

## Enhancing Women's Empowerment through MGNREGA in Manipur: A Comprehensive Analysis

Laishram Rebita Devi<sup>1\*</sup>; Maisnam Bobo Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Professor  
Department of Economics, Manipur University, Canchipur (Manipur - India)  
\*Corresponding Author, Email: rebitalaishram1982@gmail.com

### Abstract:

Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of development. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a significant initiative aimed at increasing women's participation in the workforce by providing job opportunities. The Act's provisions promote gender equality by ensuring that at least one-third of all workers are women, mandating equal pay, and improving working conditions. This study assesses the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment in Manipur by examining key factors such as participation rates, income generation, worksite facilities, and involvement in decision-making processes. Utilizing both primary and secondary data, the research reveals that MGNREGA has positively influenced women's employment, income, and participation rates, demonstrating substantial multiplier effects. However, the study also identifies challenges in implementation, including work provision and timely wage payments. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen MGNREGA's role in enhancing women's empowerment and fostering economic and social freedom in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, MGNREGA, gender equality, employment, income generation

### Introduction:

In order to create a more inclusive and equitable world where women are valued, respected, and given the opportunities to thrive, women's empowerment is essential. Women's empowerment is defined in various ways, but it primarily refers to the process by which women gain power and control over their lives, acquire the ability to make strategic decisions, and overcome gender-based unequal power dynamics. It involves ensuring that women have equal access to resources, opportunities, and the ability to make independent decisions that shape their lives and society as a whole. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is regarded as a significant step forward in this direction, aiming to increase women's participation in society by providing job opportunities. This historic legislation was passed by the Government of India, notified on September 7, 2005, and implemented in 200 backward districts on February 2, 2006, extending to all rural districts by 2008. The Act aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per year to households whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Unlike previous employment generation and poverty alleviation programs, MGNREGA focuses on reducing rural poverty, promoting inclusive growth, transparency, decentralized development, and empowering the most disadvantaged members of society, particularly women.

The Act's provisions and guidelines promote gender equality and empowerment by mandating that at least one-third of all MGNREGA workers be women, ensuring equal pay for men and women, improving working conditions, and including representation in decision-making bodies. The objectives of the programme include ensuring a strong social safety net for vulnerable groups, livelihood security through the creation of durable assets, drought proofing and flood management, empowerment of marginalized communities (especially women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes), deepening grassroots democracy by strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions, and promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Notable features of the Act include registration of willing adult rural household members with the local Gram Panchayat, issuance of job cards within 15 days, provision of employment within 15 days of work application or payment of a daily unemployment allowance, payment of wages according to the Minimum Wages Act with equal pay for men and women, and provision of work within a 5 km radius or payment of extra wages and provision of worksite facilities. These features make MGNREGA a powerful instrument for inclusive growth in rural India, impacting social protection, livelihood security, and democratic governance.

### Literature Review:

The literature on MGNREGA and its impact on women's empowerment reveal a complex but generally positive picture, with various studies highlighting both the benefits and challenges associated with the program. Khera and Nayak (2009) found that two-thirds of female respondents experienced less hunger due to NREGA employment. This improvement in food security stems from several factors: the availability of cash allows households to buy food in bulk, which is

cheaper than daily purchases; easier access to credit from local moneylenders for food expenses; and assistance in coping with family illnesses. Despite these benefits, the study also uncovered persistent issues across states, including a lack of crèches for mothers with young children and the illegal presence of contractors. Building on this foundation, recent studies have further explored MGNREGA's impact. Joseph (2010) examined the program's effects on rural women in Kerala, finding significant positive impacts on economic empowerment, social status, and household well-being. The study highlighted that MGNREGA provides a steady source of income and financial assistance, improves women's saving patterns, and enhances their sense of self-worth. By promoting gender equality and reducing gender-based discrimination, the program helps women negotiate better wages and working conditions, increasing their social status and self-esteem. Joseph's study underscores MGNREGA's role in promoting gender equality and reducing rural poverty.

Similarly, Shihabudheen (2013) emphasized the role of the State Government's poverty alleviation programme, 'Kudumbashree', in enhancing MGNREGA's implementation in Kerala. This synergy led to higher levels of effectiveness and transparency compared to other states. The study revealed MGNREGA's high potential for socioeconomic empowerment of women and moderate potential for political empowerment. However, Shihabudheen also identified issues such as middlemen, political and bureaucratic exploitation, misuse of funds, muster roll manipulation, and lack of transparency, highlighting the need for stricter controls to maximize the program's benefits. Further insights are provided by Chopra (2019), who argued that high levels of women's participation in MGNREGA worksites reflect positively on their experiences. However, Chopra stressed that focusing solely on increased female participation does not fully promote women's empowerment. True empowerment can only be achieved through the proper implementation and monitoring of gender-specific provisions within the program. Xavier and Mari (2014) found that women constitute the vast majority of MGNREGA beneficiaries (86.06%). A significant portion of these women (68.3%) used their MGNREGA income to meet family food needs. However, the lack of worksite facilities exposed women workers to physical and mental risks, with nearly 33.3% of respondents suffering from various health issues. Despite these shortcomings, the study concluded that MGNREGA improves the living standards of society's most vulnerable members, particularly women living in chronic poverty, and empowers women socially, politically, and economically.

Recent studies, including that of Pankaj and Tankha (2010), support these findings by demonstrating MGNREGA's contribution to women's economic independence and increased household income. They also note the program's role in boosting women's confidence and bargaining power within their families and communities. However, challenges such as delayed wage payments and inadequate infrastructure at worksites persist, necessitating policy interventions to address these issues. The previous findings indicate that while MGNREGA has had a positive impact on women's empowerment by providing employment opportunities and promoting gender equality, significant challenges remain. Effective implementation, monitoring, and addressing existing gaps are crucial for maximizing MGNREGA's potential to empower women and foster inclusive growth in rural India.

### **Objectives:**

The study primarily aims i) to analyse the extent of women's participation in the MGNREGA program in Manipur; and ii) to evaluate the impact of MGNREGA on the socio-economic and political empowerment of women in the state.

### **Materials and Methods:**

The study utilizes both primary and secondary data. To represent the diverse geography of Manipur, including valley and hill areas, two districts were selected: Imphal West (IW, valley) and Chandel (hill). A sample size of 391 MGNREGA beneficiaries was determined, with 203 from Imphal West and 188 from Chandel. Among these, 189 respondents were women, with 141 from Imphal West and 48 from Chandel. A multistage stratified random sampling method with proportional allocation was employed. In this approach, districts, CD Blocks, and Gram Panchayats (GPs) were treated as strata. The wards/villages within the selected CD Blocks/Village authorities formed the final stratum. The valley sub-sample of 203 beneficiaries was proportionally distributed across four CD Blocks, while the hill sub-sample of 188 beneficiaries was distributed across four TD Blocks. Each CD Block's sample was further proportionally distributed among the different GPs, and the final samples were taken from the wards within each GP. Information was collected from beneficiaries and Gram Panchayat representatives using a well-designed interview questionnaire that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Secondary data were sourced from the national MGNREGA website ([www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)). The study employed simple mathematical techniques such as percentages and weighted averages to analyse the data.

### **MGNREGA in Manipur:**

According to the 2011 Population Census, approximately 70.79% of Manipur's population resides in rural areas. The agriculture sector is crucial to the state's economy, significantly contributing to its gross domestic product. Cultivators and agricultural laborers make up 52.81% of Manipur's workforce. In terms of poverty, 32.59% of the urban population (2.78 lakhs) and 38.8% of the rural population (7.45 lakhs) live below the poverty line. One of the primary objectives of Manipur's development planning is to improve the living standards of economically disadvantaged sections of society. MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) is a key initiative aimed at promoting inclusive development in the state by positively impacting the lives of the rural population. MGNREGA was first introduced in Manipur in 2006, starting with Tamenglong district. The scheme was extended to Churachandpur and Chandel districts in 2007-2008, and by 2008-2009, it covered all remaining districts in the state. Since its inception, MGNREGA has issued 610,000 job cards, benefiting 450,000 households and providing employment to approximately 929,000 workers in Manipur. The program has initiated a total of 14,993 works, with 1,078 completed and 13,915 ongoing. It has generated 11.29 million person-days of employment, with women accounting for 3.981 million person-days, or 35.25% of the total.

### **Analysis and Results:**

The analysis of workers in Imphal West and Chandel unveils key insights. Out of 391 surveyed workers, 203 are from IW and 188 from Chandel, with 48.3% being women. Notably, 25 women-headed households are included, 15 from IW and 10 from Chandel. In terms of literacy, 46 women workers are illiterate, with a higher concentration in IW (38) compared to Chandel (8), indicating potential disparities in educational access (Table - 1). The majority of women (63.5%) are engaged in agricultural work, predominantly in IW. Additionally, 33 women are in casual work, with a similar distribution between districts. Interestingly, exclusive engagement in MGNREGA is observed only in IW. This field data highlights differences in women's workforce participation between the districts, possibly influenced by cultural, social, or economic factors. The higher illiteracy rate in IW signals a need for targeted educational interventions. Agriculture is a primary occupation in both areas, with IW showing higher dependence, suggesting potential for agricultural development support. Diversifying employment beyond agriculture could benefit women in both districts. The exclusive MGNREGA engagement in Imphal West highlights its importance in providing employment, while its absence in Chandel suggests different employment patterns. Context-specific strategies focusing on education, agriculture, and MGNREGA implementation are vital for enhancing women's socio-economic conditions and overall development in each district.

The performance analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) in Imphal West and Chandel districts of Manipur, India, spanning from FY 2020-21 to FY 2023-24 reveals significant fluctuations and trends. During FY2020-21, Imphal West generated 37.94 lakh persondays, while Chandel generated 11.5 lakh persondays. However, in the subsequent fiscal years, there were declines in persondays generated in both districts. In FY2021-22, Imphal West saw a decrease to 34.45 lakh persondays, while Chandel had 10.5 lakh persondays. The trend continued in FY2022-23, with Imphal West dropping to 2.24 lakh persondays and Chandel to 0.63 lakh persondays. Nonetheless, a partial recovery was observed in FY2023-24, with Imphal West generating 9.38 lakh persondays and Chandel 4.53 lakh persondays elicited in Table - 2. The percentage of women's participation in persondays increased steadily across all fiscal years in both districts. For instance, in FY2020-21, women constituted 63.07% of persondays in Imphal West and 40.89% in Chandel. By FY2023-24, these figures rose to 64.15% in Imphal West and 52.88% in Chandel.

Similarly, average days of employment per household fluctuated notably. In FY2020-21, Imphal West provided 58.49 days per household, whereas Chandel provided 57.64 days. However, there was a sharp decline in FY2022-23, with Imphal West offering only 7.45 days per household and Chandel providing 14.42 days. This trend partially recovered in FY2023-24, with Imphal West at 20.34 days and Chandel at 31.52 days. The average wage rate per day per person showed an upward trajectory across all fiscal years. In FY2020-21, both districts had similar wage rates, ranging from Rs. 237.95 to Rs. 237.85. By FY2023-24, the rates increased to Rs. 258.91 in Imphal West and Rs. 259.82 in Chandel. The number of households engaged in MNREGA activities fluctuated over the years. For instance, in FY2020-21, there were 0.65 lakh households in Imphal West and 0.2 lakh in Chandel. However, there was a significant drop in FY2022-23, with only 0.3 lakh households in Imphal West and 0.04 lakh in Chandel. While there was a partial recovery in FY2023-24, the numbers remained below those of FY2020-21.

In essence, the performance of MNREGA in Imphal West and Chandel districts exhibited a decline in FY2022-23 across most metrics, followed by a partial recovery in FY2023-24. Despite the positive trends in women's participation

and wage rates, strategic interventions are needed to restore and enhance the program's effectiveness in these regions, particularly in increasing employment days and household engagement.

Participation in MGNREGA, particularly by households led by women, has significantly boosted income levels, as evidenced by substantial increases noted in both Imphal West and Chandel districts. In Imphal West, 68 households (48.3%) reported a rise in family income ranging from ₹10,000 to ₹15,000, while 58 households (41.1%) saw an increase of ₹5,000 to ₹10,000. Merely 15 households (10.6%) experienced an income surge surpassing ₹15,000. Similarly, in Chandel District, 20 households (41.7%) reported a rise in family income between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000, while 24 households (50.0%) saw an increase between ₹5,000 and ₹10,000. Only four households (8.3%) observed a family income increase exceeding ₹15,000 (Table - 3). These statistics highlight that a majority of households in both districts have encountered income growth ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹15,000, showcasing MGNREGA's significant impact on their economic prosperity.

The distribution of income increase also provides valuable insights. Chandel District seems to have a higher proportion of households experiencing income growth in the lower range (₹5,000 to ₹10,000) compared to Imphal West, whereas Imphal West has a higher percentage of households experiencing larger income increases (above ₹10,000) compared to Chandel. This suggests varying impacts and potentially differing socio-economic contexts between the two districts. Furthermore, the data emphasizes the positive influence of MGNREGA on household income levels, albeit with variations among households and districts. Further analysis could explore factors affecting these differences, such as the type of work undertaken, duration of engagement with MGNREGA, demographic characteristics, and the socio-economic backdrop of each district. Thus, the data provides valuable insights into the distribution of income increases among households participating in MGNREGA in Imphal West and Chandel districts, highlighting the program's role in bolstering the economic well-being of rural households.

In assessing the potential for women's empowerment within MGNREGA, we've examined multiple factors contributing to economic, social, and political empowerment. These include gaining control over spending and saving, accessing credit and financial institutions, reducing reliance on male and other family members, improving health and education access, ensuring food security, engaging in social gatherings, participating in local development and decision-making, understanding entitlements, and increasing representation in local government. Respondents, consisting of 189 women workers, assigned weights to their responses: 'Yes' (Weight 2), 'To Some Extent' (Weight 1), and 'No' (Weight 0). We've calculated total and average scores for each factor to gauge their impact on women's empowerment. These factors are then classified into high empowerment (average score above 1.33), moderate empowerment (average score between 0.67 and 1.33), and low empowerment (average score below 0.67) based on their empowerment potential (Table - 4). Upon analysis, it's evident that MGNREGA holds significant potential for socially empowering women, with a high score of 1.35 compared to economic and political factors. This is mainly due to the substantial impact attributed to factors like improving health and education access and ensuring food security. Economically, MGNREGA has positively affected women's empowerment, particularly by enhancing control over spending and saving, and improving access to credit and financial institutions. However, the impact on reducing dependence on male and other family members is relatively lower. Politically, MGNREGA has moderately positively impacted women's empowerment, especially in terms of increasing participation in local development and decision-making, and enhancing representation in local government.

To sum up, the total score for all empowerment dimensions is 2135, with an average score of 1.26. This indicates that MGNREGA has had a moderate to significant impact on women's empowerment across various aspects. Nevertheless, there's room for improvement in MGNREGA implementation to effectively enhance women's empowerment, as seen in variations in the perceived impact of specific factors within each dimension.

### **Discussion:**

The previous findings witnessed that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and its impact on women's empowerment presents a multifaceted perspective, with studies indicating both positive outcomes and persistent challenges associated with the program. In case of economic impact, Khera and Nayak (2009) found that MGNREGA employment led to improved food security among female respondents, primarily due to increased cash availability for purchasing food in bulk and easier access to credit for food expenses. Joseph (2010) further elaborated on the economic benefits, highlighting MGNREGA's role in providing a steady income source, enhancing saving patterns, and boosting women's confidence and bargaining power within their families and communities. Pankaj and Tankha (2010) supported these findings, emphasizing the program's contribution to women's economic independence and increased household income. However, challenges such as delayed wage payments and inadequate infrastructure at worksites persist, necessitating policy interventions.

Studies on social impact like Xavier and Mari (2014) emphasized the social empowerment aspect, noting that MGNREGA significantly improves the living standards of vulnerable women and empowers them socially, politically, and economically. Furthermore, the analysis of factors contributing to women's empowerment under MGNREGA highlighted its high potential for social empowerment, particularly in terms of enhancing access to health and education and ensuring food security. While MGNREGA has a moderate positive impact on political empowerment, as seen in increased participation in local development and decision-making, there is room for improvement, especially in enhancing representation in local government. Shihabudheen (2013) highlighted the importance of effective implementation and transparency to maximize the program's potential for socioeconomic and political empowerment.

In the present District-Level analysis, the performance analysis of MGNREGA in Imphal West and Chandel districts of Manipur revealed fluctuations in person-days generated, average days of employment per household, wage rates, and the number of households participating in the program. Despite a concerning decline in FY2022-23, there was a partial recovery in FY2023-24. The increasing participation of women, albeit with variations between the districts, underscores the need for context-specific strategies to enhance women's socioeconomic conditions. While, participation in MGNREGA led to increased income levels among households, with varying impacts observed between Imphal West and Chandel districts. While the majority experienced income increases ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹15,000, there were differences in the distribution of income increases between the districts, indicating potential socio-economic disparities. Thus, MGNREGA has had a moderate to significant impact on women's empowerment across economic, social, and political dimensions. While the program has contributed positively to enhancing women's economic independence, social status, and political participation, there remain challenges such as delayed payments and inadequate infrastructure. Context-specific interventions and improved implementation are essential to maximize MGNREGA's potential for empowering rural women and fostering inclusive growth in India.

**Conclusion:**

The comprehensive analysis of data from Imphal West and Chandel districts reveals significant insights into the workforce dynamics and the performance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Imphal West exhibits a higher concentration of women workers, particularly in agricultural activities, and a concerning disparity in literacy levels compared to Chandel. The MGNREGA has been pivotal in providing employment opportunities, especially for women, though its efficacy fluctuates across years and districts, showing a decline in FY2022-23 followed by a partial recovery in FY2023-24. Despite positive trends such as increasing participation of women and rising wage rates, strategic interventions are necessary to address the decline in employment days and households engaged, ensuring sustained socio-economic benefits. Moreover, the program demonstrates a notable potential for women's empowerment, particularly in social and economic aspects, though improvements in certain areas, like reducing dependence on male family members, are warranted. These findings emphasise the importance of tailored interventions to enhance women's workforce participation, socio-economic conditions, and empowerment, thus fostering inclusive development in rural Manipur.

**Table - 1: Profile of sample workers in the study population**

Factors	Imphal West	Chandel	Total
Number of workers in the sample	203	188	391
Number of women workers in the sample	141 (69.5%)	48 (25.5%)	189 (48.3%)
No of women headed HHs	15	10	25
Illiterate (women workers)	38	8	46
Engaged in agricultural work (women workers)	105	30	135
Other casual workers (Women workers only)	15	18	33
MGNREGA works only (women workers)	21	0	21

**Table - 2: Performance of MNREGA in Imphal West and Chandel districts**

Factors	FY2020-21		FY2021-22		FY2022-23		FY2023-24	
	IW	Chandel	IW	Chandel	IW	Chandel	IW	Chandel
Persondays Generated (in Lakhs.)	37.94	11.5	34.45	10.5	2.24	0.63	9.38	4.53
Women Persondays out of Total (%)	63.07	40.89	63.77	48.82	63.12	50.61	64.15	52.88
Average days of employment	58.49	57.64	52.77	53.49	7.45	14.42	20.34	31.52

provided per Household								
Average Wage rate per day per person(Rs.)	237.95	237.85	251	250.65	250.99	250.82	258.91	259.82
Total Households Worked	0.65	0.2	0.65	0.2	0.3	0.04	0.46	0.14

**Table - 3: Distribution of amount increased in family income per annum after joining MGNREGA**

Amount (in '000Re)	District		Total
	IW	Chandel	
5-10	58 (41.1)	24 (50.0)	82 (43.4)
10-15	68 (48.3)	20 (41.7)	88 (46.5)
15+	15 (10.6)	4 (8.3)	19 (10.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>141 (100)</b>	<b>48 (100)</b>	<b>189 (100)</b>

**Table - 4: Factors attributed to women's empowerment under MGNREGA**

Factors	Yes (weight 2)	To some extent (weight 1)	No (weight 0)	Total Score	Average Score
Increases control over spending and saving the earnings	116	58	15	290	1.53
Increases access to credit and financial institution	94	76	19	264	1.4
Reduce dependence on male and other family members	42	114	33	198	1.05
Total score for 3 factors on economic empowerment				752	1.32
Increases access to health and education	76	103	10	255	1.35
Enhancement of food security	109	59	21	277	1.46
Increase participation in social gatherings	72	89	28	233	1.23
Total score for 3 factors on social empowerment				765	1.35
Increases participation in local development and decision making	55	106	28	216	1.14
Increases awareness of one's entitlements and provisions	51	84	54	186	0.98
Increases representation in local government	65	86	38	216	1.14
Total score for 3 factors on political empowerment				618	1.08
Grand total score for the three factors				2135	1.26

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