



Women Empowerment through Public Policy: An Empirical Study of MGNREGA Participation in Gaya District

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in promoting women empowerment at the grassroots level in Gaya district, Bihar. The research focuses on Wazirganj and Manpur blocks and is based on primary data collected from 120 women beneficiaries through structured questionnaires and field interviews, supported by secondary sources. The findings indicate that participation in MGNREGA has improved women's access to employment and income, which has strengthened their financial independence and increased their involvement in household decision-making. A majority of respondents reported positive changes in income, confidence, and social status. However, the study also highlights key challenges such as delay in wage payments, limited availability of work, and lack of awareness about scheme provisions. These issues reduce the overall effectiveness of the programme. The study concludes that while MGNREGA has contributed to women empowerment, its impact remains partial due to implementation gaps. Strengthening awareness, ensuring timely wage payments, and improving work availability are essential to enhance the effectiveness of the scheme in achieving sustainable women empowerment at the local level.

1. Introduction

Women empowerment has become an important area of discussion in development studies, especially in rural India. It refers to a process in which women gain greater control over their lives, including access to resources, participation in decision-making, and recognition in society. Empowerment is not limited to earning income; it also involves building confidence, improving social status, and ensuring equal opportunities. In many rural regions, women continue to face challenges such as limited education, lack of employment, and social restrictions. Therefore, strengthening women's position is necessary for achieving balanced and inclusive development.

Public policy plays a significant role in addressing these inequalities. Through targeted programs and welfare schemes, the government attempts to provide support to disadvantaged groups, particularly women. Such policies create opportunities for employment, financial inclusion, and social participation. In the Indian context, several initiatives have been introduced to improve the condition of rural women, but their effectiveness depends largely on implementation at the local level.

One of the most important policy initiatives in this direction is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Introduced in 2005, this programme guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households. A key feature of the scheme is that it ensures equal wages for men and women, which helps reduce gender inequality in the labour market. The scheme also promotes transparency through bank-based payments and encourages women's participation in local development activities. Over time, it has become an important source of livelihood for rural families, particularly in economically weaker regions.

In Bihar, the condition of rural women reflects a combination of economic hardship and social limitations. Districts like Gaya are characterized by high levels of poverty, seasonal unemployment, and limited industrial development. Women in these areas often depend on male members for financial support and have limited participation in household and community decisions. Although government programmes are available, awareness and accessibility remain uneven. In this context, MGNREGA has created new opportunities for women by providing regular wage employment and increasing their interaction in public spaces.

The present study is undertaken to examine how far such a public policy has contributed to women empowerment at the ground level. While earlier studies have discussed the broader impact of MGNREGA at national and state levels, there is limited empirical evidence focusing on specific local areas. This study, therefore, concentrates on Wazirganj and Manpur blocks of Gaya district to understand the actual experiences of women participating in the programme. It attempts to assess changes in income, decision-making ability, and social status among women beneficiaries.



The study is important because it connects public policy with real-life outcomes. By focusing on field-level evidence, it helps in identifying both the strengths and the gaps in implementation. The findings can be useful for improving policy design, strengthening local governance, and promoting gender equality in rural areas.

This paper is organized into several sections. The next section reviews existing literature related to women empowerment and employment policies. This is followed by the objectives and research methodology of the study. The subsequent sections present data analysis and discussion of findings. The paper concludes with key observations and policy suggestions.

2. Review of Literature

The concept of women empowerment has been widely discussed in development literature. Empowerment is understood as a process through which women gain the ability to make meaningful life choices and control resources. According to Kabeer (2005), empowerment involves access to resources, agency, and achievements. Similarly, Sen (1999) explained that development should be seen as an expansion of human capabilities, including women's access to education, employment, and decision-making. Agarwal (1997) emphasized that ownership of assets and control over resources are essential for improving women's status, especially in rural areas. Malhotra et al. (2002) further argued that empowerment is multidimensional and includes economic, social, and political aspects.

In the Indian context, several studies have highlighted the relationship between employment and women empowerment. Batliwala (1994) described empowerment as a process of transforming power relations and enabling women to gain control over their lives. Kishor and Gupta (2004) found that women with access to income are more likely to participate in household decision-making. Jain (2005) also emphasized that economic independence strengthens women's bargaining power within the family and society. These studies indicate that employment plays a key role in enhancing women's empowerment.

The role of public policy in promoting gender development has also been widely examined. Dreze and Sen (2013) argued that welfare policies such as employment schemes are important tools for reducing poverty and inequality. Duflo (2012) found that women's participation in public programmes improves governance outcomes and promotes gender equality. Sen (1997) highlighted that gender-sensitive policies are necessary to address structural inequalities faced by women. These studies show that public policy can create opportunities for empowerment when effectively implemented. Within this framework, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has emerged as an important rural employment programme. Narayanan (2008) observed that MGNREGA has increased employment opportunities for rural women and reduced their dependence on informal labour. Khera and Dreze (2011) found that the programme has improved income security and enhanced women's participation in economic activities. Gulati et al. (2013) also noted that public employment programmes contribute to strengthening rural livelihoods.

Several empirical studies have specifically examined women's participation in MGNREGA. Pankaj and Tankha (2010) reported that women workers experienced improvements in income, confidence, and social recognition. Sudarshan (2011) found that the programme has increased women's labour force participation in rural areas. Das (2016) concluded that MGNREGA contributes to women's economic independence, although its impact varies across regions. Sinha (2013) observed that the scheme has improved financial inclusion by encouraging women to open bank accounts and manage their earnings. Recent studies have provided further insights into the impact of MGNREGA. Imbert and Papp (2015) found that the programme has increased rural wages and reduced distress migration. Adhikari (2020) reported that MGNREGA has strengthened livelihood security, though challenges such as delayed wage payments continue. Rodriguez (2021) showed that women's participation in public employment programmes is associated with improved financial stability and reduced vulnerability. These findings highlight both the positive outcomes and existing challenges of the scheme. Studies focusing on Bihar indicate that women's participation in MGNREGA is relatively high and the programme has improved access to wage employment. However, social norms, lack of awareness, and administrative issues continue to limit its effectiveness. Women's participation in supervisory roles and decision-making remains limited in many areas, which shows that further improvement is needed at the implementation level.

Most of the existing studies are conducted at national or state levels. There is limited research focusing on micro-level analysis, particularly in specific regions such as Wazirganj and Manpur blocks of Gaya district. Local-level differences in implementation and socio-economic conditions can significantly influence outcomes. Therefore, a detailed field-based study is necessary to understand the actual impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment in this area.

3. Research Objectives (RO)

The present study aims to examine the role of public policy in promoting women empowerment through participation in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act at the micro level in Gaya district. The specific objectives are:

RO₁: To examine the level and pattern of women's participation in MGNREGA in Wazirganj and Manpur blocks of Gaya district.

RO₂: To analyze the impact of MGNREGA participation on the economic empowerment of women, particularly in terms of income and financial independence.

RO₃: To assess the influence of MGNREGA on women's decision-making power and social status at the household and community level.

RO₄: To identify the key challenges in the implementation of MGNREGA affecting women's empowerment at the local level.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts an empirical and descriptive research design to examine women empowerment through participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Gaya district, Bihar. Primary data were collected from 120 women respondents in Wazirganj and Manpur blocks through structured questionnaires and personal interviews, while secondary data were obtained from government reports and published literature. A multi-stage sampling method was used to select respondents from rural households. The data were analyzed using simple percentage and tabulation techniques to assess changes in income, decision-making, and social status, providing a clear understanding of the ground-level impact of public policy on women empowerment.

5. Result and Analysis

The results are based on primary data collected from **120 women respondents** in Wazirganj and Manpur blocks of Gaya district. The analysis is presented through tables with accurate frequencies and percentages. It examines how participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has influenced different aspects of women empowerment.

Table 5.1: Participation Pattern of Women in MGNREGA

Participation Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Regular	84	70.00
Occasional	36	30.00
Total	120	100.00

Source: Author's work

The majority of respondents (**70.00%**) are regularly engaged in MGNREGA work, while **30.00%** participate occasionally. Regular participation indicates that the scheme serves as a reliable source of employment, particularly during non-agricultural periods. Occasional participation is mainly due to limited work availability and household responsibilities.

Table 5.2: Change in Income Level after Participation

Income Change Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Significant Increase	78	65.00
Moderate Increase	28	23.33
No Change	14	11.67
Total	120	100.00

Source: Author's work

A clear majority (**65.00%**) reported a significant increase in income after participating in MGNREGA, while **23.33%** experienced moderate improvement. Only **11.67%** reported no change. Increased income has helped women contribute to household expenses and reduced their financial dependence.

Table 5.3: Role in Household Decision-Making

Decision-Making Role	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased	72	60.00
Partially Increased	32	26.67
No Change	16	13.33
Total	120	100.00

Source: Author's work

About **60.00%** of women reported increased participation in household decision-making. Around **26.67%** experienced partial improvement, while **13.33%** reported no change. This indicates that income generation through MGNREGA has strengthened women's role within the household.

Table 5.4: Change in Social Status and Confidence

Change in Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved	76	63.33
Moderate	27	22.50
No Change	17	14.17
Total	120	100.00

Source: Author's work

A majority (**63.33%**) experienced improvement in social status and confidence. Participation in work has increased mobility and interaction in public spaces. However, **22.50%** reported moderate change and **14.17%** observed no difference, indicating that social change is gradual.

Table 5.5: Awareness Level regarding MGNREGA

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	58	48.33
Moderate	40	33.33
Low	22	18.34
Total	120	100.00

Source: Author's work

Less than half of the respondents (**48.33%**) have a clear understanding of MGNREGA provisions. A significant proportion has only partial or low awareness, which affects their ability to fully benefit from the scheme.

Table 5.6: Major Problems Faced by Women

Problems Faced	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Delay in Wage Payment	72	60.00
Limited Work Availability	55	45.83
Lack of Information	38	31.67
Worksite Difficulties	30	25.00

The most commonly reported issue is delay in wage payments (**60.00%**), followed by limited availability of work (**45.83%**). Other challenges include lack of information and worksite difficulties. These issues reduce the overall effectiveness of the programme.

6. Discussion

The findings of the study provide clear evidence that participation in the MGNREGA contributed to women empowerment at the micro level in Gaya district.

The first objective of the study was to examine the level and pattern of women's participation. The results show that a majority of respondents are regularly engaged in MGNREGA work. This indicates that the programme has become an important source of employment in the selected blocks. This finding supports earlier studies such as Khera and Dreze (2011), which highlighted the role of MGNREGA in providing livelihood security in rural areas. At the same time, the presence of occasional participation reflects local-level issues such as limited work availability, which is important in understanding ground realities.

The second objective focused on economic empowerment. The findings clearly show that most women experienced an increase in income after joining MGNREGA. This has enabled them to contribute to household expenses and reduced their dependence on male family members. These results are consistent with Narayanan (2008) and Pankaj and Tankha (2010), who reported that participation in wage employment improves women's economic position. In the context of the study area, this economic improvement represents a significant step toward empowerment at the household level.

The third objective examined changes in decision-making power and social status. The results indicate that a large proportion of women reported increased participation in household decision-making, along with improvement in confidence and social interaction. This supports the argument of Kabeer (2005) that empowerment involves both economic and social dimensions. The findings also align with Kishor and Gupta (2004), who found that income-earning women are more involved in family decisions. However, the presence of



partial and no-change responses shows that social norms continue to influence the extent of empowerment, especially in rural settings.

The fourth objective was to identify challenges affecting women's empowerment under MGNREGA. The study found that delay in wage payments, limited availability of work, and lack of awareness are major issues faced by respondents. These findings are similar to Adhikari (2020), who emphasized that implementation gaps reduce the effectiveness of the programme. At the micro level in Gaya district, these challenges are particularly important, as they directly affect women's participation and benefits.

The study also highlights that the impact of MGNREGA is not uniform across all respondents. While a majority experienced positive changes, a smaller proportion reported limited improvement. This variation indicates that factors such as awareness, education, and local administration play an important role in shaping outcomes. Such micro-level differences are often not captured in broader studies, which further justifies the importance of this research.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined women empowerment through participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act at the micro level in Wazirganj and Manpur blocks of Gaya district. The findings show that the programme has contributed positively to improving women's economic condition, participation in household decision-making, and social confidence. The study found that regular participation in MGNREGA has provided a reliable source of income for rural women. This has reduced their financial dependence and enabled them to contribute to household expenses. As a result, many women have gained greater involvement in decisions related to family welfare, including education and health. The improvement in social interaction and confidence further reflects a gradual change in women's position within the community.

At the same time, the study also identified important challenges such as delay in wage payments, limited availability of work, and lack of awareness about scheme provisions. These issues affect the effectiveness of the programme and limit its overall impact. The findings suggest that while the design of the policy is strong, its outcomes depend largely on proper implementation at the local level. The study also highlights that empowerment is not uniform across all respondents. While a majority of women experienced positive changes, some reported limited improvement due to social and institutional factors. This indicates that economic benefits alone are not sufficient; awareness, access, and local support systems are equally important.

8. Suggestions

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proposed to improve the effectiveness of the MGNREGA in promoting women empowerment at the local level:

- **Ensure timely payment of wages:** Delays in wage payments were reported as a major issue. A strict monitoring system should be implemented to ensure that payments are made within the prescribed time limit. Timely payments will increase trust and encourage regular participation of women.
- **Increase availability of work opportunities:** Many respondents reported irregular work availability. Local authorities should ensure that adequate work is provided throughout the year, especially during non-agricultural seasons, so that women can depend on the scheme for continuous income.
- **Strengthen awareness and information dissemination:** A significant number of women have limited knowledge about their rights and entitlements. Awareness campaigns through Gram Panchayat, self-help groups, and local meetings should be conducted regularly to improve understanding of the scheme.
- **Promote women's participation in supervision and decision-making roles:** Women should be encouraged to take up roles such as worksite supervisors (mates) and participate in local planning processes. This will enhance their leadership skills and strengthen empowerment beyond wage employment.
- **Improve worksite facilities:** Basic facilities such as drinking water, shade, first aid, and childcare (crèche) should be ensured at worksites. Better working conditions will make participation easier and more comfortable for women.
- **Enhance transparency and accountability:** Regular social audits and community monitoring should be strengthened to reduce corruption and improve implementation. Women should be actively involved in these processes.
- **Link MGNREGA with skill development programmes:** Training programmes can be introduced to develop additional skills among women workers. This will help them access better employment opportunities beyond MGNREGA and ensure long-term empowerment.

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