

Gendered Perspectives on Rural Employment: Evaluating Role of Mgnrega in Women Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Women Empowerment in the rural area has been a vital aspect for every developing nation. The rural women have the caliber but do not have the apt forum to showcase their talent. But when the policy makers and the government identify a suitable method to employ, thereby empower the rural women, the effectiveness of the same should be assessed. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one such initiative by the Ministry of Rural Development, India from 2005. The goal of this initiative is to reduce the rural unemployment while fostering economic independence, particularly for women as it required that one-third of the beneficiaries are rural women. Although MGNREGA is a gender-neutral scheme that promotes participation of women by providing wage parity with men, there are various gaps in the implementation over the years. Hence, this study investigates the impact of MGNREGA on the women empowerment by analyzing wage parity, access to employment opportunities, financial independence, and social inclusion. Using mixed-methods approach, this study has surveyed 306 rural women and conducted interviews in the Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, India. The study adopted statistical tools to examine how MGNREGA participation by the rural women has influence financial decision-making, skill enhancement, and access to information. The findings show that while there has been a substantial improvement in the wage parity and financial autonomy for women, there has been persistent challenges such as delayed payments and other socio-cultures barriers. The study suggests having increased awareness in the adoption, streamlined payments and continuous skill development programs for better women empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, MNREGA, Wage Parity, Financial Independence, Social Inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural development and empowerment, especially women are crucial for every developing country. In 2005, the Ministry of Rural Development, India launched one of the most significant social security measures aimed at providing livelihood opportunities to rural households, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The main objective of this initiative is to provide employment opportunities for the rural community which comprises one third of the nation. This initiative guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year to rural men and women willing to do unskilled manual work. MGNREGA emphasizes on gender inclusivity and hence enforces that at least one-third of the beneficiaries are women, thereby it ensures active participation in the workforce as it seeks to reduce rural poverty, minimize migration, and enhance economic security. Historically, rural women in India had been living with significant barriers when it comes to employment, financial independence and decision-making due to socio-cultural constraints and gender disparities. Though MGNREGA was launched to bridge these gaps by providing equal wages to men and women, enhancing their access to income, and improving their overall socio-economic status with its transformative potential, the effectiveness of MGNREGA in empowering women has not achieved its true potential. Earlier studies highlighted the positive impact of MGNREGA on financial autonomy, social inclusion, and skill development, there are some challenges

that still challenges persist. The key pain points are focusing on delayed wage payments, lack of complete awareness about entitlements, inadequate grievance redressal mechanisms, and socio-cultural restrictions continue to hinder the full realization of MGNREGA's benefits for women. In this context, the present study investigates the role of MGNREGA in wage parity, financial independence, and social mobility. The focus of the study is to determine the level to which MGNREGA has empowered women in the Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, India. By adopting the mixed-methods approach, the study combines both qualitative research using structured interviews with quantitative analysis using statistical tools like paired t-tests and chi-square tests. The findings highlight that there are some gaps in the implementation, even though MGNREGA has changed the lives of rural women. The recommendations provided would help the policymakers to streamline elements toward well-informed policy interventions that can enhance the effectiveness and purpose of the scheme in promoting economic development and gender equality in rural India.

2. MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Rural employment takes a key role in the socio-economic development of any developing nation. This primarily addresses the gender disparities in rural employment by promoting financial autonomy and social inclusion for women. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), launched in 2005, is aimed at improving the lives of rural household by providing guaranteed employment for at least 100 days in a financial year. MGNREGA mandates that one-third of the beneficiaries are women. Though this scheme attempts address the gender disparities in rural employment and promote the active participation of women and contributes to their financial independence, social empowerment, and overall well-being, the actual implementation across various regions reveals challenges. The rural women face challenges such as lack of complete awareness about entitlements, delayed wage payments, restricted mobility, and other social restrictions due to prevailing patriarchal system. These challenges limit the rural women from being benefitted from the scheme. There are instances where rural women are included only to fulfill quotas rather than being financially independent. Some of these obstacles raise concerns on the extent to which MGNREGA has reached the rural women in transforming their lives and promoting gender inclusivity. The present study has attempted to assess these challenges and comprehend them to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the actual implementation of MGNREGA on the rural women's livelihood. Some of the key dimensions focused by this study are wage parity, awareness and access to employment opportunities, financial autonomy and decision-making, and social inclusion. Additionally, the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of grievance redressal mechanisms and institutional support systems that are meant to protect and promote the interests of rural women under MGNREGA. The findings could help identify gaps in the system and provide suitable recommendations for more inclusive and gender-sensitive employment policies.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate the impact of wage parity on the financial autonomy and social inclusion of rural women under MGNREGA.
- To assess the level of awareness and access of rural women to information regarding the complete entitlements provided by MGNREGA.
- To investigate the effectiveness of feedback and grievance redressal mechanisms in addressing the concerns of women and ensuring transparency, and improving their working conditions under MNREGA.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature on the effect of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the empowerment of women in rural India explores varied perspectives. Behera and Mohapatra (2024) point out that the MGNREGA has played a pivotal role in providing employment to rural women, thereby increasing income, financial autonomy, and participation in household decision-making. But they also highlight perennial problems such as delayed wages, corruption, and lack of transparency that are preventing the program from functioning effectively. Likewise, Pradeep Kumar and Sandeep Kumar (2017) in an analysis of empirical work in 2005–2015, affirm the role of MGNREGA in enhancing economic independence, self-esteem, and agency in women. But they also highlight obstacles like stringent social convention.

Moreover, Raj and Sen (2020) highlight the beneficial effects of MNREGA in boosting women's labor force participation, and bargaining power within households, though complaints related to social stigma, and wage discrimination continue.

Das and Maiorano (2019) also show that political favoritism results in resource allocation under MNREGA favoring women in areas that are prosperous but marginalized in political terms. The authors highlight that there is a need for more transparency to promote equitable access. Sarmah and Deshpande (2021) highlight that there seems to be some challenges as it has not reached its complete potential due to lack of complete awareness by the beneficiaries and poor implementation of the scheme although MGNREGA has played a significant role in providing financial autonomy for the rural households. The study recommends better community involvement and engagement for appreciable outcomes.

From the utilization standpoint, Singh (2016) uses Data Envelopment Analysis to show that rural women participation in many Indian states' underutilization of the scheme. The study also provides an estimate that performance could be improved by 133% with more involvement of rural women workforce, thereby streamlining to a more gender-focused strategies and efficient resource allocation.

Fischer (2019) explores MNREGA's role in climate risk reduction and highlights how the scheme promotes community-based decision-making and increases women's involvement in local governance. Nonetheless, weak institutional structures and political limitations reduce their ability to fully claim benefits. Malhotra and Basu (2017) also point out that although MNREGA raises rural wages and reduces disparities, it inadvertently raises production costs for farmers. Hence, the authors suggest integrating agricultural support policies with employment schemes to maintain labor market equilibrium.

From the nutrition and food security aspect the research by Narayanan and Gerber (2017), explore that MGNREGA improves the health and nutritional status of marginalized groups, especially women. They suggest making the scheme more nutrition-sensitive to optimize outcomes. Some studies highlight the impact of the weak implementation of the scheme that limits the rural women from approaching the scheme. But another study by Sudha Narayanan et al. (2017) addresses the "discouraged worker effect," where administrative rationing and wage delays lead to women withdrawing from the program over time. This Ensuring timely payments and better implementation capacity is seen as essential to sustain women's participation and empowerment.

Studies on education and family dynamics as the result of MGNREGA has been interesting along with nutrition and food security. Li and Sekhri (2019) investigate unintended consequences, noting that while MGNREGA enhances women's financial independence, there has been instances of increased child labor due to children substituting for rural women in household responsibilities. The authors highlight that in this context MGNREGA should extend support towards childcare policies that can be integrated into the scheme. Also, Godfrey-Wood and Flower (2017) observe that MGNREGA supports improved asset creation and stability in income generation, that benefits women. However, the authors caution that bureaucratic inefficiencies and wage delays limit its overall effectiveness, calling for improved local-level governance.

However, MGNREGA has thoroughly supported the migrant workers during crises such as COVID-19 and this is addressed by Vasudevan et al. (2020) and Pandey and Srivastava (2020). These studies highlight that MGNREGA acted as a cushioned support for returning migrants, and there had been a noticeable increase in rural women participation. But there had been other challenges such as inadequate wages, lack of skill development, and delays in work allocation that limited its impact. The authors recommended integration of micro-entrepreneurship, sanitation, and skill development initiatives for strengthening the adoption of the scheme which leads in empowering women. Mukhopadhyay and Borooah (2018) examine the effectiveness of MGNREGA on income redistribution. The authors find that while the scheme has helped reduce rural income disparities, the success of the implementation varies significantly across states due to differences in governance quality. The study suggest to strengthen the monitoring and fund allocation systems which is a key area for reform.

Sabarwal and Murgai (2019) investigate the impact of MGNREGA on the environmental. The study focuses on the role in promoting water conservation and afforestation and finds that while MGNREGA has positive influence on the sustainable farming practices, its effectiveness is often reduced by poor execution and corruption, mainly in the procurement of in material. Thus while, most of the studies highlighted on the positive aspects, some studies emphasize the need for stronger monitoring of the scheme and transparency. In this context, this study attempts to comprehensively understand the research gaps and provide suitable recommendations to improve the potential of the scheme to empower rural women socially, economically, and politically.

5. METHODOLOGY

To gain an in-depth understanding on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on rural women empowerment in rural India, the present study adopts mixed-methods approach. Data from 306 women beneficiaries of MGNREGA in Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu were used to assess the gender disparity in income levels. Using statistical techniques such as paired t-tests, ANOVA, and chi-square tests for quantitative analysis and structured interviews for qualitative analysis, this study analyzed the effectiveness of MGNREGA.

- The paired t-test is used to investigate if there is a significant improvement in financial stability after the adoption of MGNREGA. This would be helpful in understanding the contribution of the scheme in enhancing the economic security among rural women.
- ANOVA test is used to analyze wage parity across demographic categories such as age, education, and marital status.
- Chi-Square test is used to determine if there is an association between grievance redressal procedures and the satisfaction levels of adoption among rural women.

To complement the quantitative study, this study employs qualitative methods using structured interview with the respondents to have a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and systemic challenges in the MGNREGA scheme.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study examines the diverse role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in promoting women empowerment in rural India. It reviews six critical aspects: wage parity, financial independence, access to information, grievance redressal mechanisms, social inclusion, and skill development. Each of these adds specific value to empowering women and forms the foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of the scheme.

Wage parity under MGNREGA plays a crucial role in promoting gender parity by ensuring that men and women receive equal pay for equal work. This enhances the financial stability of rural women and strengthens their bargaining and decision-making power in their rural neighborhood. When women begin to contribute significantly to family income, there is a transition in their role from being passive recipients to active economic agents. Financial autonomy further contributes to this shift by fostering a sense of independence, self-confidence, and control. It would further support in children's education and health, and reduced reliance on male counterparts.

When the rural women have access to information such as work entitlements, wages, and rights it helps them for informed participation. The pertains to first phase of women empowerment when women can claim their due benefits and make decisions that align with their interests. In the next phase, there should be a robust grievance redressal mechanism to create a safe and secure work environment. This would support fair treatment and workplace dignity for women, leading to sustained participation in the scheme. These two aspects would motivate the women and feel empowered.

Another key component is social inclusion which addresses the historical rooted gender disparity of women, especially from underprivileged sections of society. Through MGNREGA, many rural women under this category get to engage more frequently in community spaces which results in building self-confidence and reducing gender-based exclusion, including challenging patriarchal norms. The scheme has various skill development initiatives to enhance the long-term outcomes.

Finally, to achieve its full potential in rural women empowerment, it is important to examine the key challenges such as wage delays, limited awareness about entitlements, and poor implementation of the scheme. There are also some deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers that limit mobility and participation that must be explored.

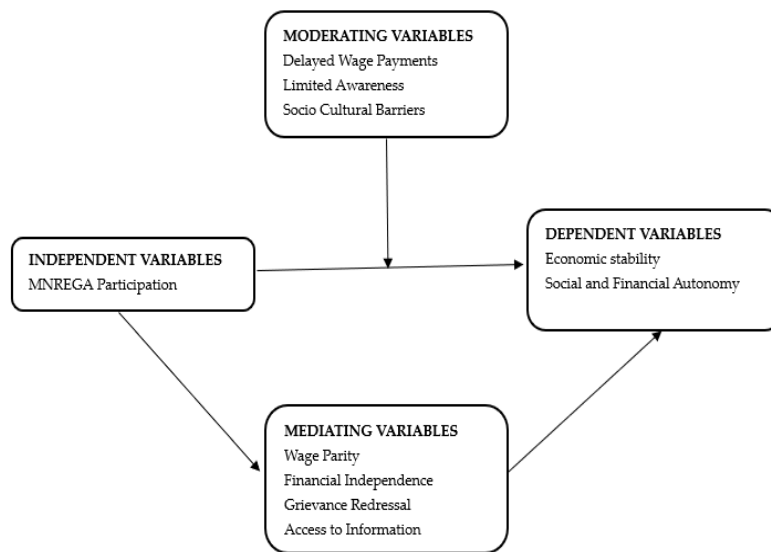


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Descriptive Analysis

Age-wise Distribution

The age-wise distribution of the respondents highlights that 49.3% of the respondents belong to 45–50 age group which shows that the scheme predominantly benefits middle-aged and older women, with and 13.3% aged 50 and above. This implies the role of MGNREGA in providing stable employment for the age group that may face limited opportunities in the conventional labor market. And the relatively low participation of younger individuals (13.4%) indicates that there is a potential for policy intervention mainly in promoting skill development.

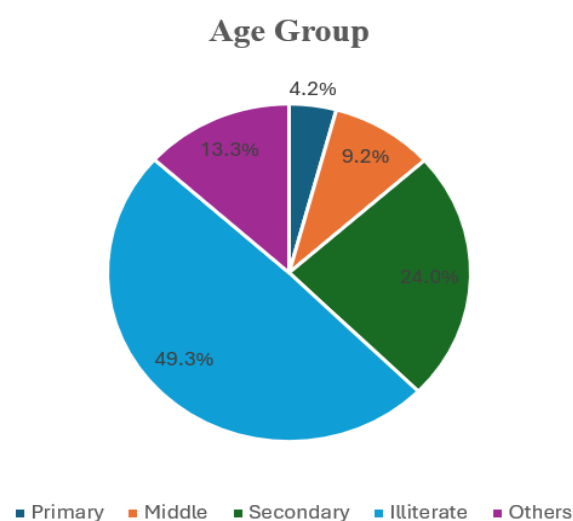


Figure 2. Age-wise Distribution

Educational Background

The distribution on educational background reveals that majority of the respondents possess limited formal education. About 52.7% have only completed primary schooling, while 27% are illiterate. This demonstrates the critical role of the scheme in supporting economically vulnerable groups with low educational level. Next, only 14.9% of participants have completed secondary education, with even fewer reaching high school level, suggesting that more educated individuals tend to pursue alternative forms of employment. This shows that there is a relationship between participation in MNREGA and economic improvement. Also, most respondents admitted the contribution of MGNREGA in reducing gender-based economic disparities, thereby reinforcing its importance as a tool for promoting gender equality and inclusive development.

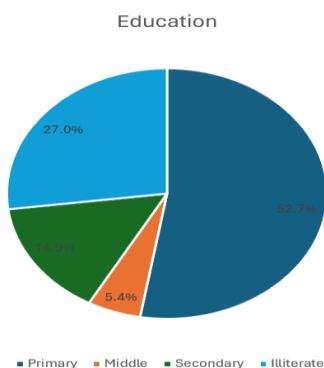


Figure 3. Education Background

Income Level

Based on the distribution of the income level of the respondents, about 41.9% of respondents fall under the 10,000 to 15,000 range and about equal distribution in the income level of 15,000 to 20,000 and 5,000 to 10,000 range and only 8.1% fall in the above 20,000 range. This indicates the concentration of lower income segment. The income level distribution suggests that respondents have limited disposable income and this may affect their ability to invest in long- term assets, access quality healthcare and education along with dynamics in economy. Thus, there is a need for targeted financial inclusion initiatives and skill development programs, mainly for the lower income segments.

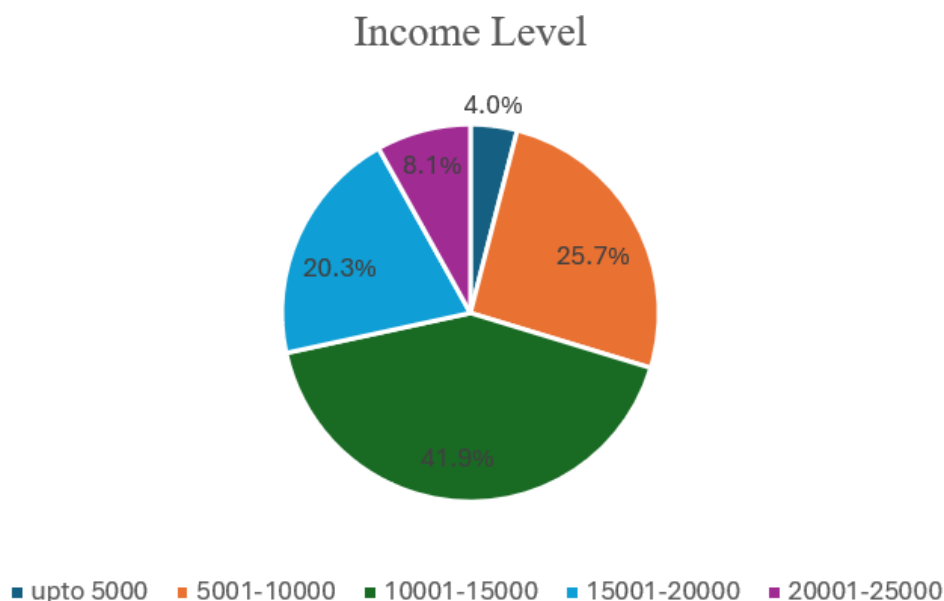


Figure 4. Income Distribution

Relationship Between MNREGA, Investment Patterns, and Economic Disparities: An Analytical Perspective

There has been a notable impact of the implementation of MGNREGA on the investment patterns and economic status of rural households. After their enrolment in the scheme, the respondents reported an increase in investment activities across multiple categories, including self-help groups, gold, cattle, agriculture, and other household asset creation. This analysis provides insights about the increased awareness and utilization of the funds received through the scheme help them improve their livelihood. This also highlights another important aspect of the research - narrowing economic disparities between men and women. This very sense reflects the shift towards financial independence among rural women. The findings also highlight that there has been an improvement in living standards which may pave a way towards sustainable living among rural women.

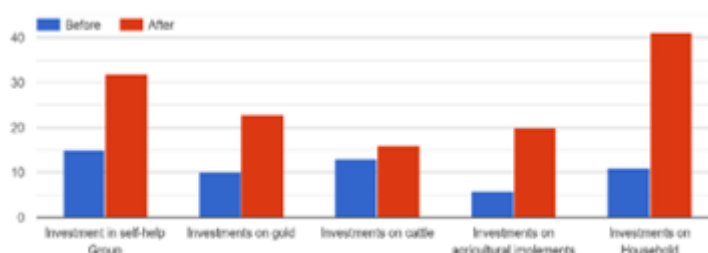


Figure 5. Investment Patterns

Analysis of Income Changes Under MNREGA

To understand if there is a meaningful financial impact after participating in MGNREGA, a paired t-test was performed.

The hypothesis for the test is follows:

Null Hypothesis (H_0) : There is no significant increase in income levels after participating in MGNREGA.

Alternate Hypothesis (H_1) : There is a significant increase in income levels after participating in MGNREGA.

Table 1: Paired t-Test Analysis of Income Changes Under MNREGA

Paired t -test		
t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Income Before MNREGA</i>	<i>Income after MNREGA</i>
Mean	3.615	4.81
Variance	3.40379397	2.184824121
Observations	306	306
Pearson Correlation	0.612461604	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	199	
t Stat	-11.27103707	
P(T<=t) one-tail	2.08069E-23	
t Critical one-tail	1.652546746	
P(T<=t) two-tail	4.16137E-23	
t Critical two-tail	1.971956544	

The inference from the paired t-test reveals that there is a statistically significant increase in income levels among MGNREGA participants indicating consistency in earnings leading to financial stability.

Analysis of Grievance Awareness and Complaint Filing

To examine the relationship between individuals' awareness of the grievance redressal system under MGNREGA and their likelihood of filing complaints, a Chi-square test was conducted. The test will provide an insight that individuals who are aware of the grievance system are more likely to file complaints, if necessary. The hypothesis is given below:

Null Hypothesis (H_0) : There is no significant association between grievance awareness and the likelihood of filing complaints.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1) : There is a significant association between grievance awareness and the likelihood of filing complaints.

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis: Grievance Awareness and Complaint Filing

Grievance awareness/Complaint filing	Yes	No	Grand Total
Yes	103	44	147
No	19	34	53
	122	78	200

Grievance awareness/Complaint filing	Yes	No	Grand Total
Yes	89.6	57.43	147
No	32.4	20.57	53
	122	78	200

Chi square value (P value)	1.0143E-05
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The findings reveal that there exists a significant association between grievance awareness and the likelihood of filing complaints which infers that those individuals who have awareness about the grievance system are more likely to file complaints when a situation arise. These findings suggest that a lack of awareness would acts as a major barrier preventing individuals from reporting problems or seeking redress. The results emphasize the critical need for structured and targeted awareness campaigns, especially in rural or marginalized communities, to ensure that beneficiaries are informed about their rights and empowered to voice concerns.

8. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has contributed to the growing body of literature on the role of MGNREGA in women empowerment on the following aspects:

1. Wage Parity and Financial Autonomy

Though the primary objective of MGNREGA is to empower women by providing employment, this study has supplemented the studies by Behera and Mohapatra (2024) and Pradeep Kumar and Sandeep Kumar (2017) who had highlighted the role of MGNREGA in enabling participation of women in such scheme would enhance financial autonomy and decision making within households by providing the evidence on how a significant increase in income levels among rural women leads to financial stability. Also, the study has provided some insights on the decreasing wage parity between men and women in the rural household.

2. Low Program Awareness of MGNREGA

A key insight from the study is from the age group and the education level of the respondents. The study highlights the identification of low awareness on MGNREGA is one critical barrier to participating in the scheme. This is more relevant to respondents who fall in the lower age groups and those respondents who are illiterate. While Singh (2016) and others have noted underutilization of the scheme in many states, this study contextualizes that issue by linking it to information asymmetries at the grassroots level. It emphasizes the need for managerial interventions focused on awareness-building

through local governance bodies, digital outreach, and community-based organizations. Furthermore, by recommending the integration of vocational training and skill development into MNREGA, the study aligns with suggestions made by Vasudevan et al. (2020) and offers a path to transition from basic employment support to long-term capacity building and livelihood generation, which remains underdeveloped in current implementation.

3. Grievance Redressal Mechanism and Filing Complaints

While previous research, including Raj and Sen (2020) and Sarmah and Deshpande (2021), has pointed to the importance of grievance redressal, this study adds quantitative validation to that claim. This study establishes a strong association between awareness of grievance mechanisms and the likelihood of filing complaints. The evidence reinforces the argument that inadequate awareness and inaccessible redressal systems remain major barriers to effective participation. From a managerial standpoint, the study recommends investing in decentralized and user-friendly grievance platforms, supported by continuous training and monitoring.

4. Economic Empowerment and Social Norms

Earlier works such as Fischer (2019) and Li and Sekhri (2019) have highlighted the need for supportive policies like childcare and community engagement, this study contributes by emphasizing the role of community sensitization programs and localized leadership development. It also calls attention to the intersectionality of economic empowerment and societal norms, stressing that program outcomes can be fully realized only when social barriers are addressed alongside institutional improvements. The study thus recommends that MNREGA implementation be complemented by gender-focused policy integration, improved local-level governance (Mukhopadhyay & Borooah, 2018), and targeted support mechanisms to promote sustainable, inclusive, and equitable empowerment outcomes for rural women.

9. CONCLUSION

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of MNREGA on women's financial empowerment, economic participation, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Statistical techniques such as correlation analysis, chi-square tests, and paired t-tests validated key findings. The results indicated a strong link between grievance resolution and satisfaction, a significant rise in income levels post-MNREGA, and an increase in investments toward economic security. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative insights, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of MNREGA's effectiveness in fostering rural women's empowerment.

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