work and therefore they are not actively participating in this scheme. it is the need of the hour to bring about attitudinal changes in society towards women, their rights to assure empowerment and implementation of their legal rights. Though changes in society from time to time have influenced the status of women and the behaviour of society towards them (Michael, 2011), men have been enjoying superiority over women due to the prevailing patriarchy and vicious customs even the most worthless.

REFERENCES