

# **What Stops Women from Participating in MGNREGA? Evidence from Ballia District of Uttar Pradesh**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the barriers to women's participation in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Ballia District of Uttar Pradesh. Using a primary survey, key barriers identified include social factors, discriminatory local government practices, lack of worksite amenities, payment delays, corruption, and stagnation in work availability. Despite MGNREGA provisions aimed at increasing women's participation, these barriers persist. The paper concludes that while MGNREGA offers significant opportunities for disadvantaged sections of society, more efforts are needed to ensure full participation of women.

**Keywords :** MGNREGA, Uttar Pradesh, Gram Panchayat, Employment

## **INTRODUCTION**

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005, now renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), was enforced by an act of parliament and has been implemented in a phased manner. MGNREGA differentiates itself from earlier employment guarantee schemes. It provides a legal guarantee for one hundred days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage. The cornerstone of MGNREGA's design is its legal guarantee, ensuring that any rural adult can request work and must receive it within 15 days. If this commitment is not met, an "unemployment allowance" must be provided. It requires that priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work. Section 17 of the MGNREGA has mandated social audit of all Works executed under the MGNREGA.

It is a matter of concern that there is large variation

in the state wise participation of women in MGNREGA (Goyal and Shefali, 2020). In 2014-15 in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh the participation of women among MGNREGA workers was 93%, 83.9%, 67.9% and 58.55% respectively. It has been observed that there is abysmally low female participation in MGNREGA in UP at approximately 33-37% as opposed to the National average of 54% (pib.gov.in, 2023). Though the Ministry of Rural Development has announced the Mahila Mates programme under MGNREGA to better women's participation as active stakeholders in the scheme, it still faces implementation challenges. The present study focuses on Ballia district of UP to identify the factors which hinder female participation in MGNREGA.

## **Literature Review:**

Several studies have been conducted since its inception by the government and non-government agencies as well as researchers to analyse the impact of MGNREGA on women's status and their decision-making power. A case study by Pankaj and Tankha (2010) found

that female workers gained from MGNREGA. The gain has been due to paid employment opportunities and equal wages under MGNREGA, thereby countering the gender discriminatory wages prevalent in the rural labour market. A study by Azam (2011) found that women have participated in public employment programs in greater numbers than SC, ST or OBC. As a result, MGNREGA not only left a positive impact on labour force participation rate through larger participation of females, but also narrowed down the gender wage gaps. An additional study by Afridi *et al.* (2012), as a case study of Andhra Pradesh, revealed that greater participation of women in MGNREGA works has a positive effect on her children's educational attainment due to her improved position in household decision-making. They further argued that the effect is more significant for children who belong to the poorest wealth group. Desai *et al.* (2015) have highlighted the factors – statutory minimum wage and equal wages for women, regularity and predictability of working hours, gender sensitivity of the delivery system, local availability of works under the programme, active role of self-help groups and prevailing traditions of wage works- that promote participation of women in the workforce. Khuntiya *et al.* (2019), in their study on Inter state analysis of women's participation in MGNREGA have found that MGNREGA program, designed to reduce poverty and diminish gender inequality, has not been able to provide a viable alternative for sustainable livelihoods for poor and vulnerable women in states where poverty and gender inequality are widely pervasive.

### Objectives of the study:

Since, MGNREGA is one of the very few guarantee programs that provide for equal wages for women and also reserves 33% workforce for women, the first objective of the study is to identify the factors that push women out of the scope of MGNREGA in UP especially in Ballia District. Another objective is to suggest suitable policy measures to reduce administrative lapses and improve transparency for the better implementation of the programme.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on primary as well as secondary data. The primary data was collected through a survey conducted in five villages of the Nagra block in Ballia District. The survey included 250 households and interviews were conducted with local officials and

community leaders. Within Nagra block, survey covered five village panchayats namely, Dihwa, Nagra, Rekua, Kodai and Lehsani. From each village 50 households that worked under MGNREGA were selected. The secondary sources include the various Ministry reports, newspapers and some research articles.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Socio-economic profile of sample Households:

The socio-economic profile of households is influenced by various factors, including income, education, occupation, employment status, housing conditions, poverty and inequality, access to services, assets, and wealth and demographics. The following Tables 1, 2 and 3, give us the detailed information about the households in surveyed villages.

**Table 1 : Share of workers by gender**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	237	77.45%
Female	69	22.55%
Total	306	100%

Source: Survey Data

**Table 2 : Share of literate and illiterate workers in the workforce**

Sex	Illiterate	Literate	Total
Male	120(50.63%)	117(49.36%)	237
Female	61(88.4%)	8(11.59%)	69
Total	181	125	306

Source: Survey Data

**Table 3 : Distribution of Landownership among Households in Survey Villages (in Bigha)**

Household land ownership	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative
0	174	69.6	69.6
0 $\geq$ 0.5	46	18.4	88
0.5 $\geq$ 1	20	8	96
1 $\geq$ 3	10	4	100.0
Total	250	100.00	

Source: Survey Data

The data clearly shows low participation of women in the villages surveyed due to a number of factors identified further in this paper. In addition, there are more illiterate workers, both men and women, working in MGNREGA projects. So far as land ownership is concerned, the worker owning higher per capita of land worked for a lesser number of days. This is a sign of

success of MGNREGA in reaching out to the target population and there is no sign of elite capturing the program in the surveyed villages. Despite the sincere efforts made by the govt. to enhance female participation in the state of Uttar Pradesh, the rates of participation has not significantly improved as reported by Union Minister of State for Rural Development, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti. The following Table 4, compiled from the data provided by the Ministry highlights the difference between state of Uttar Pradesh and national average with regard to female participation in MGNREGA.

**Table 4 : Rates of Participation of Women (Women person-days out of the total in percentage) in Mahatma Gandhi NREGS from 2018-19 to 2022-23**

Years	In Uttar Pradesh (%)	National (%)
2018-19	35.28	54.60
2019-20	34.28	54.79
2020-21	33.57	53.20
2021-22	37.25	54.82

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, 25 July 2023  
(idroline.org, 25 January 2023)

### Key findings:

#### *Social norms against Women:*

The survey revealed that 18% of the woman didn't participate in the MGNREGA programme because their family head prevented them from working outside the home. Therefore, the patriarchal societal norms were an important factor in contributing to the lower female participation. They were not provided employment because they were considered physically too weak to work at the site and therefore cannot do work equal to men, but since it is mandatory to pay equal wages to both men and women, men are preferred any day to women for the same reason.

#### *Lack of awareness and Inactive civil society:*

That majority of the workers were not aware of this act's crucial demand-based work provision. Unbelievably 64.6% of employees were unaware of this fundamental act provision. Only 34.4% of the respondents in this survey were aware of some of the provisions of MGNREGA. These included the requirement of hundred days of employment per household, state, mandated minimum wages and pay equality for men and woman. Moreover, the absence of social mobilisation of workers and inactive civil society in Uttar Pradesh in general and Ballia district, in particular makes it a tedious task to make

the benefits associated with MGNREGA to reach actual beneficiaries and realise the set targets of the Act. The success of Mazdoor Kisan Sanghathan in Rajasthan (Dreze and Sen, 2002) and organised attempt of workers under Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS) in Madhya Pradesh (Dreze, 2011) is an example of how the engagement of civil society and collective strength of workers can challenge the exploitative nature of administration and make them more accountable and transparent.

#### *Worksite Amenities:*

It was found in the survey that many women were prohibited from bringing their kids to the workplace. Moreover, every woman responded to the study agreed that government did not offer any childcare services. An elderly woman was just once sent to the Lehsani village worksite to take care of children. In Southern states like Tamil Nadu, Anganwadis and Balwadis service is most developed, and women leave their children at the centres. Anganwadi is open regularly, helpers fetch and drop the children and nutritious food is provided (Narayan, 2009).

#### *Non-availability of work:*

The lack of employment is one of the significant reasons that men and women didn't receive job under the MGNREGA scheme in the villages surveyed. Some of the MGNREGA operations came to a complete halt primarily due to heavy political pressure also. Many villagers as well as Panchayat officials acknowledged the fact that when the construction of a Kaccha road along the agriculture fields was started, the owners of adjacent plots of lands interrupted and caused disruption in the ongoing work. These People belonged to influential community and were politically influential. As a result, the village Pradhan had to stop the work immediately in order to avoid personal hostility. So, the politicisation of MGNREGA projects, flagrant violations of the act's rules, no documentation of demand for work and a lack of innovative work appropriate to the region's Geography were the main factors contributing to the non-availability of work.

#### *Delays in wage payments:*

The delay in wage payments is one of the main causes of the misery of MGNREGA workers, and seriously jeopardises the programs effectiveness. The survey revealed that payment delays range from one

month to six months. As a result, single woman being the sole provider of the family found it more difficult and was forced to look for other employment where compensation is low and working conditions were exploitative. Moreover, workers were forced to borrow money for their daily expenses also. These payment delays were the result of improper documentation management and official target group verification. Due to the implementation of payments through bank account and lengthy payment chain caused by payment agencies, the payment was further delayed and had a detrimental impact on the workers.

### ***Lack of transparency and accountability and peril of corruption:***

In Uttar Pradesh, several corruption cases surface, making a strong case to check the actual implementation of this program (The Indian Express, 2014). In the survey data, a significant number of respondents admitted that names of workers in the muster rolls were not entered at the work. On the other hand, names of people who do not work under the scheme were also present on the muster rolls. A fixed amount of money is deposited in the bank account of some workers without doing any work. Almost in all villages transparency safeguards are grossly neglected, and job cards were poorly maintained. In addition, a respondent acknowledge that he had never worked under the MGNREGA program, but the village Pradhan frequently sent money into his account and split some of it with him. The provisions of MGNREGA call for a gram Sabha meeting every six months when a social audit would be conducted and a Panchayat representative would explain the specifics of expenditure as employed in the scheme to guarantee worker engagement. Every person has the right to cross examine the accuracy of the statement made in the meeting. However, no such gram Sabha meeting or social audit ever took place in surveyed villages. The MGNREGA workers never attended any meetings or social audits if any such meeting took place.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, community groups and non-govt. organisations at local level can play a pivotal role in mobilising women and advocating for their rights. Strict enforcement of existing guidelines and allocation of resources for worksite improvements can encourage young mothers to participate in MGNREGA. Regular

social audits, strict anticorruption measures, and community monitoring will reduce fund embezzlement and ensure that benefits reach the intended recipients. Promoting transparency through public display of muster roles and worksite information also promote female participation.

### **Conflict of Interest:**

No conflict of interest was found among the authors. However, the first author is accountable for data collection, accuracy, reliability and citation related integrity.

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