

## Women's Participation and Empowerment under MGNREGA in North Garo Hills District, Meghalaya

Nikita Biswakarma<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Shalini Saxena<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Zacharias Tirkey<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, The Assam Royal Global University. Email: [biswakarmanikita23@gmail.com](mailto:biswakarmanikita23@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, The Assam Royal Global University. Email: [ssaxena@rgu.ac](mailto:ssaxena@rgu.ac)

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University. Email: [zatirkey@gmail.com](mailto:zatirkey@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Women's participation in rural employment programmes has increasingly been recognized as a critical component of inclusive development and poverty reduction in developing economies. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced in India in 2005, represents one of the largest rights-based employment programmes globally and includes strong provisions for gender inclusion. The programme guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment annually to rural households and mandates that at least one-third of beneficiaries should be women. This paper examines women's participation and empowerment under MGNREGA in the North Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The study is based on secondary data collected from government reports, MGNREGA official dashboards, policy documents, census data, and relevant scholarly literature. The findings indicate that MGNREGA has significantly expanded employment opportunities for rural women by providing access to wage labour within village communities. Participation in the programme contributes to improved household income, enhanced financial autonomy, and increased involvement of women in household decision-making processes. In addition, the programme supports rural development through the creation of community assets such as water conservation structures, rural roads, and land development projects. However, the study also identifies several implementation challenges, including delayed wage payments, limited workdays, and administrative capacity constraints in tribal hill regions. The paper concludes that while MGNREGA has played a significant role in strengthening women's participation in rural labour markets, greater institutional support and gender-responsive policy interventions are required to maximize its empowerment outcomes.

**Keywords:** MGNREGA, WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, RURAL EMPLOYMENT, MEGHALAYA, GENDER INCLUSION, TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT.

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### INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in economic activities is widely recognized as a key driver of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and social transformation. In many developing countries, however, women continue to face structural barriers that restrict their access to employment opportunities, productive resources, and decision-making processes. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural areas where employment opportunities are limited and livelihoods are largely dependent on agriculture and informal labour markets (Sen, 1999).

In India, rural women contribute significantly to agricultural production, household labour, and community activities, yet their participation in formal employment remains limited due to socio-cultural constraints, unequal access to resources, and lack of employment opportunities. Public employment programmes have therefore emerged as important policy instruments for improving women's

access to paid work and enhancing their socio-economic status.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, represents a landmark policy initiative aimed at strengthening livelihood security in rural India. The Act guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment to rural households willing to undertake unskilled manual work and emphasizes decentralized planning, transparency, and community participation (Government of India, 2005). One of the distinctive features of MGNREGA is its strong focus on gender inclusion. The programme mandates that at least one-third of beneficiaries should be women and ensures equal wages for male and female workers.

Meghalaya, a predominantly tribal state in northeastern India, presents a unique socio-economic context for examining the gender dimensions of rural employment programmes. The state is characterized by hilly terrain, dispersed settlements, and limited industrial development,

which restrict employment opportunities for rural populations. North Garo Hills district, created in 2012, is one of the most economically vulnerable districts in the state, with livelihoods largely dependent on agriculture, forest resources, and casual labour.

In such contexts, employment guarantee programmes such as MGNREGA play a crucial role in providing wage employment opportunities and supporting household income. The programme also has the potential to strengthen women's empowerment by enabling them to participate in paid labour, access independent income, and engage more actively in household decision-making processes.

The objective of this paper is to examine the role of MGNREGA in promoting women's participation and empowerment in North Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The study seeks to analyse the extent of women's participation in MGNREGA employment, the programme's impact on household livelihoods, and the challenges affecting its effective implementation in the region.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The relationship between public employment programmes and women's empowerment has attracted considerable attention in development studies literature. Scholars have highlighted the role of employment guarantee schemes in strengthening livelihood security, reducing poverty, and enhancing women's economic participation in rural areas. Bhatia and Drèze (2006) argue that employment guarantee programmes serve as important safety nets for poor households by providing wage employment during periods of economic distress. The authors highlight that such programmes help stabilize rural incomes and reduce vulnerability to seasonal unemployment.

Research on MGNREGA specifically has demonstrated its significant impact on rural labour markets. Aggarwal (2017) found that the programme contributed to rising rural wage rates by increasing the bargaining power of unskilled workers. Similarly, Dutta et al. (2014) observed that MGNREGA helped reduce income volatility among rural households and provided important support during economic shocks.

Several studies have focused on the gender dimensions of MGNREGA. Hazarika (2009) argues that the programme

has created new employment opportunities for rural women and strengthened their economic independence. Participation in wage labour enables women to contribute directly to household income, thereby increasing their role in household decision-making.

Pankaj and Tankha (2010) highlighted that women workers often use their MGNREGA wages to support household consumption, children's education, and healthcare expenses. This indicates that income earned by women tends to have broader developmental benefits for families and communities.

In the context of northeastern India, research suggests that MGNREGA has contributed to improving rural livelihoods and strengthening community infrastructure. Feroze et al. (2012) found that assets created under the programme, such as land development works and water harvesting structures, have enhanced agricultural productivity in Meghalaya.

Despite these positive outcomes, several studies also identify challenges in programme implementation. Delays in wage payments, limited administrative capacity, and lack of awareness among beneficiaries are frequently reported issues (Hussain, 2022). In addition, the absence of Panchayati Raj institutions in Sixth Schedule areas such as Meghalaya creates unique governance challenges for programme implementation (Gassah & Nongkynrih, 2015). While existing studies provide valuable insights into the impact of MGNREGA at national and regional levels, relatively limited research has focused specifically on women's participation in the programme in tribal hill districts such as North Garo Hills. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining the gendered impact of MGNREGA in this region.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data collected from multiple reliable sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis of women's participation and empowerment under MGNREGA. Key data were obtained from the annual reports of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, which provide detailed information on the implementation and performance of the MGNREGA programme across states and districts. Additional statistical information was gathered from the official MGNREGA

online dashboard, which offers updated data on employment generation, participation rates, and person-days of work. Government of Meghalaya statistical reports and development publications were also used to understand the socio-economic conditions and programme implementation in the state, particularly in the North Garo Hills district. Furthermore, reports published by NITI Aayog provided insights into national and regional development trends and poverty indicators. In addition to these sources, relevant academic journal articles, policy papers, and research studies were reviewed to support the theoretical framework and contextual understanding of women's empowerment and rural employment programmes in India.

### **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MGNREGA**

Women's participation is one of the most significant features of the MGNREGA programme. The Act explicitly mandates that at least one-third of beneficiaries should be women, and the provision of equal wages ensures that female workers receive the same remuneration as their male counterparts.

In many rural regions of India, women's participation in wage labour has traditionally been constrained by socio-cultural norms and household responsibilities. MGNREGA addresses some of these barriers by providing employment opportunities within village communities. The proximity of worksites enables women to participate in wage labour while continuing to fulfill household responsibilities.

Data from the Ministry of Rural Development indicate that women constitute a substantial proportion of MGNREGA workers nationwide. In several states, female participation rates exceed the mandated one-third threshold, highlighting the programme's importance as a source of employment for rural women.

In Meghalaya, women's participation in MGNREGA employment has been particularly significant. The state's matrilineal social structure provides women with relatively greater social status compared to many other parts of India. However, economic opportunities remain limited in rural areas, making employment programmes such as MGNREGA crucial for supporting women's livelihoods.

Participation in MGNREGA enables women to access independent income, which can contribute to improved household welfare and enhanced financial autonomy.

### **IMPACT ON HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOODS**

MGNREGA wages provide an important supplementary income source for rural households. For women workers, the ability to earn independent income strengthens financial autonomy and reduces dependence on male household members.

Studies indicate that women beneficiaries often allocate their earnings toward essential household expenditures, including food consumption, children's education, healthcare, and repayment of debts (Pankaj, 2018). As a result, income earned through MGNREGA contributes not only to poverty reduction but also to improved human development outcomes.

In North Garo Hills district, where employment opportunities outside agriculture are limited, MGNREGA employment plays an important role in stabilizing household income during agricultural lean seasons. Wage employment provided under the programme helps households cope with economic shocks and reduces the need for seasonal migration.

Furthermore, participation in wage labour can strengthen women's bargaining power within households. Women who contribute financially to household income often have greater influence in decisions related to household expenditures, education, and healthcare.

### **Community Assets and Rural Development**

In addition to providing wage employment, MGNREGA contributes to rural development through the creation of durable community assets. Projects implemented under the programme include water harvesting structures, land development works, rural roads, plantation activities, and soil conservation projects.

These assets play an important role in improving agricultural productivity and strengthening natural resource management. In hilly regions such as North Garo Hills, infrastructure created under MGNREGA can significantly improve connectivity and access to markets.

Water conservation structures, for example, help improve irrigation and support agricultural activities. Rural roads

facilitate transportation and enable farmers to access markets more easily. Plantation and forestry projects contribute to environmental sustainability and soil conservation.

Such infrastructure development not only generates immediate employment but also creates long-term economic benefits for rural communities.

#### IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Despite its achievements, several challenges affect the effective implementation of MGNREGA. One of the most frequently reported issues is delayed wage payments. Timely payment of wages is essential for maintaining worker participation and ensuring the credibility of the programme.

Another challenge relates to the limited number of workdays available to workers. Although the Act guarantees up to 100 days of employment per household annually, many households receive fewer days of work in practice.

Administrative capacity constraints also affect programme implementation, particularly in remote districts such as North Garo Hills. Limited technical staff and infrastructure can delay project planning and monitoring.

In addition, governance structures in Sixth Schedule areas present unique administrative challenges. The absence of Panchayati Raj institutions in Meghalaya requires alternative institutional arrangements for programme implementation, which can sometimes complicate coordination among local authorities.

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#### CONCLUSION

MGNREGA represents one of the most significant policy interventions for strengthening rural livelihoods and promoting gender inclusion in India. The programme has expanded employment opportunities for rural women and contributed to improvements in household income and welfare.

In North Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, women's participation in MGNREGA employment has played an important role in supporting household livelihoods and strengthening women's financial autonomy. Income earned through the programme contributes to improved household welfare and enhances women's role in decision-making processes.

At the same time, several challenges continue to affect programme effectiveness, including delayed wage payments, limited workdays, and administrative capacity constraints. Addressing these challenges will be essential for maximizing the programme's potential to promote gender-inclusive rural development.

Strengthening institutional support, improving monitoring systems, and ensuring timely wage payments can enhance the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment and rural development in tribal hill regions.

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