

Employment Guarantee and Gendered Transformation: A Thematic Review of MGNREGS and Rural Women's Empowerment in India

Namrata Rai, Department of Geography, Kurseong College, Kurseong, India
rainamrata.kc@gmail.com



<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijstmt.v2i2.016>

Cite this Article: Rai, N. (2026). Employment Guarantee and Gendered Transformation: A Thematic Review of MGNREGS and Rural Women's Empowerment In India. International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology, 02(02). <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijstmt.v2i2.016>

License:  This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are properly credited.

Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is one of the largest right-s based public employment initiatives worldwide, conceptualized to improve the livelihood security of rural India by providing wage employment guarantees. For almost two decades, MGNREGS has been extensively studied for its implications on women's employment, wage equality and empowerment. This paper presents a thematic narrative review to compile diverse scholarship on the gendered effects of MGNREGS in rural India. By referencing the literature on development economics, gender studies, political economy and governance, this review will critically assess the evidence on employment generation, wage trends and women's empowerment.

The results indicate that MGNREGS has contributed substantially to women's participation in the labour force and has led to reduce the gender gap in wages because of the provision of equal wages. Empirical research points to better income security, financial inclusion and access to local governance institutions. However, the potential of the scheme in bringing about a structural change is not uniform. Structural factors such as delayed wages, unpaid care work, caste, governance and disparities are some of the factors that hinder the potential of the scheme in bringing about the outcome in terms of empowerment.

The review points out the gaps in research which include a lack of longitudinal studies, a lack of integration of unpaid care work in impact assessments and a lack of exploration of intersectional vulnerabilities. The review concludes that although MGNREGS has empowered women economically, its potential for bringing about structural gender transformation is dependent on institutional changes and sensitivity to context.

Keywords: Rural Women, Employment Guarantee, Women's Empowerment, MGNREGS

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), operational for the past 18 years, has been a pivotal initiative by the Government of India aimed at enhancing women's empowerment in rural India. Existing research indicates that whenever women are supported and empowered, the community as a whole benefits. This literature review synthesizes findings from a diverse array of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of MGNREGS in promoting gender equality, examining the socio-economic impacts, and identifying gaps in the field of current research.

2. MGNREGA: LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTIVES

Enacted on 5th September, 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) aims at enhancing rural livelihood security by guaranteeing 100 days of employment in a year for households willing to do unskilled work. It ensures gender equality through equal wage rates for both men and women. MGNREGA Sameeksha II (2015) reflects its positive impacts on agricultural productivity, reduced distress migration and increased income particularly among marginalized communities and women. However, the extent of women's empowerment in decision making processes and long term sustainability of MGNREGA's benefits poses a gap for further investigation.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Women empowerment forms the foundation of rural development programmes. (Rajvanshi, 2016) focuses on the socio-cultural barriers in the realization of women empowerment and rural sustainable development. He suggests focusing on technological applications to overcome these barriers. Similarly, (Tambe et al., 2012) identify sustainability gaps in rural development initiatives in Sikkim and call for long-term impact assessments. (Zuniga, 2019) explores the significance of transparency and accountability in governance, underscoring the necessity for context-specific measures. (Mahajan & Nagaraj, 2017) analyze rural employment growth within the construction sector, revealing a need to understand the sustainability of this growth through employment data and public investment insights.

3.1 MEASUREMENT INDICES AND STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

(Gupta & Yesudian, 2006) develops indices like freedom of movement and autonomy of households to measure women's empowerment. The findings reflect variations between different groups of people. The study misses other groups and lacks to consider deeper structural issues by focusing only on ever married women. Future research should incorporate diverse populations, qualitative approaches, and longitudinal data.

(Kabeer, 2005) argues that, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have too narrow focus on gender equality. She believes that policies should be extensive and address deeper and larger inequalities in society. Similarly, (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011) emphasize the need for detailed analysis, pointing out that national statistics do not fully capture the complexity of women's empowerment) challenges the common idea that empowerment is only about having control and making choices, arguing that real empowerment requires deeper changes in the system.(Biswas & Kabir, 2004) create a special empowerment index for Bangladesh but find flaws in earlier methods of measuring empowerment, suggesting more improvements and the need for deeper understanding.(Rajvanshi, 2016) presents a plan for rural sustainable development, pointing out cultural barriers and recommending future research on how technology can help

3.2 STRUCTURAL REFORMS AND GOVERNANCE

(Ranaware et al., 2015) reiterates MGNREGA's support for agriculture, calling for context-specific planning. (Carswell & Neve 2013) emphasize the need for longitudinal data on MGNREGS's socio-economic impacts. (Panda, 2015) highlights the importance of governance improvements in MGNREGS and calls for integrated research. (S.Anderson et al., 2015) examines caste dynamics affecting MGNREGS, recommending reforms to enhance governance. (Aggarwal A, 2016) critiques MGNREGS's crisis in Jharkhand, identifying governance failures and calling for research on adapting to socio-economic changes. (Chhotray V, 2015) talks about the challenges MGNREGS faces in creating jobs, pointing out problems in its design and how it doesn't always fit local needs, which reduces its impact on poverty. While it does help marginalized groups, there are concerns about the quality of the assets it creates and the long-term benefits for women. The study uses qualitative assessments and case studies, suggesting that future research should focus on improving the program's design.

3.3 PAYMENT SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

(Bhatti B, 2012) evaluates the Aadhaar-Enabled Payment System (AEPS) in Jharkhand, identifying challenges like authentication failures and limited access. The study employs qualitative interviews and wage data, calling for broader evaluations of AEPS's performance. (Afridi, 2008) assesses community monitoring in NREGS, finding varying success influenced by governance and elite dominance. The methodology combines case studies and interviews, suggesting further research on community empowerment. (A V Jose, 2013) investigates wage dynamics, revealing persistent gender disparities and a need for targeted policies. The quantitative analysis emphasizes ongoing research for equitable wage growth. (Ravillion M, 2012) criticizes corruption indices, pointing out that they don't fully capture the complex social and economic factors involved. His study suggests using more detailed methods to better understand corruption and recommends future research that looks closely at the connection between poverty and governance. (Shah, 2024) stresses systemic reforms in rural development, advocating for enhanced women's participation in local governance, identifying key research gaps. (Narayanan & Das, 2024) explores NREGA's impact on women and childcare in Tamil Nadu, calling for policy reforms to support childcare facilities.

4. MGNREGA: IMPACTS, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS AND PARTICIPATION CHALLENGES

(Tambe et al., 2012) examine rural development in Sikkim, identifying sustainability gaps and calling for long-term impact studies. (Zuniga, 2024) explores transparency and accountability in governance, emphasizing the need for context-specific measures and further investigation into their relationship. (Mahajan & Nagaraj, 2017) analyze rural employment growth in India's construction sector, identifying a gap in understanding the sustainability of this growth and its economic implications. Their study uses employment data analysis and NSSO survey insights, highlighting the critical role of public investment. Future research should examine structural factors influencing these trends.

4.2 ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND POLICY RESPONSES

(Aggarwal, 2017) highlights challenges in MGNREGA wage payment reforms, calling for mixed-methods research to address infrastructure issues affecting marginalized communities. (Berg et al., 2018) evaluate NREG's impact on agricultural wages through

wage data analysis, noting gaps in distinguishing labor market effects. (Chopra, 2019) emphasizes the role of political commitment in MGNREGA's success, proposing further research on commitment dynamics and measurement tools. Chopra (2019) analyses discussions of women's participation in MGNREGA for overlooking unpaid care work and informal gender norms. This highlights a gap in research on the interaction between formal and informal institutions.

4.3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN MGNREGA RESEARCH

4.3.1 NEED FOR MIXED-METHODS APPROACHES : (Das, 2016) evaluates MGNREGA's impact on livelihood security using a difference-in-differences approach with NSS data, finding no significant economic improvement. (Khera, 2020) examines India's shift to a rights-based welfare state, identifying awareness gaps and caste dynamics that hinder NREGA's effectiveness. (Khera & Nayak, 2024) emphasize NREGA's transformative potential for women while noting challenges in the social acceptance of wage work. There is a need for more investigation of institutional interactions to address persistent gender biases.

4.3.2 DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION CHALLENGES: (Mathur, 2012) points out problems in MGNREGS's transparency, saying that these are not working well. He further suggests for investigation to find governance models that ensures efficiency and accountability. (Mehrotra et al., 2014) analyze employment trends and the need for job creation amid structural changes, identifying gaps in effective strategies. (Nagaraj et al., n.d.) find that MGNREGA has raised wages but highlights ongoing gender wage inequality, suggesting policy interventions to align with agricultural objectives. (Narayanan & Das, 2024)) reveal state- level variations in women's participation, advocating for tailored policies to enhance access.

4.4 CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE

4.4.1 CENTRALIZATION VS. DECENTRALIZATION: (Patnaik et al., 2017) focuses on the centralization of labour budget in MGNREGS. They further argues that it should be managed locally instead and advocates for long term studies to better understand the social and economic challenges faced by the people. (Patwardhan & Tasciotti, 2023) analyse household vulnerability in Odisha, finding WORLP beneficiaries less vulnerable than MGNREGA participants, who face challenges like corruption. (Pellissery & Jalan, 2011) assess MGNREGA's gendered implications in Andhra Pradesh, revealing systemic barriers that limit women's empowerment despite increased participation. It shows that, there are deep

rooted barriers that prevent women from achieving empowerment even though more women are getting involved in MGNREGS.

(Rajasekhar et al. 2013) examine social audits in Karnataka, identifying participatory gaps and they suggest that there should be wider evaluations to improve the process. (Ranaware et al., 2015) provide a literature review on MGNREGA in Maharashtra, revealing high user satisfaction but gaps in project execution. Their methodology includes surveying 4,881 users, indicating a need for improved local participation.

4.4.2 EMPLOYMENT TRENDS AND SUSTAINABILITY: (Reddy et al., 2014) review MGNREGA's impacts on marginalized groups, emphasizing the need for equitable access assessments through synthesizing various studies. (Shah 2013) addresses India's water crisis, advocating for participatory management and assessing MGNREGA's role in water sustainability. (Ghosh, 2017) studies MGNREGS's impact on women's financial inclusion, suggesting future research on effective financial empowerment policies.

4.4.3 POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES: (Shah 2007) describes NREGA as a "showpiece" initiative, calling for substantial reforms to unlock its full potential. (P. Chakraborty, 2007) suggests a shift from supply-based to demand-based projects, emphasizing the importance of understanding region-specific labour demands to avoid imprudent fund usage.

4.4.4 Corruption and Mismanagement: (Das et al. 2007) reveal that NREGA, as implemented by the Orissa Government, leads to grandiose claims of expenditure with minimal tangible results. (Afridi, 2008) stresses that without serious actions against corrupt officials, community monitoring will have limited efficacy.

4.4.5 Social Audit and Worker Empowerment: (K. S. Gopal, 2009) emphasizes that social audits in Andhra Pradesh must be streamlined to enhance accessibility and efficacy, while (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010) argue that empowering NREGA workers is crucial for reducing embezzlement. When workers manage their accounts and collective organizations, they become less vulnerable to exploitation.

5. Conclusion

The literature review reflects that the MGNREGS has great potential to empower rural women in India. However, there are important gaps in realising its holistic effects. Incorporating the views of marginalized groups, women, focusing on using various methods and addressing underlying barriers should be the focus for further investigations. By doing so, we can improve the effectiveness of MGNREGS as an initiative to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

References:

- Adhikari, A., & Bhatia, K. (2010). *NREGA Wage Payments: Can We Bank on the Banks? Economic and Political Weekly*, XLV (1) 30-37
- A V Jose. (2013). Changes in Wages and Earnings of Rural Labourers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(26/27), 107–114.
- Afridi, F. (2008). *Can Community Monitoring Improve the Accountability of Public Officials? Economic and Political Weekly*, 35-40
- Aggarwal, A. (2017). *Tyranny of MGNREGA's Monitoring System. Economic and Political Weekly*, LII (37) 24-26
- Aggarwal A. (2016). The MGNREGA Crisis: Insights from Jharkhand. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(22), 38–43.
- Anderson S. et al., (2015). “One Kind of Democracy”: Implementing MGNREGS. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(26/27), 44–48.
- World Development*, 103, 239–254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.10.027>
- Bhatti B. (2012). Aadhaar-Enabled Payments for NREGA Workers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(19), 16–19.
- Biswas, T. K., & Kabir, M. (2004). Measuring women's empowerment: Indicators and measurement techniques. *Social Change*, 34(3), 64–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908570403400305>
- Carswell C & Neve (2013). Women at the Crossroads: Implementation of Employment Guarantee Scheme in Rural Tamil Nadu. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(52), 82– 93.
- Chopra, D. (2019). Taking Care into Account: Leveraging India's MGNREGA for Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 50(6), 1687–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12535>
- Chhotray V (2015). Through Narega's Lens: Rural Employment and Economy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(10), 23–25.
- Das, S. (2016). Impact of MGNREGA on the livelihood security of rural poor in India: A study using national sample survey data. *Oxford Development Studies*, 44(4), 420–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2016.1246658>
- Ghosh, S. (2017). Did MGNREGS Improve Financial Inclusion? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(12), 106–114.
- Gupta, K., & Yesudian, P. P. (2006). Evidence of women's empowerment in India: A study of socio-spatial disparities. *GeoJournal*, 65(4), 365–380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-7556-z>
- K. S. Gopal. (2009). NREGA Social Audit: Myths and Reality. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(3), 70–71.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>
- Khader, S. & University of Arkansas Press. (2018). *Passive Empowerment: How Women's Agency Became Women Doing It All. Philosophical Topics*, 46(2), 141–163. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201846216>
- Khera, R. (2020). India's Welfare State: A Halting Shift from Benevolence to Rights. *Current History*, 119(816), 134–140. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2020.119.816.134>
- Mahajan, K., & Nagaraj, R. (2017). Rural Construction Employment Boom during 2000–12: Evidence from NSSO Surveys. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(52), 54–63.
- Mathur, N. (2012). Transparent-making Documents and the Crisis of Implementation: A Rural Employment Law and Development Bureaucracy in India. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 35(2), 167–185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1555-2934.2012.01197.x>

Mehrotra, S., Parida, J., Sinha, S., & Gandhi, A. (2024). *Explaining Employment Trends in the Indian Economy: 1993-94 to 2011-12*.

MGNREGA Sameeksha II An Anthology Of Research Studies (2012-2014), United Nations Development Programme, www.in.undp.org

Mishra, N. K., & Tripathi, T. (2011). Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(MARCH 12-18, 2011), 58–65.

Panda B. (2015). National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: Development Practice at the Crossroads. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(23), 126–131.

Patnaik et al., (2017). Can Developmental Interventions Reduce Households' Vulnerability? Empirical Evidence from Rural India. *Current Science*, 113(10), 2004. <https://doi.org/10.18520/cs/v113/i10/2004-2013>

Patwardhan, S., & Tasciotti, L. (2023). The effect of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on the size of outstanding debts in rural India. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 15(4), 353–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2022.2103169>

Pellissery, S., & Jalan, S. K. (2011). Towards transformative social protection: A gendered analysis of the Employment Guarantee Act of India (MGNREGA). *Gender & Development*, 19(2), 283–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2011.592639>

Pinaki Chakraborty. (2007). Implementation of Employment Guarantee: A Preliminary Appraisal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(7), 548–551.

Rajvanshi, A. K. (2016). Roadmap for Rural India. *Current Science*, 111(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.18520/cs/v111/i1/39-43>

Ravallon M. (2012). Corruption in the MGNREGS: Assessing an Index. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(8), 13–15.

Reddy, D. N., Reddy, A. A., & Bantilan, M. C. S. (2014). The Impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on Rural Labor Markets and Agriculture. *India Review*, 13(3), 251–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2014.937271>

Tambe, S., Arrawatia, M. L., & Ganeriwala, A. K. (2012). Managing Rural Development in the Mountain State of Sikkim, India: Experiences, Innovative Approaches, and Key Issues. *Mountain Research and Development*, 32(2), 242–252. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-12-00005.1>