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**TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE MGNREGS**

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## TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE MGNREGS

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### ABSTRACT

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) stands as a beacon of welfare in India, specifically tailored to uplift rural communities. At its core, MGNREGS aims to provide a crucial safety net by offering a guaranteed hundred days of employment to unemployed families within their own locality over the course of a year. The objectives of this research paper, conducted over the study period from 2014-15 to 2020-21, are to investigate the dynamics of registered workers' participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) across India; to assess the level of activity among registered workers; to examine the distribution and utilization of skilled and semi-skilled female workers within the MGNREGS framework; and to quantify number of person-days generated for women. Secondary data from the MGNREGS official website is analyzed using growth rates and percentages. Findings indicate stable female participation rates but a decline in growth rates, suggesting potential challenges. Strategies for fostering women's participation include awareness campaigns, skill development, equal pay policies, and addressing barriers like transportation and childcare.

**Keywords:** MGNREGS, women participation, active workers, person days

In the intricate tapestry of India's socio-economic landscape, rural areas emerge as vibrant hubs teeming with life, accommodating a staggering three-quarters of the nation's populace, totaling approximately 1,128 million individuals. This vast demographic swath underscores the enduring significance of rural communities in shaping India's identity and trajectory. Within these rural expanses, agriculture reigns supreme, serving as the backbone of livelihood for over 66 percent of the country's workforce. The agrarian sector, with its rich traditions and deep-rooted practices, not only sustains livelihoods but also embodies a cultural ethos that resonates across generations. Yet, despite the integral role of agriculture, the specter of poverty looms large over swathes of rural India. As of 2011-12, about 22 percent of the population grapples with economic deprivation, their lives entrenched below the poverty line. This sobering reality underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to uplift the marginalized and vulnerable communities scattered across the rural landscape.

In response to this pressing challenge, successive governments have launched a myriad of schemes and programs aimed at fostering employment opportunities. These initiatives, spanning wage employment to self-employment endeavors, seek to empower individuals and communities by providing avenues for economic sustenance and growth. However, despite these noble endeavors, the trajectory of employment growth paints a concerning picture. The data reveals a troubling deceleration in employment growth over time, indicative of systemic challenges that impede inclusive economic progress. The Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of employment, a crucial metric for assessing the vitality of the labor market, has witnessed a stark decline. From a robust 2.8 per cent between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, the CAGR plummeted to a meager 0.5 per cent between 2004-05

and 2011-12 (Tripathy, 2015). This precipitous drop raises alarms and necessitates a deeper examination of the underlying factors hindering job creation and economic mobility.

Furthermore, juxtaposing the sluggish pace of employment growth with the expansion of the labor force reveals a glaring disparity. While the labor force burgeons at a steady rate, with a CAGR of 2.9 per cent and 0.4 per cent during the respective periods, job creation struggles to keep pace. This imbalance underscores systemic inefficiencies that stifle economic dynamism and perpetuate cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. In essence, the challenge of fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development in rural India requires multifaceted approaches that address not only immediate economic needs but also systemic barriers to progress. It demands concerted efforts to bolster agricultural productivity, enhance skill development, and create an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and innovation. Only through holistic and collaborative endeavors can India realize its vision of a prosperous and equitable future for all its citizens.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) stands as a beacon of welfare in India, specifically tailored to uplift rural communities. At its core, MGNREGS aims to provide a crucial safety net by offering a guaranteed hundred days of employment to unemployed families within their own locality over the course of a year. This employment is facilitated through various projects and initiatives undertaken at the grassroots level. By ensuring that participants receive government-declared piece rates for their work, MGNREGS not only provides much-needed income but also empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to their community's development. The program's emphasis on local employment generation holds the potential to stem the tide of rural-to-urban migration, a phenomenon that has long plagued India's socio-economic landscape. Rural-to-urban migration is driven by a complex interplay of factors, often categorized as push and pull factors. Push factors, such as limited employment opportunities and inadequate income levels in rural areas, propel individuals to seek livelihoods elsewhere. On the other hand, pull factors, such as the promise of better-paying jobs and improved living standards in urban centers, attract migrants to urban areas. By addressing the root causes of rural-to-urban migration, particularly the push factors, MGNREGS aims to create a more sustainable and equitable socio-economic environment in rural India. By providing employment opportunities closer to home, the program not only ensures the economic well-being of rural households but also strengthens the fabric of local communities. Furthermore, MGNREGS serves as a catalyst for grassroots development, as the projects undertaken under the program are often geared towards building vital rural infrastructure, conserving natural resources, and promoting sustainable livelihoods. This multi-dimensional approach not only addresses immediate employment needs but also lays the groundwork for long-term socio-economic growth and resilience in rural areas (Amit Kundu, 2015).

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme stands as the largest rural development initiative of its kind. Distinguished by its innovative features such as guaranteed wage employment, creation of lasting assets, and provision of social security through Rashtriya Sashay Baima Yojana, among others, it sets itself apart from previous development endeavors. Over its ten-year span, the program has become a beacon of hope for countless villagers, offering them the means to earn a livelihood locally and bolster agricultural production through the assets generated by the scheme. Since its inception in February 2006, the program's focus on enhancing rural livelihoods underscores the ongoing significance of the assets it creates (Sanjay Thakur, 2018).

Within the framework of the MGNREGS, the participation of women holds particular significance. Historically, rural women in India have been disproportionately affected by socio-economic disparities, facing barriers to education, employment, and decision-making processes. The MGNREGS presents a unique opportunity to address these disparities by providing women with avenues for economic independence, skill development, and social inclusion. However, despite the potential benefits, the participation of women in the MGNREGS has been subject to various challenges and constraints. These may include socio-cultural norms, limited access to resources, inadequate awareness, and administrative hurdles. Understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for maximizing the effectiveness and inclusivity of the MGNREGS, thereby ensuring its potential to transform the lives of rural women and communities. Despite the commendable objectives of the MGNREGS, there exists a gap in understanding the extent and nature of women's participation within the scheme. While anecdotal evidence suggests that women have increasingly availed themselves of employment opportunities provided by the MGNREGS, a comprehensive assessment of their participation levels, experiences, and the factors influencing their engagement remains lacking.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this research paper, conducted over the study period from 2014-15 to 2020-21, are to investigate the dynamics of registered workers' participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) across India; to assess the level of activity among registered workers; to examine the distribution and utilization of skilled and semi-skilled female workers within the MGNREGS framework; and to quantify number of person-days generated for women.

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed for this study involves the utilization of secondary data collected from the official website of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) under the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) for the period spanning from 2014-15 to 2020-21. Data analysis is primarily conducted using growth rates and percentages to fulfill the objectives outlined in the study. The research paper commences with a concise review of relevant literature concerning the implementation of the MGNREGS, providing contextual background information. Subsequently, the secondary data is meticulously analyzed in accordance with the aforementioned objectives of the study, facilitating a comprehensive examination of registered workers' participation, gender-specific employment trends, and person-days generated within the program during the specified timeframe.

### **Review of Literature**

Sudha Narayanan's (2008) study delved into the barriers hindering the transformative potential of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). One significant obstacle identified is the issue of childcare, which often goes unnoticed. Conducted in July 2007 in Tamil Nadu's Viluppuram district, the research specifically examined the availability of crèche facilities and childcare practices among women participating in NREGA work. It revealed that childcare poses a significant challenge, particularly for mothers with children under three years old. Despite NREGA's positive impact on the lives of young mothers in Viluppuram, the study underscores their difficult circumstances, emphasizing the NREGA's

crucial role as vital support for marginalized communities when alternative livelihood options are scarce. The study involved 104 women employed on NREGA earthwork sites, focusing on their demographic characteristics and socio-economic backgrounds, highlighting the essential role of NREGA for many households, especially during periods of agricultural inactivity.

Reetika and Nandini Nayak (2008) conducted a comprehensive study spanning six states to evaluate the socio-economic ramifications of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) on female laborers. Despite encountering hurdles in implementation, their research illustrates that women have garnered substantial benefits, including enhanced access to local employment opportunities offering fair wages and relatively favorable working conditions. The study delves into barriers to women's participation and emphasizes the varying degrees of success of NREGA initiatives designed to enhance female involvement across different regions. While acknowledging notable accomplishments such as increased income, improved access to food, healthcare, and safer working environments, the study highlights persistent challenges in execution, such as the absence of childcare facilities and the illicit presence of contractors. Additionally, delayed wage payments emerge as a significant obstacle, particularly impacting single women, potentially compelling them to opt for less desirable job opportunities when unable to await timely remuneration.

Pankaj and Rukmini (2010) undertook a study to examine the empowerment effects of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) on rural women in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. Their research contends that the scheme has notably empowered women by providing increased opportunities for paid employment, leading to positive impacts on income-consumption patterns, intra-household dynamics, and the expansion of choices and capabilities. The study emphasizes the significant progress achieved in attaining wage parity for women under the NREGS, highlighting its potential to address gender disparities and unfair wage practices prevalent in India's rural labor market. Despite facing challenges, the authors stress the promising outlook for women's empowerment, particularly through collective action, especially in states where progress has been slower.

Narayanan and Das (2014) conducted an investigation into the inclusiveness of the MGNREGA program for women, with a specific focus on sub-groups such as widows and mothers with young children, who encounter constraints in the labor market. Utilizing data from the National Sample Survey, the study unveiled that while MGNREGA exhibited overall inclusivity of women at the national level, significant disparities were evident among states, highlighting the necessity to address the exclusion of vulnerable populations. Importantly, the research found that the allocation process did not consistently prioritize women, with variations observed across different states. Despite positive trends, challenges persisted for households led by women, as indicated by lower participation rates and obstacles in accessing employment opportunities.

Bhaskar Kumar and Behera (2014) conducted an evaluation of women's involvement in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Jharkhand. Utilizing state-level data, the paper identifies significant hurdles in implementation that deter women from participating in the program, despite government directives to incorporate Self-Help Groups in the planning process. The study stresses the critical need to address these barriers and underscores the importance of implementing

recommendations aimed at bolstering women's participation. While acknowledging limitations such as the lack of separate analysis for women's income and workdays, the research highlights broader deficiencies in the program, including low household income and workday statistics. Specifically, it brings attention to the disproportionate impact on women resulting from delayed, insufficient, or absent payments.

Sumit Vij et al. (2017) conducted a comprehensive study utilizing secondary data from the National Sample Survey Office in conjunction with a household-level survey conducted across four villages in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The objective was to assess the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and its direct and indirect benefits. The findings emphasized the positive impact of the program on women's participation in rural areas of both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. While acknowledging these favorable aspects, the study also analyzed field indicators, revealing a mixture of positive and negative feedback regarding women's involvement in MGNREGS. Negative consequences, such as increased domestic responsibilities and challenges in childcare, were more pronounced in Andhra Pradesh compared to Telangana. Nonetheless, positive outcomes included an enhancement in women's decision-making authority, particularly in managing daily social and economic obligations that contribute to household well-being.

**Registered workers under the MGNREGS**

Table -1 presents a comprehensive overview of registered workers in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all-India level from 2014-15 to 2020-21. Notably, there has been a consistent decline in the total registered workers, dropping from 2592.55 lakhs in 2014-15 to 2559.22 lakhs in 2020-21. Despite this overall trend, the number of women registered has remained relatively stable, fluctuating within a narrow range. The percentage of women workers in the total has shown minor variations, with a peak of 48.23 per cent in 2020-21. However, the growth rate of women workers has consistently been negative, indicating a gradual decline over the years, reaching its lowest at -0.75 per cent in 2020-21. The negative growth rates in the number of women workers suggest a concerning trend that warrants further investigation.

**Table – 1**

**REGISTERED WORKERS IN THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL**

(Figures in Lakhs)

Year	Number of women registered	Total registered workers	% of women workers in the total	Growth rate of women workers
2014-15	1249.46	2592.55	48.19	-
2015-16	1248.70	2590.79	48.20	-0.06
2016-17	1246.04	2585.14	48.20	-0.21
2017-18	1244.12	2581.12	48.20	-0.15
2018-19	1243.78	2580.27	48.20	-0.03
2019-20	1243.52	2579.69	48.20	-0.02
2020-21	1234.25	2559.22	48.23	-0.75

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

### Active workers

Table – 2 presents data on the active workers in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all India level over a seven-year period from 2014-15 to 2020-21. The number of active women workers has remained relatively stable, hovering around 730 to 733 lakhs during this period. Despite slight fluctuations, the percentage of women workers in the total workforce has remained consistently at 51.18 per cent, showcasing a gender-balanced participation in the MGNREGS. The growth rate of women workers has also been modest, with a minimal increase of 0.03 per cent in 2015-16 and a slight decline of -0.01 per cent in 2018-19. Overall, the data indicates a stable and gender-inclusive pattern in the active workforce engaged in MGNREGS activities at the national level. While the total number of active workers in MGNREGS has seen a gradual increase, reaching 1433.80 lakhs in 2020-21, the overall growth rate has been relatively modest.

**Table – 2**

#### ACTIVE WORKERS IN THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL

(Figures in Lakhs)

Year	Number of active women workers	Total active workers	% of women workers in the total	Growth rate of women workers
2014-15	730.49	1427.41	51.18	-
2015-16	730.74	1427.87	51.18	0.03
2016-17	731.72	1429.76	51.18	0.13
2017-18	731.71	1429.75	51.18	0.00
2018-19	731.67	1429.73	51.18	-0.01
2019-20	731.64	1429.66	51.18	0.00
2020-21	733.21	1433.80	51.14	0.21

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

### Skilled-Semiskilled Registered Women Workers

Table - 3 presents data on skilled and semiskilled registered women workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all India level for the years 2014-15 to 2020-21. From 2014-15 to 2020-21, the number of female skilled workers remained relatively stable, with a slight decrease from 668,977 to 652,084, representing a decline of 2.48 per cent. However, the growth rate fluctuated, showing a marginal increase in 2015-16 (0.03 per cent) followed by a slight decline in the subsequent years. This suggests a certain degree of volatility in the employment of skilled women workers under the MGNREGS during the specified period. On the other hand, the number of female semiskilled workers experienced fluctuations over the years, with an

overall increase from 1,621,159 in 2014-15 to 1,627,690 in 2020-21. The growth rate of semiskilled women workers varied annually, reaching a peak of 0.40 per cent in 2020-21. This indicates a positive trend in the employment of semiskilled women workers under the MGNREGS, with a notable increase in the most recent year.

**Table – 3**

**SKILLED-SEMISKILLED REGISTERED WOMEN WORKERS UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL**

Year	Female skilled worker	Growth rate of women skilled workers	Female semiskilled worker	Growth rate of women semiskilled workers
2014-15	668977	-	1621159	-
2015-16	669189	0.03	1621568	0.03
2016-17	668859	-0.05	1622329	0.05
2017-18	668840	0.00	1621543	-0.05
2018-19	668777	-0.01	1621359	-0.01
2019-20	668682	-0.01	1621201	-0.01
2020-21	652084	-2.48	1627690	0.40

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

**Employment provided to women under the MGNREGS**

Table-4 presents the number of women provided employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all-India level, along with the corresponding growth rates for the years 2014-15 to 2020-21. In 2014-15, the program provided employment to 312.609 lakh women, serving as the baseline for subsequent years. Over the next six years, there was a notable increase in the number of women employed, with a growth rate of 16.57 per cent in 2015-16, reaching 364.397 lakhs. The positive trend continued in the following years, with growth rates of 7.08 per cent, 3.81 per cent, and 2.47 per cent in 2016-17, 2018-19, and 2019-20, respectively. However, in 2017-18, there was a marginal decrease of -0.57 per cent in the number of women employed, indicating a temporary setback. The most striking observation in the data is the substantial surge in the number of women provided employment in 2020-21, reaching 565.297 lakhs—an impressive growth rate of 36.98 per cent.

**Table – 4**

**NUMBER OF WOMEN PROVIDED EMPLOYMENT UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL**

(Figures in Lakhs)

Year	Number of women provided employment	Growth rate of women provided employment
2014-15	312.609	-



2015-16	364.397	16.57
2016-17	390.190	7.08
2017-18	387.950	-0.57
2018-19	402.742	3.81
2019-20	412.688	2.47
2020-21	565.297	36.98

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

**Persondays generated**

Table-5 presents data on the number of persondays generated for women under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all India level from the fiscal year 2014-15 to 2020-21. The number of persondays generated for women shows fluctuations over the years. There's an increasing trend overall, with some variations in growth rates across different years. The total number of persondays generated also fluctuates but generally shows an increasing trend, indicating the overall growth of the MGNREGS program. The percentage of persondays generated for women fluctuates slightly over the years, ranging from 53.20 per cent to 56.22 per cent. Despite some fluctuations, the percentage remains above 50 per cent throughout the years, indicating a significant contribution of women to the MGNREGS workforce.

The growth rate of women persondays varies from year to year, with some years showing positive growth and others showing negative growth. There is significant variation in growth rates, with the highest growth rate recorded in 2015-16 (42.60 per cent) and the lowest in 2019-20 (-0.61 per cent). Between 2014-15 and 2015-16, there's a substantial increase in the number of women persondays generated (42.60 per cent), indicating a significant expansion of the program. From 2016-17 to 2017-18, there's a slight decrease (-5.40 per cent) in the growth rate of women persondays, which might indicate a slowdown or stabilization of the program during those years. The years 2018-19 and 2020-21 show notable increases in the number of women persondays, with growth rates of 16.87 per cent and 42.33 per cent respectively, indicating periods of expansion or increased participation of women in the workforce. The MGNREGS program has been successful in generating employment opportunities for women, as indicated by the consistently high percentage of women persondays. Despite fluctuations, there is an overall increasing trend in the number of women persondays generated over the years, highlighting the program's importance in empowering rural women and providing them with livelihood opportunities.

**Table – 5**

**NUMBER OF PERSONDAYS GENERATED FOR WOMEN UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL**

(Figures in Lakhs)

Year	Number of women persondays	Total number of persondays	per cent of women persondays in the total	Growth rate of women persondays
2014-15	9119.507	16563.672	55.06	-
2015-16	13004.767	23494.438	55.35	42.60
2016-17	13222.868	23519.323	56.22	1.68

2017-18	12509.041	23364.311	53.54	-5.40
2018-19	14619.736	26776.666	54.60	16.87
2019-20	14530.517	26520.717	54.79	-0.61
2020-21	20681.690	38878.948	53.20	42.33

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

## Conclusion

The study has examined the participation of rural women in the MGNREGS. The proportion of women registered in the MGNREGS program remained relatively stable over the years, hovering around 48 per cent, with a slight decline noted from 2020-21. Additionally, there was a notable decrease in the growth rate of women workers from 2019-20 to 2020-21, suggesting potential shifts or challenges in female participation within the program. The percentage of women among active workers in the MGNREGS program remained relatively stable around 51 per cent over the years, with minor fluctuations. However, from 2019-20 to 2020-21, there was a slight decrease in the growth rate of women workers, contrasting with a slight increase in their absolute numbers, indicating potential changes in overall program dynamics. The number of skilled registered women workers under the MGNREGS program experienced a notable decrease from 2019-20 to 2020-21, with a growth rate of -2.48 per cent, while the number of semiskilled registered women workers remained relatively stable, with a slight increase in the growth rate from the previous year. The number of women provided employment under the MGNREGS program increased significantly from 2019-20 to 2020-21, with a growth rate of 36.98 per cent, marking a substantial rise compared to previous years' growth rates. This notable increase suggests potential shifts or expansions in the program's reach and impact on female employment. The number of persondays generated for women under the MGNREGS program experienced a substantial increase from 2019-20 to 2020-21, with a growth rate of 42.33 per cent, marking a significant rise compared to previous years' growth rates. Despite a slight decrease in the percentage of women persondays in the total from the previous year, the absolute increase in women persondays suggests a notable expansion in female participation and engagement within the program.

To foster active participation of rural women in the MGNREGS program, a comprehensive approach is needed. This should involve targeted awareness campaigns to educate women about their rights and opportunities, coupled with skill development and training programs tailored to their needs. Access to information and resources should be facilitated through community centers and online portals, while gender-sensitive policies should ensure equal pay and safe working conditions. Promoting collective action through women's self-help groups and inclusive decision-making processes can empower women to advocate for their rights within the program. Addressing barriers such as transportation and childcare, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are also crucial for ensuring the meaningful engagement of rural women in MGNREGS activities. Policymakers may need to delve into the underlying factors contributing to the declining participation of workers, particularly women, in MGNREGS. This analysis underscores the importance of addressing potential economic, policy, or social factors influencing worker registrations to ensure the continued effectiveness of the employment guarantee scheme.

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