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Women Work Issues in Rural Development: A Case of Mgnrega Implementation in West Bengal, India

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Abstract- This paper used a gender and development (GAD) approach and explores how M.G.NREGA is opening a new window for the ease of livelihood for rural women in India. MGNREGA is the first right based and demand driven employment generating act of the country which ensures some special provisions for rural women. The focus of the act is to mainstream the rural women into the contemporary discourse of economic development. MGNREGS is the outcome of this act. This paper keeps an inner look about the expectations from this scheme for the development of women livelihood in rural areas and the challenges in ground level implementation. The problem addressed in this paper is the women work issues generating with the successful implementation of the scheme. It is important to find out how the full benefits of the scheme can be explored. This exploration is needed for a large societal benefit and improved rural livelihood. For entire study, a twofold approach is taken. First is the analysis of available literatures to understand the possible outcomes of the scheme with current discourses of economic development. Second, analysis of primary and secondary data for revealing the characteristics of the problem based on gender dynamics of the region. This study relates findings from the field survey of 210 samples in the state of West Bengal, India. Intensive field study has identified several positive outcomes like saving of time for domestic works, mainstreaming of women labour, generation of income and livelihood security for village women, reorganization of women's work etc with wide regional variations.

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Women Work Issues in Rural Development: A Case of Mgnrega Implementation in West Bengal, India

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Abstract- This paper used a gender and development (GAD) approach and explores how M.G.NREGA is opening a new window for the ease of livelihood for rural women in India. MGNREGA is the first right based and demand driven employment generating act of the country which ensures some special provisions for rural women. The focus of the act is to mainstream the rural women into the contemporary discourse of economic development. MGNREGS is the outcome of this act. This paper keeps an inner look about the expectations from this scheme for the development of women livelihood in rural areas and the challenges in ground level implementation. The problem addressed in this paper is the women work issues generating with the successful implementation of the scheme. It is important to find out how the full benefits of the scheme can be explored. This exploration is needed for a large societal benefit and improved rural livelihood. For entire study, a twofold approach is taken. First is the analysis of available literatures to understand the possible outcomes of the scheme with current discourses of economic development. Second, analysis of primary and secondary data for revealing the characteristics of the problem based on gender dynamics of the region. This study relates findings from the field survey of 210 samples in the state of West Bengal, India. Intensive field study has identified several positive outcomes like saving of time for domestic works, mainstreaming of women labour, generation of income and livelihood security for village women, reorganization of women's work etc with wide regional variations. The study has identified major challenges to get these benefits. The result drawn from the study is general and regionally applicable.

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I. INTRODUCTION

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act popularly known as MGNREGA, was enacted by legislation in August 25, 2005 is the most prevalent in contemporary discourses pertaining to employment guarantee schemes ever passed in Indian history of employment generation. This act targets rural people of the country, irrespective of financial, social and gender status. From the very first day of its inception, this act has drawn the attentions of the economists and scholars for its wide scope of

improving of the livelihood of the rural people, especially rural women. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), is the outcome of MGNREGA. The expectations arisen in contemporary times may brief as follows:

a) *Ensuring right to work for rural women*

Present rural context of India often sees women workers as invisible workers. Schedule II, Section 6 of MGNREGA Act states 'While providing employment, priority should 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 under the scheme.' MGNREGS is the first scheme, which provides the right of employment to the rural people with a specific reservation for the rural women. MGNREGA makes a conscious effort to provide employment to the rural women by ensuring work identity and employment as a right. Surely, this scheme marks a paradigm shift in this way by ensuring the right of employment to the rural people, especially women. Thomas (2008, p.8) argued that "NREGA is unique in the sense that, it gives primary importance to women participation and empowerment as well as a corruption less implementation of the wage employment programme; through social auditing by Gram sabhas."

b) *Mainstreaming rural women into developmental process*

A complete developmental initiative should touch the target group irrespective of gender status. Unfortunately from the past experience it has seen that most often women are the most deprived of all benefits offered by Government. It is an accepted fact that women has to bear the domestic work burden which is a major factor restricting them to perform work outside. They do prefer home based job and performs the home based part of farming and cattle rearing in the rural areas which are often non countable invisible work. This invisibility and non-accountability has deeply rooted to such an extent that often women workers treated themselves as non-workers. The word 'nothing' is a frequent answer of rural women when surveying in a rural area with the question 'what do you do?', while they are investing at least one and half or double work hours than their male counter parts, the realization of work is almost absent. To mainstream this invisible workers to

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the process of economic development, MGNREGA has framed the work design outside the home boundary, ensures their work identity by 'job cards' and records their contribution of work days and wage sharing which is certainly a good initiative to mainstream a large section of invisible workers in rural India.

c) Reduction in the exploitation level

In the rural labor market, women do suffer from three stand points, first differential wage rate which is mostly lower than men, second, comparatively longer working hours with no choice of preference of work and third, harassment by local employers. These situations expects some improvements though MGNREGA. This scheme ensures fixed working hours with equal wage for equal work. Besides that, one can apply for job according to his/her own choice of season or for a worksite which she prefers. For example, choice of the plantation sites rather than road construction sites or agriculturally slack season rather than the agricultural season. As this scheme ensures the employment days within 15 days from its demand, it is expected that a woman will be able to balance her employment days and earnings according to her choice of preference. This situation is expected to reduce the exploitation level of the rural women both at work and domestic front.

d) Rise in the bargaining power and improvement in the local market situation

It has proved by different scholars that the income level and power of bargain are directly related, i.e. rise of one results the rise of other too. One of the expected outcomes of MGNREGA is the rise in the bargaining power of the rural women as a result of the increasing job opportunities in the villages and a considerable rise in income. This will improve the wage situation for Non-MGNREGA casual workers too. In the fully implemented phase of MGNREGA, less supply of labor for other worksites will create the situation where demand exceeds supply resulting the improvement of the wage situation. Similarly, the local employers will compel to improve their worksite situation without harassment for securing the non-interrupted availability of cheap labor. In this way rise in the bargaining power of rural women will result the improved wage and worksite situation of the local market too, if MGNREGA is fully implemented.

e) Reduction of working hours of women for household work

The assets created by MGNREGS are equally created for both men and women. But in most cases women is the direct beneficiary of these assets than men. For example, plantation for land development and flood protection, creation of social forestry under MGNREGS in the territory of the village helps the rural women to collect the fuel wood and forest products from their locality and thus it saves them from the longer

duration of work for collecting firewood. As wood is the main fuel in the rural India and in most of the cases, collection of the firewood is the responsibility of the children and women of the household, so it is the compulsory duty for them to collect by spending hours varying from 5 hours to 9 hours in an average depending on the availability of the wood. Except this, MGNREGS water harvesting feature is being created which is another useful asset especially for rural women. As collecting the drinking water and sometimes water for domestic work is the essential duty



Pic. 1 : Collection of firewood from MGNREGS Created plantation Ground in the Field Area

of the rural women, the assets created under MGNREGS plays dual role in favor of rural women, first, it saves the time by providing firewood, forest products and water in the locality. Secondly, it generates the possibility of participating women in economic activities in their spare time. In this way MGNREGA plays a key role for the rural women by saving their working hours for the jobs which are specially recognized as women's jobs.

II. ISSUES FROM THE FIELD



Pic. 2 : A Glimpse of Field Work Revealing the Issue of Women MGNREGS Workers

Though the scheme has undoubtedly explored the rural women labor force unused or underused to the mainstream of rural development, women are facing newer challenges to get their right of work under MGNREGS. The question arises what are the challenges especially to women? Are they inherent in the Act or a result of the implementation failure? Let us discuss the points of the women work issues to understand the matter clearly. It draws from data obtained through the field survey carried out in two villages (Rupnarayanpur & Galsi) in Burdwan district of West Bengal. The survey was carried out during November 2009 to January 2010 and covered a sample size of 210 respondents. This study refers to the data for the financial year 2008-2009. The major queries of this study are a) how this scheme has influenced the lives of the marginalized people as well as the lives of the rural women and b) whether there is a positive change regarding this or not. The scheme of sample selection in the study area is as follows:

Location	MGNREGS Participators	MGNREGS Non Participators
Rupnarayanpur	27(M) 29(F) 56(Total)	35(M) 12(F) 47(Total)
Galsi	40(M) 35(F) 75(Total)	15(M) 17(F) 32(Total)
Total No. of Respondents	210	

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

First, the household approach of MGNREGS puts a major challenge to the women workers of MGNREGS. The concept of household, as explained in the MGNREGA Act section 5.1.3 is 'Household will mean a nuclear family comprising mother, father, and their children and may include any person wholly or substantially dependent on the head of the family. Household will also mean a single member family.'

This definition excludes the single women residing with her brother's family or with the family of the any relative having own earning from any source in the absence of her father and mother. It is a known fact that a women very rarely stays alone in rural India as the social restriction does not allow her to do so. In that case, if she is a widow or unmarried or separated in marital status and having a distinct earning source, is deprived from earning wage under MGNREGS automatically. And the point is, the rate of self employment is predominant among rural women, who do not have any other options of work and these self employment in most of the cases, non remunerative. Poor single women, if employed by an employer in most of the cases are exploited and under-paid. In that case, the need of the employment seeking single women is as

much as other members of the household, but she is not eligible to work as per the guideline of MNREGA as she is neither in the reproductive group (mother) nor in dependant group (wholly or substantially).

Second issue is how do we measure substantial dependency? Is it in the terms of food, clothing and shelter? How do we demarcate a line between partial and substantial dependency? In most of the cases of rural India, dependency of single women is related with shelter, as society does not permit them for single residing. Except that either she has to earn her own food by working somewhere or have to put her labor for the shelter giver's family. The second option does not generate money but make her indispensable for the family. In that way a single woman secures her shelter in a family. When we consider the dependency of the household member to the head of the family, we should consider the fact that, dependency is not the sole criteria for eligibility, as a woman may be single and independent, having inadequate income for her livelihood should be considered eligible for applying job under MGNREGS.

Thirdly, the household approach taken by the scheme puts another challenge to rural women. It is obvious that where there is a strict boundary of job days as hundred days per household per financial year, the intra-household distribution of job days is possibly not equal for the adult male and female unemployed members of the household. Preference always goes to the unemployed males. Females are, in fact the secondary receiver of job when either a) male member is unwilling to do so or b) temporarily migrate from the village. Decision of taking job is possibly determined by the head of the family, who is usually a male. Thus women suffer in intra-household level in the point of job distribution and decision taking. These two extremely important points are ignored by the scheme which causes less participation of women than men as expected. Government figure reveals that women participation is increasing with years, but still it is lower than the men.

Table 2 : Women & Decision Making

Women who took their decision independently regarding MGNREGS work	21.88%
Women whose decision was influenced by household Members	78.12%

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

Fourthly, MGNREGA provides unskilled manual work to the job seeking people. It is true that rural poor are generally unskilled and it is one of the reasons that metro cities and big towns are denying to accept them in various works which needs some minimum skill. That

makes their life more struggling in urban areas. In that context, providing job opportunity within the territory of the village is certainly a good step to stop un-economic job -driven rural to urban migration. The point needs to mention that, beside providing the poor unskilled manual work the stress should be given on some skillful works too as most of the rural population in India are malnourished and have inadequate health facilities. Women are the worst sufferer of it, so exposing them to hard manual work in every season without any option needs consideration of the government. MGNREGS should cover some skillful work and obviously the category of skillful work should be higher paid than the unskilled ones. This categorization will develop rural women workforce in many ways: firstly, women have some inherent domestic skills like cooking, stitching, making household products etc which can be improved through training. This skillful training will develop a new window of reorganization of women's domestic work as earning one. Secondly, these skills will certainly improve their livelihood. Thirdly, rural people can value the skilled work and gradually learn it which will ready them for big job market other than MGNREGS.

Table 3 : Distribution of Women Non Working Respondents in Different Categories

Category of non-participation	Rupnarayanpur (%)	Galsi(%)	Total(%)
Lack of detailed information	8.33	17.65	13.79
Low wage rate	8.33	0	3.45
Not home based	58.33	29.41	41.38
Not secure	25.00	29.41	27.59
Administrative difficulties	0.00	25.53	13.79

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

Fifthly, non participation of rural women in the planning stage puts another obstacle for planners to plan the work successfully suitable for rural women. Participation is very less in the case of the rural backward classes. Overall low rate of women participation in planning has influenced the participation rate also, as seen in the study area. Women are often seen uncomfortable to move in the public meetings and to express their requirements which are another major issue of mainstreaming women workforce.

Table 4 : Women Participation in NREGS Planning Level (Respondents Workers)

Caste	Rupnarayanpur(%)	Galsi(%)	Total(%)
Gen	17.24	22.86	20.31
SC	13.79	0.00	6.25
ST	10.34	5.71	7.81
Others	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total in the village	41.38	28.57	34.38

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

III. CONCLUSION

One interesting point is women participation under NREGA is increasing gradually with the pace of time. Sudarshan (2008) argues that the participation of women is getting high basically because of three reasons, '(a) because of the high market wage of males for works other than MGNREGS, (b) for low market wage of females for works other than NREGS (c) migration of the male members of the family and need to earn money in the female-headed households in poverty stricken states'. From this discussion it can be suggested that MGNREGA should move from its household specific approach to person specific or more precisely, gender specific approach to achieve its goal for women participation. Ensuring women participation in the public meeting is the second step through which the desired assets of the village women can be crated, or in other words, active participation of women in the planning process and inclusion of some skillful works in the MGNREGA framework can only enhance the full benefits of the scheme and to achieve the improved sustainable livelihood for rural women.

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