

EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN THROUGH MGNREGA: A CASE STUDY OF LONGLENG DISTRICT, NAGALAND

Liong M Phom^{1*}

^{1*}Research Scholar The Assam Royal Global University, Betkuchi, Guwahati. Email: liongmphom3@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: *The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a key social welfare initiative aimed at enhancing livelihood security by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment annually to every rural household whose adult members are willing to perform unskilled manual work. The Act includes special provisions to ensure the active participation of women, thereby promoting gender equity and empowerment. This study examines the socio-economic status of women beneficiaries under MGNREGA and assesses the programme's impact on empowering rural women. Based on field-level data collected from selected villages, the research highlights how MGNREGA contributes to income generation, decision-making capacity, and increased mobility among women. The findings indicate that the programme plays a positive role in improving the lives of rural women, though challenges related to implementation and limited work availability persist. The paper concludes by offering suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of MGNREGA in meeting the specific needs of rural women more efficiently.*

KEY WORDS: *Socio-economic status, women empowerment, MGNREGA, gender equity*

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is broadly acknowledged as essential for sustainable development and the realisation of human rights for everyone.¹ Women's empowerment is the process through which women gain greater control over material, human, and intellectual resources, such as knowledge, income, and access to decision-making structures at various levels. This enables them to exercise more influence across all areas of life.² The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, provides a complementary and influential framework for analysing women's empowerment, particularly in the context of development interventions such as MGNREGA. Sen (1999) argues that true development should be assessed not merely by economic growth or resource distribution but by the expansion of individuals' capabilities, their actual freedoms to lead lives they have reason to value. In this context, empowerment involves enhancing women's substantive freedoms to participate in economic, social, and political life. Programmes like MGNREGA, which offer income, opportunities for public participation, and access to decision-making platforms, can be understood as expanding women's capabilities by improving both their agency and autonomy. By moving beyond mere access to resources and focusing on what individuals can do and be, Sen's framework offers a deeper understanding of empowerment that aligns closely with the broader goals of gender equity. Historically, feminist movements have played a crucial role in shaping this discourse. The second-wave feminist movement, with its focus on labour rights and gender equality, established the basis for many modern gender-sensitive policies. Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), one of the earliest feminist thinkers, argued that women have the same capacity for reason as men and therefore deserve equal opportunities, especially in education and economic participation. Her advocacy for women's moral and intellectual independence provided the philosophical foundation for subsequent feminist efforts, including the right to work, earn, and be autonomous.

In India, grassroots mobilizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), established in 1972, drew attention to the marginalization of women in the informal sector and influenced the development of inclusive employment schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Within the Asian context, India's MGNREGA stands out for its legally binding, rights-based, and demand-driven approach to rural employment. Notably, the Act guarantees equal wages for men and women, thereby reinforcing the principle of gender equity in the labour market. In comparison, several African countries, including Ethiopia and Rwanda, have introduced public works programs with similar objectives. However, the extent to which these programs integrate gender considerations varies significantly (Holmes & Jones, 2013). For instance, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) of Ethiopia makes a substantial contribution to empowering rural women both directly and indirectly. While its core aim is to reduce food insecurity and build resilience among vulnerable populations, the program includes several gender-sensitive components that have contributed meaningfully to women's empowerment. The PSNP has enhanced economic opportunities, reduced food insecurity, and promoted women's participation in decision-making. While challenges remain, the PSNP is widely recognized as a model for integrating social protection with gender mainstreaming in Africa. Ojha (2011) emphasized that "no nation can achieve a sustained, high and equitable growth without the development of its human resources." In rural India, women's economic participation is often restricted due to traditional norms, lack of education, and limited livelihood options. To enhance women's economic involvement, the Government has launched a range of targeted schemes and initiatives aimed at improving their socio-economic status and reducing poverty. One notable programme is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was enacted in 2005 and implemented starting in 2006. A remarkable opportunity provided by the Act is equal wages for men and women.³ The significance of MGNREGA lies in its establishment of a rights-based, demand-driven, and legally binding framework for wage employment, ensuring that the government is obligated to employ those who seek it.⁴ Beyond its economic objectives, the Act was also intended to address gender inequality by empowering rural women. It provides opportunities for women to work outside the home, earn their income, manage their bank accounts, learn to defend their rights, participate in Gram Sabhas, and more.⁵

Despite these ambitions, questions remain about the extent to which MGNREGA has succeeded in advancing women's empowerment on the ground. This concern has been echoed in various empirical studies across India. For example, Rath and Nanda (2018), examining the KBK region of Odisha, found that while MGNREGA has enabled women to earn income, most of their earnings were spent on basic household needs such as food, with limited allocation toward health, education, or savings. The study also highlighted institutional bottlenecks such as wage delays, corruption, and poor worksite facilities, which collectively hinder the scheme's empowering potential. Similarly, Sahoo (2014), in her case study of Cuttack district, reported that women viewed MGNREGA as a valuable opportunity that enhanced their confidence and strengthened their role in household decision-making. The Act was seen as having brought significant changes to their lives, particularly in fostering a sense of financial contribution and public presence. Ghosal, Das, and Ghosh (2022) further observed that MGNREGA has contributed positively to women's empowerment, though mainly at the individual level. Women gained independent income and increased recognition within their households and

¹ Dutta, N., & Jha, S. (2014) *Women and Gender Inequality*. Pacific Books International. p, 239

² Mishra, R.N. (2010). *Women Empowerment- Issues, Strategies and Challenges*. In D. Bora (Ed.), *Women empowerment: Present and the way forward*. Purbanchal Prakash, p 15

³ Kar, S. (2013); "*Empowerment of women through MGNREGS: Issues and Challenges*." *Odisha Review*. pp, 76-77

⁴ Mukundan, N. (2009). *Rural Development and Poverty Eradication in India*. New Delhi: New Century Publications, p-143

⁵ Sen, A., & Drèze, J. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. London: Allen Lane. p,200-201

communities. However, the study noted a relatively limited impact in terms of collective empowerment or broader community organization among women workers.

These studies indicate that while MGNREGA has significant potential for advancing gender equity, its actual impact is uneven and contingent upon contextual and implementation-specific factors. This underscores the importance of conducting more localized studies to understand how the programme operates on the ground, particularly in less-studied regions. While national- and state-level studies have broadly highlighted the transformative potential of MGNREGA for rural women, regional variations in implementation and outcomes necessitate localized investigation. In relatively under-researched and remote areas such as Longleng district in Nagaland, the impact of MGNREGA on women’s empowerment remains inadequately documented. These districts, marked by distinctive socio-cultural dynamics, limited infrastructure, and geographical challenges, offer a unique lens through which to examine how centrally designed schemes translate into ground realities. It is necessary for a micro-level study that not only quantifies participation but also captures women’s lived experiences, perceptions, and aspirations under the scheme. Against this backdrop, the present study undertakes a focused inquiry into the socio-economic status of women beneficiaries, the tangible and intangible outcomes of MGNREGA participation, and potential ways to strengthen the programme’s effectiveness in empowering rural women. MGNREGA was implemented in Nagaland in a phased manner. In the first phase (2005–06), Mon district was selected as the initial beneficiary, recognized as one of the most backward districts in the state. However, actual implementation began in 2006–07. In the second phase, four additional districts, Kohima, Mokokchung, Wokha, and Tuensang, were brought under the scheme. The third phase included the remaining districts: Dimapur, Zunheboto, Longleng, Kiphire, and Peren. As a result, by the fiscal year 2008–09, MGNREGA had been extended to all districts of Nagaland, ensuring state-wide coverage of the employment guarantee programme.⁶

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present study, both primary and secondary data sources are used. For primary data, a well-prepared questionnaire and interview schedule are used. Secondary data were obtained from various books, journals, and E-resources. The research focuses on the Longleng district of Nagaland. Out of 46 villages, a sample of eight villages, i.e., Yachem, Pongo, Bhumnyu, Nian, Orangkong, Tamlu, Sakshi, and Pongching were selected for the study based on their population size. A total of 80 women beneficiaries were selected for the study, with 10 respondents randomly selected from each of the chosen villages.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To study the socio-economic conditions of women beneficiaries
2. To assess how participation in MGNREGA influences the empowerment of rural women.
3. On the basis of findings from the field study, suggest improvements that can be introduced to make MGNREGA more effective.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF WOMEN RESPONDENTS

1.1, Age composition of women.

Table 1 presents the age distribution of women beneficiaries

Age	No. of female respondents	Percentage (%)
18-25	2	2.5%
26-35	9	11.25%
36-45	42	52.5%
46-55	19	23.75%
56 and above	8	10%
Total	80	100

Source: Computed- Field Data

The table above illustrates the distribution of respondents according to age in the study area. As per the table, (52.5 %) of the respondents fall within the age group of 36–45, while (23.75 %) of the respondents fall within the age group of 46–55. The age group of 26–35 covers (11.25 %) of the respondents, 56 years and above covers (10%). The youngest group, aged 18–25, represents only 2.5% of the total. These results indicate that most of the respondents belong to the age group of 36–45, suggesting that women above the age of 35 are more likely to register for job cards under the MGNREGA program in the villages.

1.2, Educational status

Table 2 presents the distribution of the educational status of women beneficiaries

Education	No of respondents	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	18	22.5%

⁶ Kedise Pucho (2017), Impact of MGNREGA on Rural Livelihood in three districts of Kohima, Mokokchung and Dimapur. State Institute of Rural Development Nagaland: Kohima, p 5

Primary level	62	77.5%
Secondary level	0	0.0%
Higher secondary level	0	0.0%
Graduate or above	0	0.0%
Total	80	100

Source: Computed- Field Data

The table above presents the educational background of the women beneficiaries surveyed in the study area. A significant majority (77.5%) have completed only primary-level education, while (22.5%) are illiterate. Notably, no respondents have attained secondary, higher secondary, or graduate-level education. It was observed that a majority of women participating in MGNREGA have limited educational attainment, potentially limiting their ability to access other employment options. The absence of respondents with secondary or higher education suggests that women with better educational qualifications may seek other forms of employment or migrate for better job prospects.

1.3, Marital status of women respondents

Table 3 presents the distribution of marital status of respondents.

Marital status	No of respondents	Percentage (%)
Married	71	88.8%
Unmarried	2	2.5%
Separated	0	0.0%
Widowed	7	8.8%
Total	80	100%

Source: Computed- Field Data

The table above presents the marital status distribution of the respondents showing that (88.8%) are married, (2.5%) are unmarried, and (8.8 %) are widows, and no respondents reported being separated. The study revealed that the majority of women respondents who are engaged in MGNREGA are married. These findings suggest that married women prefer joining MGNREGA as unskilled labor in the villages. During the interviews conducted in the study area, respondents expressed their desire to generate extra earnings for their livelihood. Consequently, they showed a preference for joining the MGNREGA program.

1.4, Nature of work performed by women beneficiaries

Women beneficiaries under MGNREGA were engaged in a variety of tasks. More than half of them reported doing multiple tasks. The most common were carrying mud, cement, and sand. These activities indicate that women often take part in physically demanding labour. Only a small number of women were involved in cooking and serving food. A few respondents reported their involvement in cleaning the village. Overall, the findings show that women contributed to a wide range of MGNREGA activities in the study area.

1.5, Primary source of earnings of women workers

Table 4 presents the distribution of the primary source of earnings of women workers.

Sources	No of respondents	Percentage (%)
MGNREGA	39	48.8%
Sale of agricultural products	31	38.8%
Working in other fields for wages	6	7.5%
Business	4	5.0%
Total	80	100

Source: Computed- Field Data

The table above presents the sources of earnings of women workers. It shows that most of the respondents (48.8%) rely solely on MGNREGA for their additional income. Many of these women cited problems that limit their ability to pursue other income sources. They reported that the land in their villages is infertile, leading to poor harvests that are barely sufficient for personal consumption, making it difficult to sell surplus produce. Additionally, selling agricultural products in the main district is difficult due to expensive transportation, which typically costs between Rs200 and Rs300, a significant expense for them. Furthermore, (38.8%) of respondents earn from selling agricultural products. It was observed that all the respondents from Nian village were primarily engaged in selling locally made broomsticks, which they harvest from their broom fields. Some respondents also sell vegetables as a source of income. A smaller proportion of women (7.5%) engage in wage labour on other villagers' fields, while (5.0%) run small businesses, such as operating shops and selling handicrafts like mekhela and shawls.

2. Contribution to women's Independence.

2.1, Attending social audit:

Table 5: Attendance in the social audit of women at the village level under the MGNREGA program

Responses	No of respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	10	12.5%
No	70	87.5%
Total	80	100%

Source: Computed- Field Data

As observed, only (12.5%) of women attended social audits. As per MGNREGA rules, annual social audit is open to every resident of the village, including men, women, job card holders, MGNREGA workers, youth, elders, etc. The low attendance of women is primarily due to their lack of knowledge about their rights to attend, question the officials, and give suggestions.

2.2. Mode of receiving wages under MGNREGA

Table 6: Responses on the mode of receiving wages under MGNREGA

Responses	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
In person	80	100%
Through husband	0	0%
Total	80	100%

Source: Computed-Field Data

The data shows that all women beneficiaries received their MGNREGA wages directly in person. This helps ensure that they have control over their own earnings and do not depend on others to collect their wages.

2.3, Income utilization and consumption impact of MGNREGA on women workers:

Table 7: Responses on the income utilization and consumption impact of MGNREGA on women workers

Area of utilization	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Household	17	21.25%
Children Education	29	36.25%
Health expense	10	12.5%
Food	24	30%
Total	80	100%

Source: Computed- Field Data

The table highlights how women beneficiaries of MGNREGA allocate their earnings across various needs. A significant portion of respondents (36.25%) reported using their income for their children's education, followed by (30%) who spent it on food. About (21.25%) utilized the earnings for general household needs, while (12.5%) allocated it towards health-related expenses. These findings reveal that MGNREGA wages play a crucial role in supporting essential family expenditures, particularly in areas related to education and nutrition.

2.4, Impact on community level participation:

Findings from the field study indicate that MGNREGA has somehow positively influenced women's participation in community activities. Through their involvement in MGNREGA, women gained the opportunity to engage in physical labour alongside men, which has boosted their confidence. It was observed that in some of the sample villages, two women represent in the Village Development Planning Committee (VDP), the implementing agency for the MGNREGA programme at the village level, but this did not carry much impact because women are given fewer opportunities to raise their voices.

2.5, Number of Days Worked and Wages

MGNREGA as a form of employment opportunity has grown to be acknowledged by women in villages. Women workers have expressed their understanding that the benefits from MGNREGA employment are high and that they would like to get more working days in a year. Every respondent indicated that they worked for less than 15 days in the previous year. Work allocation is often not demand-driven, and women are not properly informed about their right to participate. Due to traditional perceptions, men are more likely to be engaged, while women receive fewer opportunities. They also voiced their desire for additional work days throughout the year, reflecting their eagerness to engage in productive work and enhance their economic well-being.

2.6, Opinion on empowering women from women respondents:

Table 8. The level of empowering women through the MGNREGA program.

Responses	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	37.5%
No	10	12.5%
To some extent	40	50.0%

Total	80	100%
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Source: Computed- Field Data

The table presents responses from women workers concerning how much MGNREGA has contributed to their empowerment. Half of the respondents (50%) felt that the program has empowered them to some extent which suggests improvement in areas such as financial independence or decision-making. About (37.5%) of the women believed that the scheme has significantly empowered them, while (12.5%) did not perceive any empowerment from their participation in MGNREGA. These findings suggest that while the program has had a positive impact on many women, the extent of empowerment still varies considerably.

Suggestions

- There is a pressing need to enhance awareness about MGNREGA, particularly among women, so they are informed about the special provisions and entitlements specifically designed for them under the scheme. Improved knowledge can lead to increased participation and more effective utilization of these benefits.
- A transformative step would be to shift from household-based entitlements to individual entitlements, particularly for women. Ensuring each woman is entitled to hundred days of employment in her own right, independent of household negotiations would empower women, promote financial independence, and strengthen their position within the household and community.
- To ensure that work allocation is truly demand-based, the process of registering and responding to job demands should be made more accessible, transparent, and strictly monitored.

Conclusion

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has demonstrated a meaningful impact on the lives of rural women in Longleng district, especially in enhancing their socio-economic status and contributing to their empowerment. The study reveals that the majority of women workers perceive MGNREGA as a critical source of supplementary income, which they primarily utilize for education, food, and household needs. While majority of women acknowledged the empowering effects of the scheme such as increased confidence and economic independence, empowerment is still limited by systemic challenges. Some of the challenges include limited awareness about rights and entitlements, fewer workdays and work allocation often not being demand-driven, etc. Addressing these concerns can significantly enhance the scheme's effectiveness and lead to more meaningful improvements in rural women's socio-economic status.

In conclusion, while MGNREGA has established a solid basis for women's inclusion in rural employment, adopting a gender-neutral and comprehensive approach is essential for sustained empowerment. When properly implemented, adhering to MGNREGA guidelines and free of corruption, it could serve as a transformative social tool in Longleng district.

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