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## Women and Marginalized Social Groups in MGNREGA: Participation Patterns, Challenges, and Opportunities

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### Abstract:

*This paper examines the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), focusing on key aspects such as participation patterns, socio-economic factors, women's empowerment, and the inclusion of marginalized groups. It highlights significant regional variations in participation, noting an increase in women's involvement but varying engagement levels among marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Socio-economic factors, including traditional gender roles and economic status, influence access to MGNREGA. The scheme has positively contributed to women's empowerment and the socio-economic mobility of marginalized communities by providing stable income and enhancing social inclusion. However, challenges related to gender norms, safety concerns, and bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder effective implementation. Addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the benefits of MGNREGA and ensuring equitable participation.*

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**Keywords:** *Socio-Economic Factors, Women's Empowerment, Marginalized Groups, MGNREGA, Gender Norms, Social Inclusion.*

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### Introduction:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most significant social welfare legislations in India. Enacted in August 2005 by the Government of India, it became operational in 2006 and is recognized as the largest public works programme in the world. MGNREGA was designed to address the growing concerns of rural poverty and unemployment in India, particularly in the context of agricultural instability and seasonal unemployment that have long plagued rural areas.

MGNREGA provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to perform unskilled manual labour at the statutory minimum wage. It is an inclusive, demand-driven programme that ensures work for the rural poor upon their request.

### Historical Context:

The foundations of MGNREGA were laid by earlier employment schemes in India. Before MGNREGA, the Government of India had implemented several rural employment programmes, such as the Food

for Work Programme (1977–78) and the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), aimed at addressing rural unemployment. These programmes, however, were neither as comprehensive nor as rights-based as MGNREGA, which legally guarantees employment to rural households.

MGNREGA emerged as a response to persistent rural poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, particularly in the agricultural sector. The rural economy faced significant challenges due to seasonal employment patterns in agriculture, where work opportunities were available only during certain periods. The absence of reliable, continuous work during off-seasons created distress among rural workers, often forcing them to migrate to urban areas in search of jobs. Recognizing this issue, the Government of India introduced MGNREGA as a legal entitlement to work, emphasizing rural employment as a means to alleviate poverty and strengthen the rural economy.

#### **Objectives of the Study:**

1. To analyse the participation patterns of women and marginalized social groups in MGNREGA across different regions.
2. To identify the socio-economic factors influencing access to MGNREGA for women and marginalized communities.
3. To assess the impact of MGNREGA on women's empowerment and the socio-economic mobility of marginalized groups.
4. To examine the challenges in the implementation of MGNREGA related to gender and social inclusion.

#### **Research Methodology:**

This study employs a **secondary data-based research approach** to investigate the participation patterns, challenges, and opportunities of women and marginalized social groups in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

The analysis is based on a wide range of reliable secondary sources, including:

- Official MGNREGA portal (Management Information System), Ministry of Rural Development reports, and CAG performance audits.
- Large-scale national surveys such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Sample Survey (NSS) rounds, and India Human Development Survey (IHDS).
- Scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and working papers from reputed institutions.
- Evaluation studies and reports published by established research organizations, think tanks, and civil society bodies working on rural development, gender equality, and social inclusion.

#### **Participation Patterns of Women and Marginalized Social Groups in MGNREGA Across Regions:**

MGNREGS was introduced as part of India's inclusive growth strategy outlined in the 10th Five-Year Plan, with the goal of addressing rural poverty and providing employment opportunities (Pankaj, 2012). The scheme specifically targets marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), as well as women, aiming to foster social inclusion and

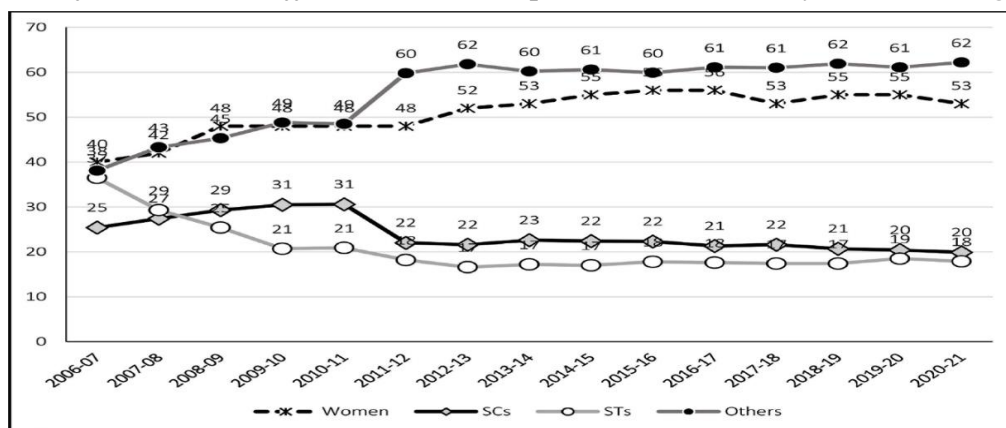
economic equity. Initially launched in the 200 most backward districts, where poor and marginalized populations are concentrated, MGNREGS sought to empower these disadvantaged sections.

Over the past 15 years, the participation of different social groups in MGNREGS can be evaluated based on their share of total person-days generated. On average, SCs, STs, and other groups have received 24%, 18.6%, and 57.4% of the total person-days, respectively, reflecting their demographic proportions. Participation trends have evolved over time, as illustrated in Figure 4. In the early years, the scheme provided relatively higher person-days to SCs and STs, as it focused on economically backward districts with significant SC/ST populations. However, as MGNREGS expanded to cover all rural districts, the participation of non-SCs/STs, including

Other Backward Classes, increased from 38% to 62% between 2006-07 and 2020-21.

Despite this, the share of STs in total person-days has steadily declined to 17%, while the share of SCs initially rose from 25% to 31% up to 2010-11 before decreasing. This indicates that while MGNREGS is designed to support marginalized groups, its effectiveness in targeting these groups has been compromised. Issues such as rationing, delays in wage payments (Narayanan et al., 2018), and other challenges have led to the scheme's benefits being diverted from the intended recipients. Consequently, MGNREGS has not fully alleviated distress migration from rural areas (Agarwal, 2019; Reddy et al., 2014), a situation further highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis (Kesar et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2020).

*Share of Women and Different Social Groups in Total Person-days (in Percentages)*



Official statistics reveal significant variations in the participation of women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other social groups in MGNREGS across different states (Table 2). Participation is measured by the proportion of person-days generated by these groups. According to Schedule II of the

MGNREGA, at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women. Overall, women's participation has consistently exceeded this mandated 33% threshold over the past 15 years, increasing from 40% to 56% during this period.

States such as Tamil Nadu, Goa, Rajasthan, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh,

Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab have also shown relatively high female participation rates, surpassing the national average of 52%. This higher participation is attributed to cultural acceptance of female labor, the presence of active women's self-help groups, and better working conditions and wages (Afridi et al., 2016; Chari et al., 2019; Khera & Nayak, 2009).

Conversely, states like Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir report female participation below the statutory mandate of 33%. This lower participation is largely due to prevailing social customs, domestic responsibilities, and limited empowerment of women (Sudarshan, 2011). Nevertheless, there has been a general upward trend in women's participation across most states over time.

#### **Socio-Economic Factors Affecting Access to MGNREGA for Women and Marginalized Communities:**

- **Patriarchal Norms and Gender Roles:** Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes often limit women's freedom to engage in public works, thereby reducing their involvement in MGNREGA.
- **Poverty Levels:** Households facing acute poverty and economic vulnerability show higher participation rates, as marginalized sections depend heavily on the scheme for survival.
- **Literacy and Information Gaps:** Low literacy levels and poor awareness of rights and procedures under MGNREGA restrict access, especially for disadvantaged communities.
- **Regional Customs:** In many areas, restrictive customs curb women's

mobility and public interaction, adversely affecting their enrolment and attendance.

- **Worksite Amenities:** Lack of essential facilities—crèches, shade, safe drinking water, separate toilets, and transport—strongly discourages women workers.
- **Implementation Bottlenecks:** Payment delays, corruption, and cumbersome administrative processes disproportionately harm marginalized households and erode confidence in the programme.
- **Caste-Based Exclusion:** Long-standing caste hierarchies and discrimination continue to impede full and equal participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

#### **Impact of MGNREGA:**

##### **A) On Women's Empowerment:**

- **Financial Autonomy:** Direct wages credited to women's own accounts promote economic self-reliance and lessen dependence on male relatives.
- **Household Influence:** Income earned through MGNREGA strengthens women's voice in decisions related to spending, children's schooling, and family welfare.
- **Community Recognition:** Visibility through paid work outside the home challenges stereotypes and elevates women's standing in the village.
- **Capacity Building:** Regular work exposure helps women gain practical skills and self-confidence for future opportunities.

##### **Remaining Obstacles for Women:**

- Rigid social norms and family opposition still constrain participation.

- Inadequate safety, childcare, and transport facilities, along with occasional harassment, continue to pose serious hurdles.

### **B) On Socio-Economic Mobility of Marginalized Groups**

- **Income Stabilization:** MGNREGA acts as a vital safety net, delivering regular wages that help SC/ST families combat poverty.
- **Rural Infrastructure Gains:** Durable assets created under the scheme (roads, check dams, plantations) improve connectivity and agricultural prospects for disadvantaged areas.
- **Curbed Migration:** Local job availability reduces forced seasonal migration, helping families remain rooted in their villages.
- **Greater Inclusion:** The programme enables SCs and STs to access public resources and participate more actively in local economic life.

### **Challenges in MGNREGA's Implementation Related to Gender and Social Inclusion:**

- **Entrenched Cultural and Gender Norms:** Rigid patriarchal attitudes and heavy domestic responsibilities prevent many women from registering for or regularly attending MGNREGA work.
- **Safety and Worksite Constraints:** Absence of crèches, separate toilets, shaded resting areas, and safe transport, combined with risks of harassment, severely discourage women's participation.
- **Delayed Wage Payments:** Frequent and prolonged delays in wage disbursement create acute financial hardship,

particularly for women who often manage household cash flow.

- **Uneven Targeting and Regional Disparities:** Weak demand registration, geographic isolation, and poor planning result in lower work allocation to blocks and villages with high SC/ST populations.
- **Bureaucratic Hurdles and Corruption:** Complex procedures, fake muster rolls, rent-seeking by local officials, and technical glitches in Aadhaar-linked payments exclude the most vulnerable.
- **Low Awareness Levels:** Inadequate outreach and information campaigns leave many marginalized households, especially ST communities in remote areas, unaware of their entitlements.
- **Cumbersome Documentation and Processes:** Mandatory Aadhaar seeding, repeated job-card verification, and deletion of "inactive" workers disproportionately affect illiterate and mobile marginalized groups.
- **Persistent Caste-Based Discrimination:** Social boycotts, upper-caste dominance in mate selection, and discrimination at worksites continue to restrict full participation of SCs and STs.

### **Opportunities for Women and Marginalized Social Groups in MGNREGA:**

#### **A) Opportunities for Women:**

- **Economic Empowerment:** Direct and independent wages paid into women's bank accounts foster financial autonomy and reduce dependence on male earners.
- **Higher Workforce Participation:** Guaranteed rural employment enables



women to enter and remain in the formal labour market, narrowing the gender gap in work participation.

- **Skill Acquisition:** Exposure to diverse public works builds practical skills and confidence that can open pathways to better jobs or entrepreneurial activities.
- **Enhanced Social Standing:** Visibility as wage earners challenges stereotypes, raises women's status in the community, and strengthens their voice in gram sabha meetings.
- **Greater Intra-Household Bargaining Power:** Control over earned income improves women's say in decisions on children's education, health, and household expenditure.

#### **B) Opportunities for Marginalized Social Groups**

- **Poverty Reduction:** Regular wage income acts as a critical safety net, helping SC and ST households' smooth consumption and escape extreme poverty.
- **Promotion of Social Inclusion:** Mandatory quotas and priority for SC/ST-dominated areas integrate historically excluded groups into mainstream development processes.
- **Local Infrastructure Benefits:** Creation of durable community assets (roads, ponds, afforestation) directly improves access to markets, water, and services in marginalized habitations.
- **Reduced Distress Migration:** Availability of local employment minimizes forced seasonal migration, preserving family unity and children's education.
- **Active Citizenship and Ownership:** Involvement in planning, social audits,

and worksite management fosters agency, leadership, and collective empowerment among SC/ST communities.

- **Long-Term Community Development:** Productive assets generated under the scheme enhance agricultural productivity and environmental resilience in areas predominantly inhabited by marginalized groups.

#### **Conclusion:**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) remains a transformative instrument for promoting inclusive rural development, yet its potential for women and marginalized social groups is only partially realized. The scheme has undeniably expanded economic independence for women through direct wage payments, strengthened their voice in household and community decisions, and enhanced their visibility in public spaces. For Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other marginalized communities, MGNREGA has served as a vital safety net, reduced distress migration, supported poverty alleviation, and contributed to the creation of productive community assets that disproportionately benefit disadvantaged areas.

Nevertheless, persistent structural barriers continue to limit the programme's inclusiveness. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, inadequate worksite facilities, safety concerns, and delayed payments restrict women's effective participation. Similarly, marginalized groups face exclusion due to weak targeting, bureaucratic bottlenecks,

caste-based discrimination, and technological hurdles in payment systems.

To fully harness MGNREGA's potential, concerted policy action is essential: provision of gender-sensitive worksite amenities (crèches, shade, separate toilets), strict enforcement of timely wage payments, strengthened social audits, simplified procedures, and targeted awareness campaigns in remote and socially excluded areas. When these gaps are addressed, MGNREGA can move beyond being a mere employment guarantee to becoming a powerful vehicle for gender equality, social justice, and sustainable socio-economic mobility for India's most vulnerable rural populations.

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