

Women Empowerment through the Lens of MGNREGA: A Study of Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept that combines with the socio-economic and political development of women living in different parts of the world. Women's empowerment as a concept stands for empowering women to make them powerful so that they can decide their own fate; they can decide their strategic life choices, which are closely associated with their lives. The Government of India has implemented numerous policies and programs aimed at improving the well-being of women. MGNREGA is one such scheme, which came into being in 2005 by the Government of India for the upliftment of women. The explicit purpose of MGNREGA is to generate employment the population of rural India and remove poverty in India. However, the partial aim of MGNREGA is to empower women living in rural area. MGNREGA is a gender sensitive scheme where one-third of the total beneficiaries should be women. The paper investigates women's empowerment through the lens of MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh, focusing on women's economic independence, social mobilization, and political participation. The Researcher primarily relies on secondary data sources to investigate the impacts of MGNREGA on the socio-economic development of rural women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, MGNREGA, Rural Development, Economic upliftment, Social Mobilization, Himachal Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is a wide concept in its nature. If we take women as a unit of analysis, we assume that within women, there are huge variations. A woman living in a rural area faces different kinds of problems than a woman living in an urban area; women belonging to SC and ST face different kinds of problems than women belonging to the general category. Again, the concept of empowerment is also very wide; it combines with social, economic, and political perspectives of a particular area of research. When women get an equal share of socio-political power, many things besides politics will have changed dramatically. Any society that completely keep out half its population from the processes by which it rules itself will be ruled in a way that is less than fully human (Vidya, 2007). Therefore, women's empowerment is a process to include women in socio-

economic and political participation from the top to the bottom level. Since independence (1947), the Government of India has implemented a variety of policies and programmes to fulfill the needs and demands of women's empowerment. Policies like MGNREGA, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, and Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana, etc., are some gender sensitive schemes. In a society like India, where women face multiple sorts of discrimination in terms of their gender, caste, and religious identity, women's empowerment is a precondition for the overall development and growth of the nation. In our country, women constitute a major share of the repeatedly underprivileged population. Half of the Indian population faces deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is mandatory to develop the vast women's power that the nation wants to progress in all spheres of life (Gnyaneswar, 2016).

Historical perspective of women's empowerment:

Until the dawn of the great industrial revolution in 1868, the status of women remained the same all over the world. In the Greek city, the status of women was derogatory; they lived under the subordination to men. Initially, he was the father of political philosophy who emphasized complete equality between the sexes. Plato even gave the concept of philosopher queen, which was the core thought of his theory of justice and Ideal state. Earlier, women were not allowed to participate in political affairs. New Zealand was the first country to give equal voting rights to women in 1893, followed by Australia and Canada in 1908. Britain, popularly known as the mother of parliamentary democracy, had not allowed its women the adult franchise until 1928. In the USA, women's suffrage was protected in 1920 and in France in 1944 (Quraishi, 2023).

In South Asia, the position of Hindu, Muslim, and Chinese women is not so high as compared to Burma, Thailand, and Malaya, where women had much greater freedom than in, for instance, India, the Middle East, China, and Japan. In Pakistan, women faced discrimination because of the deep-rooted traditional norms. However, women have been legally able to approach the highest position since the 1949 constitution. In 1960, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) became the first country in the world to have a female Prime Minister. Women in China received the voting right in 1947, and Japan in 1947 (Vidya, 2007). In South Asia, the social position of women—whether Hindu, Muslim, or Chinese—has historically been less favorable compared to places like Burma, Thailand, and Malaya, where women traditionally enjoyed greater independence and participation in public life. In Pakistan, for example, women have long faced discrimination rooted in cultural and traditional norms, yet the 1949 constitution opened the door for them to aspire to the highest offices of the state. A remarkable milestone came in 1960, when Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became the first country in the world to elect a female Prime Minister. Across Asia, progress unfolded in different ways: women in China and Japan gained the right to vote in 1947, marking a significant step toward equality. These milestones reflect both the struggles and the resilience of women across the region, as they worked to claim space in societies often shaped by patriarchal values.

Status of women's empowerment in India:

At the beginning of Indian history, the Vedic women

possessed a high status; they held the key position in their family. Vedic women maintained equal participation with men, with a right to knowledge and a freedom to marry. In the Vedic age, women held a respected position in society, enjoying dignity and equal partnership in family life. Marriage was seen as a sacred bond, making husband and wife joint guardians of the household. Overall, women lived with honor and satisfactory status during this period (Alterkar, 1999). In the Vedic period, all scholars agreed that women possessed much freedom and were clearly, in most cases, equal to men. Her status during the Vedic period was too high. She was the presiding deity of the house (Roy and Kalpana, 1999). The condition of women had deteriorated during the post-Vedic period; it had reached its zenith during the medieval period. The Muslim impact on India was no better; the system of Purdah came in, which hid women. In Indian history, the 18th century is often regarded as the Dark Age with regard to the maltreatment of women. Polygamy among the rich section of society and the early marriage, sati rite, killing of female child, thronging of the first child into the holy river, etc., became very general phenomena. One of the worst aspects of the 18th century was the rampant prevalence of the rite of widow burning. However, the rite was prevalent amongst the higher caste families, but through the passage of time, lower caste families, for the purpose of sanskritization, also followed this system (Jha and Pujari, 1996). When the British came to India, the position of women was at its worst in the history of India. System of Sati, Purdah, child marriage, dowry, Polygamy, Prostitution, Devadasi, was present all over India. To annihilate all these social and religious taboos, a large number of social reforms were launched in the middle of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The most well-known social reformers were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who stood against the idea of the Sati system, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, who established Prathana Samaj, and Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who founded Arya Samaj to give equal opportunity to all persons, men and women, to gain knowledge and to choose their own profession.

After independence, the Government of India for the upliftment of women did a number of reforms. In the first general election (1951-1952), all women above 21 years were granted the right to vote, and the Constitution made it clear that no citizen could be discriminated against on the grounds of religion, race, sex, or place of birth (Basu, 2015). Article 15 prohibits discrimination in any form, while Article 15(3) allows the state to create special

provisions for women and children, even if they go beyond fundamental rights, ensuring their protection and empowerment. This provision is one of the best examples of Affirmative action and positive discrimination with respect to the weaker section. In grassroots politics, women had been granted a 33% reservation through the 73rd or 74th constitutional amendment in 1993. Recently, Govt of India passed the 106th Constitution Amendment in parliament, which is popularly known as Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserving one-third of the total seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. These provisions ensured the social and political empowerment of women living in India (Kannabiran, 2024).

Women's empowerment and MGNREGA:

The Government of India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) on August 23, 2005, which came into effect on February 2, 2006. Initially, this scheme was implemented in around 200 selected rural districts, and later on, this scheme was extended to 330 rural districts all over the country. In the year 2008, the third phase of its implementation came into being across the country (Sivapragasam and Boraian, 2012). In 2009, its name changed from NREGA to MGNREGA. The major goal of this programme is to enhance the livelihood security of all rural households and provide at least 100 days of manual work for those entire rural households who are willing to do the manual work. This programme not only generates employment but also empowers the livelihood of the rural poor. MGNREGA legalizes the right to work, which is one of the salient features of the Directed Principle of State policy under Article 42 of the Indian Constitution. MGNREGA helps to reduce migration from rural India to urban areas. In this scheme, the person who is interested in labour work can participate in it and earn labour wages during the hard or summer session (Peter, 2023). The prime goal of this scheme is to enhance rural resources and conservation of natural resources, and make them available for the rural people. MGNREGA also helps to enhance women's land rights. The scheme acts as a land reformer and provides land for the women who belong to SC/ST/BPL families through PM Awas Yojana houses (Abraham and Neetha, 2024).

MGNREGA as a Gender Sensitive scheme :

However, women's employment was not the sole

objective of the scheme, but with its developmental goals, it comes automatically to empower women by giving them a chance to work and earn their financial livelihood. The fundamental gender sensitive features of MGNREGA is following:

1. The MGNREGA is guaranteed for equal wages for equal work. Therefore, there will be no discrimination in terms of gender with respect to wages. This unique feature of MGNREGA makes it more gender neutral.
2. The MGNREGA mandates that at least one-third of the total beneficiaries should be women. This provision of MGNREGA is not found in the existing other programmes.
3. The MGNREGA is again Gender sensitive; it provides necessary facilities for women at the worksites, drinking water, baby crèche, first aid, and shade.
4. In MGNREGA, the work will be provided on a priority-based basis. Single women, either a widow or whose husband unilaterally leaves the marriage, will be treated as households for registration, and this provision allows them to access the benefits of MGNREGA (MGNREGA Samiksha Report, 2012).

MGNREGA and Women's Empowerment in Himachal Pradesh:

Himachal Pradesh, a beautiful mountainous state in northern India, stretches over 55.67 lakh hectares, according to the Survey of India. The state came into existence on 15 April 1948 as a Part 'C' state of the Indian Union, following the merger of Punjab and the Shimla Hill states. At its formation, Himachal had just four districts, covering an area of 27,168 square kilometers. A few years later, in 1954, the neighboring state of Bilaspur was merged with Himachal, adding one more district and expanding its total area to 28,237 square kilometers (Ahluwalia, 1988, pp. 32, 45). This marked the beginning of Himachal's journey as a distinct state, gradually shaping its unique identity in the Indian Union.

In Himachal Pradesh, this programme was implemented on February 2, 2006, in the two geographically isolated districts of Chamba and Sirmour, followed by the Kangra and Mandi districts on April 7, 2007. The third phase of MGNREGA started in 2008 onward, and the scheme was enforced throughout the eight remaining districts of Himachal Pradesh (Singh and

Lal, 2024). In this regard, women's participation has shown great progress, as one-third of the beneficiaries should be women themselves. Though the working conditions in the mountain state have not been very congenial, rural women are very enthusiastic and eager to participate in MGNREGA. According to the primary report of the State Institution of Rural Development Himachal Pradesh, Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh got a national award for Maximum participation of women amongst the states of north India in the financial year 2013-2014 (Singh and Lal, 2024).

Table 1 describes the rate of participation of women (women person days out of the total in percentage) in MGNREGA during the last five financial years from 2019-2020 to 2023-2024. It also shows the consistently increasing participation of women in MGNREGA at the national level. According to the report of the Indian Express (26 December 2023), women's participation at the national level increased up to 59% for the fiscal year 2023-2024. The report also showed that in the financial year 2023-2024, women's participation in MGNREGA was the highest in 10 financial years, with 59.25% women's person days achieved in this year (Sharma,

2023).

Table 2 shows the overall participation of women working in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh. It also shows the growing tendency of women's participation in MGNREGA as compared to the national level; Himachal Pradesh is in a far better position. According to the report of 'HIMACHAL TONITE' (2024), the Ministry of Rural Development, in its annual report, informed that more than 344 working days were created in Himachal Pradesh in the financial year 2023-2024. Out of these working days, 64 per cent of working days belong to women's daily wages.

Table 3 illustrates that approximately half of the total number of beneficiaries are women. Lahaul and Spiti is the district where the highest percentage (56.28) of women labour force participation was in MGNREGA. Apart from this, Mandi district showed the highest number of women participation in MGNREGA (266916), and second in terms of percentage (54.14). The data, sources from the ministry of Rural Development, shows the importance of continuous support and policy intervention to maintain and enhance women's active participation and involvement in rural development programs.

Table 1 : National-level Participation of Women in MGNREGA

Financial year	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Women participation rate in (%)	54.79	53.79	54.82	57.47	58.89

Source: Ministry of state in the ministry of rural development, GoI.

Table 2 : Participation of women in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh

Financial year	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Women participation rate in (%)	62.75	61.65	62.53	64.77	64.7	63.63

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India

Table 3 : District wise women participation in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh

Districts	Total workers	Women workers	Percentage (%) of women participation
Bilaspur	158276	78267	49.45%
Chamba	255833	122665	47.95%
Hamirpur	158838	89766	56.51%
Kangra	544871	265136	48.66%
Kinnaur	39646	20473	51.64
Kullu	195553	95734	48.96
Lahaul and Spiti	16513	9293	56.28
Mandi	493023	266916	54.14
Shimla	289293	137097	47.39
Sirmaur	183910	76096	41.38
Solan	146284	66933	45.76
Una	109439	56712	51.82
Total	2591479	1285088	49.59

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Govt of India

Table 4 : Budget approved by Himachal Pradesh, last five financial years

Financial years	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Approved labour budget in lakh	343	315	350	300	250

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Govt of India

The Table 4 shows a decrease in the budget for MGNREGA periodically. In 2021, the government allocated 343 lakh, but in the financial year 2025-2026, it reduced to 250 lakh. Himachal Pradesh needs to enhance the budget for this scheme so that people working under this scheme feel secure and empowered. However, the daily wage for workers under MGNREGA increased from 300 to 320 rupees per day in the budget 2025-2026.

Challenges of women's empowerment in MGNREGA:

MGNREGA is currently the largest income-generating scheme throughout India. Women's empowerment is one of the basic premises of this scheme. However, there are various shortcomings for its implementation:-

- 1. Caste variable** – sometimes the caste variable could be the source of discrimination for providing benefits through this scheme. Particularly in Himachal Pradesh, where 26% (census data 2011) belongs to the Scheduled Caste population, the scheme needs to be implemented in an impartial way so that benefits could reach door to door. The population of privileged backgrounds within SC has a good understanding of the government welfare programme in comparison to the upper caste (Singh and Lal, 2024)
- 2. Non-available childcare facilities in the worksite-** One of the significant features of MGNREGA is that it provides basic childcare facilities for women in every worksite. This provision makes it more sensitive towards women and ensures a large number of women's participation in MGNREGA. Nevertheless, various studies found that despite this provision, there is an availability of proper crèche facilities at the worksites. Women who are working in MGNREGA have always remained worried about their children (Kar, 2013).
- 3. Law level of awareness-** Public awareness is one of the significant steps for democratic transitions. If MGNREGA is not working smoothly, the reason behind this is that people

are not aware of the basic government welfare programmes. The low level of awareness further creates a low level of participation.

- 4. Delay in Payment** – delay in payment has a significant negative impact on the livelihood of rural people, particularly the vulnerable class like women (Patro, 2023). This creates a low level of women's participation in MGNREGA. Apart from this, wage laws that are provided under MGNREGA create another challenge for its proper functioning and participation.
- 5. Decline in MGNREGA's Budget-** As per the report of the Indian Express (2023), it has been noticed that in the financial year 2023-2024, the finance minister has allocated 60,000 crore for this scheme, which is lower than the budgetary estimate of Rs. 73,000 crore for 2022-2023. This decline sharply criticized the Government's decision, and underestimates, the provisions and determination of the scheme.

Conclusion:

MGNREGA is one of the world's largest social security initiatives in India. This initiative connected rural households with mainstream India. This scheme reduces the gap between 'India', which is known as a modernized, advanced industrialized regime, and 'Bharat', which is known as a rural, unindustrialized regime. India is living in enormous cities, whereas Bharat is living in thousands of villages throughout the country. Through MGNREGA India, it has been able to reduce rural poverty, provide livelihood security for millions of rural households, and give legal assent to their right to work. MGNREGA's special feature makes this scheme unique compared to other social security schemes. Apart from reducing rural poverty and socio-economic security by providing 100 days of unskilled guaranteed manual work, its hidden purpose is to enhance women's participation in rural economic growth and empower them by ensuring that at least one-third of its beneficiaries are women themselves. Since MGNREGA was implemented (2005), it has ensured women's participation and their economic independence throughout India. We can see the large number of women enrolled in MGNREGA. Through

MGNREGA, women have become politically aware, and social mobilization is possible because of this scheme. In Himachal Pradesh, MGNREGA has become the means to break down the social taboos like caste and religious hurdles. Women with different caste and religious backgrounds come together and share their social norms. Women working in MGNREGA have been empowered socially, economically, and politically. However, there are myriad challenges to its implementation or proper functioning. If we really want to ensure women's enrollment in MGNREGA, we must ensure proper facilities for women so that they feel secure in their workplace. We need to install proper childcare facilities, providing basic amenities like drinking water and Menstrual hygiene issues, and last but not least, to raise awareness about the benefits of such schemes.

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