

“Empowerment through Labour: Women’s Participation in MGNREGA and Its Social Impact.”

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Introduction:

Empowerment of women, especially in rural India, remains one of the most critical dimensions of inclusive development. Despite being significant contributors to agricultural and informal sectors, rural women often face restricted access to income-generating opportunities, decision-making spaces and public resources. In this context, public employment schemes such as the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** have emerged as vital instruments not only for poverty alleviation but also for enhancing the socio-economic status of rural women¹.

Enacted in 2005, MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of wage employment annually to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. With its legal assurance of employment and focus on transparency and inclusivity, MGNREGA has created a significant platform for women to enter the paid workforce². According to the Ministry of Rural Development, **over 50% of total person-days generated under MGNREGA in recent years have been attributed to women**, demonstrating their increasing presence in the rural labor market³.

Beyond providing employment, the act also promotes **gender equality** by mandating equal wages and prioritizing women's participation. Participation in MGNREGA has been associated with improved financial independence, greater mobility, enhanced self-esteem and more say in household decisions for many rural women. However, challenges such as delayed wage payments, lack of basic facilities at worksites and persistent social barriers continue to limit its full potential⁴.

This study seeks to explore the nature of women’s participation in MGNREGA and its **impact on their social empowerment**, with a focus on indicators such as confidence, decision-making, skill development and community recognition. By evaluating both quantitative participation patterns and subjective perceptions of empowerment, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of MGNREGA as a tool for transformative change in the lives of rural women.

Despite notable progress in gender equity policies, **rural women in India** continue to face structural barriers to employment, education and economic participation. According to the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21)**, only **25.4% of women in rural India** are part of the labor force, highlighting a significant gender gap in economic participation. Moreover, only **14.3%** of women in rural households reported having control over personal earnings, which underscores the urgent need for empowerment through employment schemes⁵.

The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**, launched in 2005, mandates at least **one-third of beneficiaries to be women**. However, recent

data show that women's participation has exceeded this threshold: **women accounted for 57.5% of total person-days generated under MGNREGA in 2022–23**, as reported by the **Ministry of Rural Development**⁶. This indicates that the scheme has become a major avenue for rural women to access wage employment, often for the first time in their lives.

While economic engagement through MGNREGA is evident, the **qualitative impact on women's empowerment** — including self-confidence, decision-making, mobility and community recognition — remains underexplored. A study by **Khera and Nayak (2009)** found that MGNREGA had positive effects on women's autonomy and financial independence, yet issues like **delayed payments, lack of childcare and inadequate facilities at worksites** continue to hinder its full potential⁷. In Rajasthan — one of the top-performing MGNREGA states — reports have revealed wide variation in women's empowerment outcomes based on local implementation, caste and family support systems⁸.

Given this backdrop, it becomes imperative to **systematically assess** not just the **extent of participation** of women in MGNREGA but also the **social impact it has on their empowerment**. This study is crucial for generating localized evidence that can help **strengthen policy implementation**, especially in rural Rajasthan, where socio-cultural norms often restrict women's agency despite formal rights.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study adopts a **quantitative, descriptive and cross-sectional research approach**.

Research Design

A **descriptive survey design** was used to collect and analyze primary data.

Setting of the Study

The study was conducted in selected rural areas of Bundi, Rajasthan where MGNREGA implementation is active.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of **women beneficiaries registered under MGNREGA**.

Sample size: 120 respondents

Sampling technique: Purposive sampling was employed to select women actively involved in MGNREGA work across different villages.

Inclusion Criteria

Women aged 18 years and above.

Currently or previously registered under MGNREGA.

Willing to participate in the study and give informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

Women who were not aware of their MGNREGA participation status.

Women unavailable during the data collection period.

Tools for Data Collection

A **structured questionnaire** was used to gather data. It comprised **three sections**:

Section A: Demographic profile (age, marital status, education, income, family size)

Section B: MGNREGA participation (years worked, days worked annually, wage receipt, facilities, gender equality)

Section C: Social empowerment indicators using a **5-point Likert scale**, measuring perceived improvement in:

- Household income
- Self-confidence
- Family decision-making
- Financial independence
- Skill development
- Personal mobility
- Community respect

For Section C, each response was scored from **1 (Strongly Disagree)** to **5 (Strongly Agree)**. Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived empowerment.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through **face-to-face interviews** using the structured questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Local language support was provided to ensure understanding.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **SPSS version 25**. The following statistical techniques were applied:

Descriptive statistics: Frequency & percentage.

Chi-square tests: To determine associations between MGNREGA participation and empowerment indicators

Result

Table 1 Description of socio-demographics among study participants (n=120)

S. N.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Age (in years)		
	18–30	24	20.0
	31–45	80	66.7
	46–60	16	13.3
2	Marital Status		
	Married	81	67.5
	Unmarried	8	6.7
	Widow	25	20.8
	Separated	6	5.0
3	Education Level		
	Illiterate	59	49.2
	Primary	45	37.5
	Secondary	16	13.3
	Graduate & above	00	0.0
4	Monthly Family Income		
	Below ₹10,000	00	0.0
	₹10,000–15,000	58	48.3
	₹15,001–20,000	40	33.3
	Above ₹20,000	22	18.3
5	Number of Family Members		
	Below 2	00	0.0
	3–5	90	75.0
	6–7	30	25.0
	Above 7	00	0.0

Table 1 presented the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants (n=120). The majority of participants (66.7%) belonged to the 31–45 years age group, followed by 20.0% who were aged between 18 and 30 years. A smaller proportion (13.3%) were in the 46–60 years age group. In terms of marital status, most respondents (67.5%) were married, whereas 20.8% were widowed, 6.7% were unmarried and 5.0% were separated.

Regarding educational background, nearly half of the participants (49.2%) were illiterate, while 37.5% had completed primary education. Only 13.3% had attained secondary education and none were graduates or held higher qualifications.

The majority of participants (48.3%) reported a monthly family income between ₹10,000–15,000, followed by 33.3% in the ₹15,001–20,000 range and 18.3% above ₹20,000. Notably, none reported income below ₹10,000, suggesting that MGNREGA may have contributed to reducing extreme poverty among these women.

Finally, with regard to family size, the majority (75.0%) had between 3 and 5 family members, while the remaining 25.0% had between 6 and 7 members. No participants reported having fewer than 2 or more than 7 family members.

Table 2 Description of samples characteristics for Participation in MGNREGA (n=120)

S. N.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Currently working under MGNREGA		
	Yes	56	46.7
	No	64	53.3
2	Years of worked under MGNREGA		
	Less than 1	21	17.5
	1–3	49	40.8
	4–6	26	21.7
	More than 6	24	20.0
3	Days of work last year under MGNREGA		
	Less than 30	26	21.7
	30–60	20	16.7
	61–100	21	17.5
	Full 100	53	44.2
4	Received wages on time		
	Always	64	53.3
	Often	22	18.3
	Rarely	25	20.8
	Never	9	7.5
5	Distance of worksite from your residence		
	Less than 1 km	0	0.0
	1–3 km	10	8.3
	3–5 km	90	75.0
	More than 5 km	20	16.7
6	Basic facilities (shade, water, first aid) available at the worksite		
	Always	49	40.8
	Sometimes	39	32.5
	Rarely	32	26.7
	Never	00	0.0
7	women and men treated equally at the worksite		
	Yes	64	53.3
	No	29	24.2
	Not Sure	26	21.7
	Prefer not to say	1	.8

Table 2 described the characteristics of participants related to their involvement in MGNREGA (n=120). Out of the total participants, 46.7% were currently working under MGNREGA, while a slightly higher proportion (53.3%) were not currently working. Regarding the number of years worked under the scheme, the largest group (40.8%) had worked for 1 to 3 years, followed by 21.7% who had worked for 4 to 6 years, 20.0% for more than 6 years and 17.5% for less than a year.

In terms of the number of workdays in the previous year, 44.2% of participants reported completing the full 100 days of work. Meanwhile, 21.7% had worked less than 30 days, 16.7% between 30 to 60 days and 17.5% between 61 to 100 days.

When asked about the timeliness of wage payments, 53.3% stated they always received their wages on time, 18.3% said often, 20.8% rarely and 7.5% reported never receiving wages on time.

With regard to the distance of the worksite from their residence, the majority (75.0%) reported that the site was 3 to 5 kilometers away. About 16.7% traveled more than 5 kilometers, while only 8.3% had a worksite within 1 to 3 kilometers. None of the respondents reported having a worksite within 1 kilometer.

On the availability of basic facilities at the worksite, 40.8% indicated that these were always available, 32.5% said sometimes and 26.7% stated rarely. None reported a complete lack of such facilities.

Lastly, in terms of gender equality at the worksite, 53.3% of participants believed that men and women were treated equally, 24.2% said they were not, 21.7% were unsure and a small fraction (0.8%) preferred not to answer.

Table 3 Description of Social Impact & Empowerment among study participant (n=120)

S. No.	Statement	SD		D		U		A		SA	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	MGNREGA has helped improve my household income.	0	0.0	19	15.8	29	24.2	38	31.7	34	28.3
2	My participation in MGNREGA has increased my self-confidence.	1	0.8	12	10.0	26	21.7	49	40.8	32	26.7
3	I now have more say in family decision-making.	0	0.0	9	7.5	21	17.5	37	30.8	53	44.2
4	I feel more financially independent since joining MGNREGA.	0	0.0	20	16.7	22	18.3	36	30.0	42	35.0
5	I have developed new skills or knowledge through MGNREGA.	0	0.0	24	20.0	37	30.8	33	27.5	26	21.7
6	I am now more mobile and can travel alone for work or personal needs.	0	0.0	29	24.2	44	36.7	27	22.5	20	16.7
7	MGNREGA has helped increase my respect and recognition in the community.	0	0.0	18	15.0	32	26.7	28	23.3	42	35.0
SD; Strongly disagree, D; Disagree, U; Uncertain, A; Agree, SA; Strongly agree											

Regarding household income, 60.0% of participants either agreed (31.7%) or strongly agreed (28.3%) that MGNREGA had helped improve their household income, while 24.2% were uncertain and 15.8% disagreed.

When asked about self-confidence, a majority (67.5%) reported increased self-confidence due to MGNREGA—40.8% agreed and 26.7% strongly agreed. A smaller portion were uncertain (21.7%), while 10.0% disagreed and only 0.8% strongly disagreed.

In terms of decision-making within the family, 44.2% strongly agreed and 30.8% agreed that they now had more say, making a combined 75.0% who acknowledged improvement. Only 7.5% disagreed and 17.5% were uncertain.

Regarding financial independence, 35.0% strongly agreed and 30.0% agreed, indicating that 65.0% of respondents felt more financially independent since joining MGNREGA. Meanwhile, 18.3% were uncertain and 16.7% disagreed.

Skill development and knowledge gain were less conclusive, with 27.5% agreeing and 21.7% strongly agreeing (a total of 49.2%), while 30.8% were uncertain and 20.0% disagreed.

As for mobility and the ability to travel alone, responses were more varied. While 22.5% agreed and 16.7% strongly agreed (a total of 39.2%), a larger proportion remained uncertain (36.7%) or disagreed (24.2%), suggesting mixed outcomes in this area.

Finally, when asked about respect and recognition in the community, 35.0% strongly agreed and 23.3% agreed that MGNREGA had improved their social standing. Meanwhile, 26.7% were uncertain and 15.0% disagreed, indicating that a significant number of women perceived enhanced social respect due to their participation.

Table 4 Chi square test showing association between MGNREGA participation and selected indicators of women's empowerment. (n=120)

Variables	P value						
	Income	self-confidence	Decision-making	Financially independent	New skills	travel alone	Self-Respect
Age (in years)	0.059	0.028	0.023	0.005	0.001	0.001	0.023
Marital Status	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Education Level	0.005	<0.001	0.069	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.033
Monthly Family Income	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Number of Family Members	0.048	<0.001	0.010	0.044	0.006	0.004	0.204
Registered under MGNREGA	<0.001	<0.001	0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Years of worked under MGNREGA	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Days of work last year under MGNREGA	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Received wages on time	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Distance of worksite from your residence	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Basic facilities (shade, water, first aid) available at the worksite	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
women and men treated equally at the worksite	<0.001	0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

Table 4 presented the results of the Chi-square test examining the association between MGNREGA participation and selected indicators of women's empowerment among the study participants (n=120). The indicators included income improvement, self-confidence, decision-making ability, financial independence, skill acquisition, ability to travel alone and self-respect. The analysis revealed several statistically significant associations.

Age was found to be significantly associated with most empowerment indicators, such as self-confidence ($p = 0.028$), decision-making ($p = 0.023$), financial independence ($p = 0.005$), acquisition of new skills ($p = 0.001$), mobility ($p = 0.001$) and self-respect ($p = 0.023$), although its association with income improvement was marginal ($p = 0.059$).

Marital status showed a strong and consistent association with all indicators, each with a p -value of <0.001 , indicating that marital status played a significant role in women's empowerment through MGNREGA.

Education level was significantly associated with income ($p = 0.005$), self-confidence, financial independence, skill development, mobility and self-respect (all $p < 0.001$), though its association with decision-making was not statistically significant ($p = 0.069$).

Monthly family income also demonstrated a highly significant relationship ($p < 0.001$) with all empowerment indicators, suggesting that economic standing had a profound impact on women's empowerment.

The number of family members was significantly associated with income ($p = 0.048$), self-confidence ($p < 0.001$), decision-making ($p = 0.010$), financial independence ($p = 0.044$), skill acquisition ($p = 0.006$) and mobility ($p = 0.004$). However, it did not show a significant association with self-respect ($p = 0.204$).

Participation-related variables such as being registered under MGNREGA, years of work under the scheme and the number of workdays in the previous year all showed a highly significant association ($p < 0.001$) with every empowerment indicator assessed.

Similarly, the timely receipt of wages, the distance of the worksite from home, availability of basic facilities at the worksite and the perception of equal treatment of men and women were all significantly associated with every empowerment domain ($p < 0.001$ in most cases), indicating that both administrative and workplace-related factors significantly influenced the degree of empowerment experienced by women.

Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the participation of women in MGNREGA and its impact on their social empowerment. It was observed that the majority of respondents belonged to the age group of 31–45 years and were predominantly married and illiterate. These demographic features closely match those found in a study by Kumari and Singh (2015), who reported that middle-aged, married and illiterate women constituted the major workforce under MGNREGA in Bihar⁹. Similarly, Dey and Bedi (2010) observed that rural women participating in MGNREGA were often from economically backward, low-literacy households, indicating the scheme's focus on the most vulnerable¹⁰.

The study also revealed that nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) were currently working under MGNREGA, with 44.2% having completed 100 days of work in the last year. However, only 53.3% received timely wages. This challenge is well-documented in literature. Khera and Nayak (2009) noted systemic wage delays and irregular payments in their multi-state review of MGNREGA implementation⁷. Pankaj and Tankha (2010) further confirmed that while MGNREGA had become a reliable source of employment in Madhya Pradesh and

Chhattisgarh, payment delays and lack of awareness about entitlements were major deterrents to sustained participation¹¹.

The infrastructure and accessibility aspects were also concerning, as the majority (75%) of women reported traveling 3–5 km to reach the worksite and only 40.8% confirmed availability of basic amenities like water, rest areas and first aid. Holmes et al. (2010) similarly observed that the absence of facilities at MGNREGA worksites hindered female participation, particularly among those with caregiving responsibilities¹². Such structural barriers often reduce the intended impact of welfare programs on women's empowerment.

In terms of empowerment indicators, the majority of participants reported enhanced confidence, greater financial independence and increased involvement in family decision-making. Sudarshan (2011) found similar results across several Indian states, noting that MGNREGA participation led to improved self-worth, decision-making capability and social visibility among women¹³. Desai and Joshi (2019), in their study in Gujarat, confirmed that employment through MGNREGA significantly contributed to women's autonomy, financial literacy and social respect in rural households¹⁴.

Despite these positive outcomes, empowerment in the areas of mobility (39.2%) and skill development (49.2%) remained limited. Afridi, Dinkelman and Mahajan (2016) argued that although MGNREGA provides income, it does not automatically result in expanded freedom of movement or acquisition of new skills, especially in regions where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched¹⁵. Thus, economic benefits alone are insufficient for holistic empowerment unless supported by social transformation.

The chi-square analysis in this study showed statistically significant associations between MGNREGA-related variables (e.g., number of days worked, years of engagement, receipt of wages, distance to worksite and perception of equality) and empowerment outcomes. Ghosh (2014) found that longer-term engagement with MGNREGA led to higher confidence levels and community involvement among women in West Bengal. Similarly, Mehrotra (2008) argued that the empowerment effect of MGNREGA is directly proportional to the frequency and consistency of employment received under the scheme^{16,17}.

Interestingly, the present study did not find a significant association between education and decision-making power, although education was related to other variables like confidence and income. This supports the findings of Jain and Ghosh (2012), who observed that income-generation had a more immediate impact on rural and tribal women's agency than formal education¹⁸. Economic contribution often translates into bargaining power in low-income households, which may be more effective in enhancing decision-making than years of schooling.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study, along with existing literature, confirm that MGNREGA plays a critical role in women's empowerment by offering economic security, building confidence and altering gender roles to some extent. However, to fully harness its potential, administrative efficiency, timely wage disbursement, access to entitlements and supportive infrastructure must be improved. The comparative literature strongly suggests that the benefits of MGNREGA are real but depend on implementation quality and the sociocultural context of the region.

The purpose of this study was to assess how women's participation in MGNREGA contributes to their empowerment and broader social impact in rural settings. The findings underscore the scheme's significance in enhancing income stability, confidence, and decision-making power among women—demonstrating that labour-driven inclusion can be a pathway to empowerment. Despite these gains, the study also reveals persistent gaps such as limited mobility, skill development, and inconsistent access to entitlements. Unanswered questions remain regarding the long-term psychological, political, and intergenerational effects of such empowerment, especially in deeply patriarchal contexts. Future research should explore comparative outcomes across regions, the role of community institutions, and how MGNREGA participation intersects with digital literacy, health access, and civic engagement for women.

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