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## Impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers and policy implications of MGNREGA

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented change in societies and amplified many socio-economic crises. India has witnessed a massive crisis among the migrant workers which resulted in a severe blow to the livelihood of millions of migrant workers, especially women migrant workers. Most migrant workers are daily-wage earners, and absence of work for extended periods makes it difficult to afford the cost of living. The emerging evidence from this pandemic and experience from previous disease outbreaks shows that it's women who will disproportionately bear the resulting socio-economic hardships. According to an estimate by the UN 2019, 90% of the women workforce are part of the informal sector and migrant workers. In addition to this is the uncertainty around the timelines for normalization of the situation.

Amidst this MGNREGA has become very crucial in the current scenario. The merits of the program make an attractive proposition during the COVID-19 crisis and reverse migration. It is the largest work guarantee programme in the world with the primary objective of guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment per year to rural households. The programme emphasizes on strengthening the process of decentralization by giving a significant role to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in planning and implementing these works. This unique feature has attracted the participation of more rural women. They have taken this as an opportunity towards more economic freedom and inclusion in the workforce. In this context, the government has allocated additional provisions under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan Package to provide local employment to the returning migrant's workers. However the

program is afflicted with certain implementation issues and MGNREGA wage rates for being below the minimum agricultural wage rate, the wages paid under the schemes are lower than the minimum wage rates. With very low wages, the expansion of the MGNREGA scheme under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package seems questionable. However, it is important that we observe if these measures are a sufficient solution to employment generation and poverty reduction in the COVID crisis?

This study explores the impact of COVID-19 on rural migrant women and the policy implications of MGNREGA. It aims to understand the role of MGNREGA during this critical economic climate and gaps in policy implementation. Moreover, it emphasizes the effectiveness of MGNREGA as a tool for post-COVID rural recovery.

## **1. Introduction**

As millions of migrant workers in India began their long journey home, carrying children, possessions, crowding transport networks, and resourceless, after the sudden lockdown in the wake of coronavirus pandemic, they faced hunger, homelessness, the wrath of the police and fear of death (Ghosh, 2020; Jadhav, 2020; Jha & Pankaj, 2020). The pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the gravest health emergency of our times, is poised to disrupt social, economic and political systems and lives worldwide. As preventive measures, India initiated a nationwide lockdown since March, asking 1.3 billion people to stay at home unless involved in permitted essential services. The lockdown initiative had dramatically altered our economy and had huge on informal migrant workers.

Women migrants workers have been prevented from accessing adequate economic opportunities, due to gender inequalities and gender-based discrimination. In migration corridors, women are less protected from job losses and economic recession (UN-Women, 2020a:5), however, these inequalities are laid bare and have been worse during the pandemic. As migrant women form a disproportionate part of the informal sector, they are particularly vulnerable as they are often the first to be let go, with little to no social protections or unemployment benefits. In contrast with the previous global financial crisis, during which unemployed migrant workers were often able to change sectors, the World Bank (2020a) notes that changing sectors in this crisis may not be as feasible, due to the skills and experience needed for essential sectors (UN-Women, 2020b). Migrant Women Workers are predominantly overlooked and excluded from governments policy responses during crisis response. Their health, wellbeing, livelihood, and families are significantly impacted. (ILO, 2020b: 20).

However, it is important that we observe if these measures are a sufficient solution to employment generation and poverty reduction in the COVID crisis? This study explores the impact of COVID-19 on rural migrant women and the policy implications of MGNREGA. It aims to understand the role of MGNREGA during this critical economic climate and gaps in policy implementation. Moreover, it emphasizes the effectiveness of MGNREGA as a tool for post-COVID rural recovery.

## **2. Methodology:**

A descriptive study was conducted for this paper. Secondary data was used through various sources like research articles, journals, newspapers, websites. The article has been developed with the analysis and examining the published literature to address the objectives of present study.

### **3. MGNREGA and Its Key Features:**

#### **3.1 Background of MGNREGA**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) that operates under the aforementioned Act, came into force in February 2006, following the enactment of the MGNREGA in August 2005, and it was phased-in across India in three steps in a non-random manner that prioritized economically underdeveloped parts of India (Zimmermann, 2013). Initially it was implemented in the first 200 marginalized rural districts of India, the scheme was later extended to the rest of the country with 130 additional districts receiving it in April 2007, and all rural districts across India by April 2008 (Ministry of Rural Development, 2010). MGNREGA has been recognized as the largest state-run employment-generation and poverty reduction scheme in the world (Dutta et al., 2014).

It was essentially a public works programme that is planned through a bottom-up, decentralised process, with half of the works implemented through Gram Panchayats at the village-level (Chopra, 2011). The Act anticipates not only an immediate livelihood (through employing unskilled labour) but also long-term livelihood opportunities by creating sustainable assets in rural areas. This contributes to enhancing national resources (through water conservation, rural connectivity and renovating water bodies and furthering sustainable development. In the allocation of work, the guidelines stated that women should be given preference on worksites closest to their place of residence (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, 2013).

#### **3.2 Main objectives of the scheme**

The primary objectives for the launch of the MGNREGA programme are as follows:

1. To enhance the livelihood security of the rural poor by generating wage employment opportunities.
2. To create a rural asset base which would enhance productive ways of employment, augment and sustain a rural household income.

#### **3.3 Roadmap 2005-2020**

MGNREGA was launched in September 2005 under the leadership of Dr. Manmohan Singh. It is the largest work guarantee programme in the world with the primary objective of guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment per year to rural households. This is the 15th year of the implementation of the MGNREGA programme, which is operational in about 691 districts across the country.

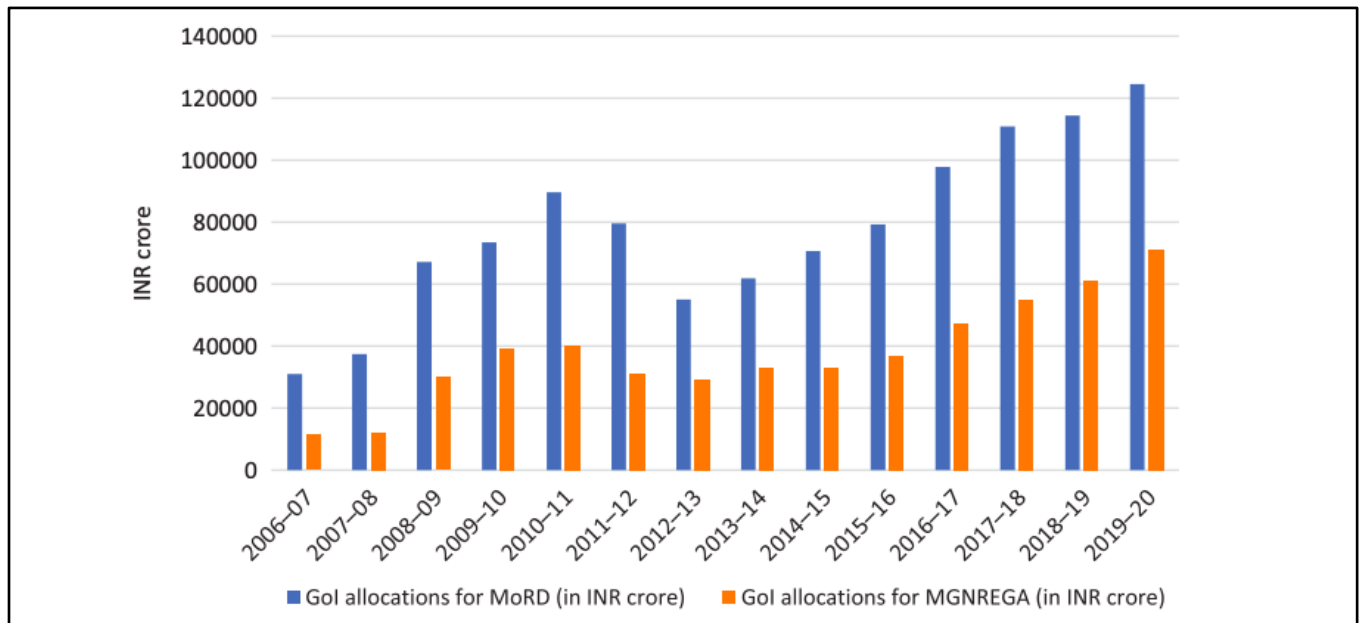
MGNREGA is the world's largest social welfare and employment scheme that promises to provide the enhancement of livelihood security to the households in rural areas, by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental. In 2014, the World Development Report published by the World Bank refers to the MGNREGA as a great example of rural development. It further revealed that the MGNREGA initiative has reduced poverty and prevented many from falling into poverty. MGNREGA has generated work, boosted incomes and consumption expenditure especially during the lean season. It has been proved to be an enhanced health quotient, improved food and nutrient intake as a consequence of the employment programme.

As a social protection measure, the inclusivity of MGNREGA both in terms of

economic and social groups has been exemplary. The weaker sections of society have been more attracted to the employment scheme. The participation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other minority groups has also been consistently increasing since its launch in 2005. The employment program and the wage rates of the scheme have encouraged women to participate in a significant way. Majority of the workers in MGNREGA sites are women, accounting for about 52 per cent of the workers consistently since the launch of the programme (ORF, 2020). MGNREGA's inclusivity goes beyond SC/ST and women to accommodate the differently-abled as well as the elderly by allocating tasks to them according to their abilities. Workers are also provided life insurance and disability benefits under Janashree Bima Yojana and health coverage under Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana.

### Highlights of 2019-20

For the financial year 19-20 spending by the Centre was Rs. 71,000 crores, while the original budget for FY21 was Rs. 61,500 crores, following the Covid-19-related reverse migration. In the financial year 2019–2020, approximately 13 crore workers availed of work under the scheme (MGNREGA, Operational guideline, 2020). For the FY21 the centre has allocated Rs. 73,000 crore for the next fiscal 2021-22 which is 34% less than the revised estimate of 1,11,500 crore for 2020-21. It also included an additional Rs. 40,000 crore as part of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana.



Source: Accountability Initiative (2020b).

Figure 1. Union expenditure budget of the Ministry of Rural Development for FY 2006–2007 to FY 2019–2020. Note: Figures in Rupees crore (1 crore = 10 million) and are revised estimates (constructed from data in public domain).

The following section discusses the implications and effectiveness of MGNREGA as a tool for post-COVID rural recovery. Which also leads to our question, if the measures taken under the scheme are a sufficient solution to employment generation and poverty reduction in the COVID crisis?

## 4. COVID-19 and MGNREGA

The benefits of the MGNREGA programme make it an attractive proposition in times of COVID-19. Amidst this MGNREGA has become very crucial in the current scenario. The merits of the program make an attractive proposition during the COVID-19 crisis and reverse migration. crisis and the migrant workers. Some of the highlights are as follows:

- MGNREGA data shows that job demand in May 2020 was the highest in eight years. Over 45 crore person days have been generated (2.63 crore households and 3.6 crore individuals have worked) in the 45 days of 2020-21 since work began on April 20. Traditionally, the months of May and June have always witnessed the highest NREGA work demand because of the lean agriculture season after Rabi harvest and before Kharif sowing.
- The MGNREGA program has created a positive impact among women during covid by increasing the quantum and level of employment. This has elevated the women in the society to a higher status of becoming income earning workers (Rajalakshmi, 2015). Women's share of workdays under the scheme increased from 40.6 per cent in 2020 (ILO, 2020).

### **5. Implications:**

MGNREGA is tormented with some design and implementation issues that reduce its effectiveness as a tool for employment to recover from the recession and the migrant crisis. While several judgements have precluded MGNREGA wages from being below the minimum agricultural wage rate of the state, the wages paid under the scheme continue to be lower than the minimum wage rate in 17 states in the country. On 23 March 2020, it was notified by the Center that the daily wage has been increased to Rs. 202, although there is significant interstate variation in the wages paid (Vasudevan et al, 2020).

Given the low wages and variation, the expansion of the MGNREGA scheme under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package has not prevented people from being deprived of basic needs and falling into poverty. Furthermore, MGNREGA workers have suffered regular payment delays. These delays, especially in the current critical economic climate, have reversed the gains made in poverty reduction and have been detrimental to the achievements of the first Sustainable Development Goal of 'No poverty' (ORF, 2020). When a state fails to meet all the administrative requirements, the wages of workers of a particular state are withheld. Such delays risk the objective of poverty alleviation while defeating the purpose of making it one of the key measures of dealing with the migrant crisis. Additionally, another limitation has been the requirement to visit the bank for receiving the wages. The banking infrastructure is quite poor in rural areas leading to overcrowding in banks.

Another important drawback of the programme has been administrative rationing that has been taking place in the allocation of work. By design, MGNREGA is not a targeted, budget-driven programme. It should provide work to every person applying for work within 15 days of such application. In the event of a failure in doing so, the worker is entitled to unemployment compensation. This feature makes it particularly attractive to be used in rehabilitating the reverse migrants of the COVID crisis. The administrative rationing that plagues MGNREGA casts doubt on its ability to accommodate the existing rural aspirants, let alone serve the additional demand created by the new reverse migrant aspirants. Given the urgency of the situation in

which the MGNREGA programme has been included in the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package to provide employment security to the returning migrants, this strategy will yield results only if the above mentioned implementational glitches are rectified(ORF, 2020).

## 6. Conclusion:

The rural employment guarantee programme in India has been an opportunity for women to enter paid employment, MGNREGA's provision has raised participation of women across the country essentially in rural areas (Dasgupta 2017, Goyal 2020). This study concludes with an observation through literature reviews and secondary data, some critical issues and impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. MGNREGA was not designed as a women's empowerment programme, yet, it has brought economic and social empowerment of women in rural areas. It has certainly benefited women during a critical economic climate.

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