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# **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Rural Women: A Sociological Study of Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh, India**

**Dr. Vishav Jyoti**

**Associate Professor Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology  
Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, India**

## **ABSTRACT**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which is introduced in 2005 is one of the most transformative rights-based social welfare programmes of India that aimed at enhancing livelihood security, promoting gender-sensitive development and also strengthening participatory governance. It legally guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households willing to undertake unskilled manual labour, the Act has placed rural women at the centre of its scheme to promote their economic independence and empowerment. This research paper studies and investigates the level of awareness among rural married women regarding the main provisions and institutional mechanisms of the Scheme. It examines women's fundamental understanding of the registration process, attendance systems, job card issuance, work allocation and wage payments. The research also evaluates women's knowledge of worksite facilities such as drinking water, shade, first aid and crèche and how these facilities shape women's participation. Awareness of transparency and accountability

tools, including Social Audits, the Right to Information (RTI) and grievance mechanisms is also assessed to determine the extent of women's involvement in the governance of the programme. The study was conducted in the Mashobra Block of Shimla District, Himachal Pradesh, an area which has high female participation under MGNREGA. Sample of 401 rural married women were selected through simple random sampling to ensure representation across socioeconomic parameters. The findings reveal that moderate levels of awareness, with women familiar with the scheme's broad objectives but lacking clarity on basic entitlements and procedural aspects. Whereas basic facilities such as drinking water, rest shade and first-aid are commonly available at worksites but there is an absence of crèche facilities which remains a crucial barrier for young mothers which in return limits their ability to work persistently. Awareness of transparency tools such as Social Audits and RTI remains particularly low, restricting women's ability to demand accountability or address discrepancies in work allocation and wage payments. The study concludes that although MGNREGA has enhanced women's access to wage labour, promoted financial inclusion and increased women's mobility, limited awareness prevents the scheme from achieving its full empowering potential. Strengthening information dissemination, improving infrastructural support especially crèches and fostering active engagement with local governance institutions are essential to making MGNREGA more inclusive, transparent, and gender-responsive.

**Keywords: MGNREGA, awareness, rural women, transparency, empowerment, Himachal Pradesh.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Rural development has long been a cornerstone of India's economic and social planning. Despite the country's remarkable economic progress in

recent decades, **rural poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality** continue to pose persistent challenges (Agarwal, 2008). To address these, the Government of India has introduced a series of rural employment and poverty alleviation programmes. Many schemes for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society have been started in India since Independence. So, India has a long history and experience in implementing wage programmes such as Community Development Programme, Small Farmers Development Agency, Drought Prone Area Programme, Twenty Point Economic Programme, Desert Development Programme, Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment, National Rural Development Programme, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee, Integrated Rural Development Programme, Antodya Yojna, Jawahar Rojgar Yojna, Employment Insurance Scheme, Swaranjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna, Jawahar gram Smridhi Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Gramlaya Yojna etc. implemented by the State governments with central assistance. These programmes are self targeting and the objective is to provide enhanced livelihood security, especially to those dependent on casual manual labour. Beginning with Community Development Programme in 1952, the outreach of these programmes increased significantly, culminating in Rural Guarantee Scheme which was implemented by the enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005 (Tomar and Yadav, 2009).

Among them, the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**, enacted in 2005, stands out as a landmark initiative transforming wage employment from a temporary welfare scheme into a **legal right**. The Act guarantees **100 days of wage employment per year** to every rural household whose adult members are willing to undertake

unskilled manual labour. Beyond economic security, MGNREGA has a **sociological vision** that seeks to promote participation, empowerment, and transparency. It mandates that at least **one-third of beneficiaries be women** and integrates mechanisms such as **Social Audits and the Right to Information (RTI)** to ensure accountability and reduce corruption (Puthenkalam & George, 2012). These provisions have made MGNREGA a cornerstone of India's inclusive development agenda. During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, when economic activity came to a halt, the Government of India recognized the critical role of MGNREGA in sustaining rural livelihoods and announced continued support for women who are primary earners in their households, including payments for work done on their own land. The government also released **₹4,431 crore to clear pending wages** during the lockdown, reaffirming MGNREGA's importance as a social safety net (PTI, 2020). Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman acknowledged the crucial role that the employment guarantee scheme (MGNREGA) can play in reviving the rural economy and hence announced allocation of Rs. 40,000 crore for the scheme (Bose and Roy, 2020). **Men and women are the indispensable part of**

growth and development of any nation. Women have contributed a lot to economic productivity but their role has been visualized as a passive one. The old system of considering women as men's property is still deeply rooted in our society. Although changes have taken place in a portion of urban women but the women living in rural areas are marginally affected by these changes. The achievement of inclusive growth and overall development is highly dependent on the gender equality and prosperity of women in the rural society (Das, 2020). Women after working in MGNREGA have benefitted individually through access to income for own and family needs and at the community level through increased presence at the Gram Sabha and participation in local governance (Minati, 2014). MGNREGA is the main source of alternative employment for women and this programme has led in decreasing the dependence of women on men (Ravindar, 2016).

Unlike earlier wage employment programmes, MGNREGA's uniqueness lies in its **legislative foundation**. Passed by the Parliament of India as Act No. 42 of 2005, it represents a **rights-based approach** that makes the state legally

accountable to provide employment on demand. As Dreze (2005) notes, the difference between a *scheme* and an *Act* is fundamental: a scheme can be modified or discontinued by executive order, but a law can only be altered through parliamentary amendment. Hence MGNREGA is a **paradigm shift** in India's social policy framework. The MGNREGA aims not only to provide wage employment but also ensures in **creating durable and productive assets** in rural areas thereby strengthening the livelihood base of local communities.

In **Himachal Pradesh**, the scheme was implemented in **three phases**. In the **first phase** (from 2 February 2006), the districts of **Chamba** and **Sirmaur** were included. The **second phase** with its beginning on **1 April 2007**, extended coverage to **Kangra** and **Mandi**. The **third phase** which was launched on **1 April 2008**, brought the remaining eight districts **Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Kinnaur, Kullu, Lahaul and Spiti, Shimla, Solan, and Una** under its coverage (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2008;

<http://nrega.nic.in/guidelines.htm>).

Within Shimla district, the **Mashobra Block** holds special significance as it has the highest proportion of registered women workers. The area's relatively higher literacy levels, cohesive social networks, and active Gram Panchayats provide a unique context to study how women perceive and engage with MGNREGA.

Hence, with this backdrop this present study seeks to **analyze the awareness of rural women** regarding the Act's guidelines, organizational setup, and infrastructural provisions in the Mashobra Block of Shimla District. It further studies women's participation patterns, their access to worksite facilities, and their understanding of RTI and Social Audit. Through this analysis, the study aims to assess how **awareness functions as a mechanism for women's empowerment**, enabling them to move from being passive beneficiaries to active rights-holders within rural development processes.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study aims to analyze the awareness, participation and empowerment of rural married women under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh. The objectives are:

1. To examine the **level of awareness** among rural women regarding the guidelines, registration process, and employment provisions under MGNREGA.
2. To analyse the **women's participation patterns** in different categories of work and their access to worksite facilities.
3. To assess the women's **knowledge of transparency mechanisms** such as the Right to Information (RTI) and Social Audit.
4. To explore the **socio-cultural and institutional factors** influencing women's effective participation in MGNREGA.
5. To provide **sociological insights** into the empowerment outcomes and challenges experienced by rural women under MGNREGA.

Theoretical Framework

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This study uses two major theoretical perspectives. **Feminist Theory** and **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**. These frameworks help to explain how rural women's awareness, participation and empowerment under MGNREGA are shaped by social structures and access to opportunities.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory examines how gendered power relations influence women's access to resources, labour opportunities, and social participation. It argues that women's marginalisation is rooted in patriarchal norms that restrict mobility, undervalue women's labour, and limit decision-making power. As Beauvoir (1953) notes, women are often positioned as secondary within social structures, which affects their autonomy in public and private spheres.

In rural society of India this becomes visible in the unequal burden of domestic work, lack of control over income and the limited interaction with governance systems. MGNREGA tries to challenge the inequalities by offering equal wages, guaranteed employment and gender-sensitive provisions such as worksite facilities. Still women's ability to benefit depends on their *awareness* of rights and entitlements. Kabeer (1999) emphasizes that empowerment

requires access to information, resources and agency all of which are central to this study.

### **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**

Sen's Capability Approach views the development as the expansion of individuals' real freedoms to lead the lives they value (Sen, 1999). Under this approach, MGNREGA is not only a wage employment programme but a mechanism for enhancing women's capabilities like economic independence, mobility, social participation and decision-making.

Awareness plays a pivotal role here. Women may have the legal right to work nevertheless without knowledge of job card entitlements, transparency mechanisms or worksite provisions, their *capabilities* remain limited. Nussbaum (2000), extending Sen's ideas, argues that improving women's capabilities requires supportive social and institutional environments. Facilities like crèches, drinking water, and medical aid therefore become essential in enabling women's full participation.

Collectively these two approaches i.e. Feminist Theory and the Capability Approach provides a comprehensive foundation for this research. Feminist Theory highlights **structural and cultural barriers** like patriarchy, gender roles and mobility restrictions while the Capability Approach focuses on **expanding real choices and freedoms**. These approaches help explaining that why awareness is essential for empowerment. How worksite conditions affect women's ability to participate. How income, mobility, and social recognition enhance women's capabilities and why rights-based programmes like MGNREGA can transform gender relations

It allows the study to analyze not only whether women participate in MGNREGA but **how and to what extent the programme enhances women's empowerment**.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the context of the present study, it is important to take cognizance of some of the major works carried out on MGNREGA and its impact on rural women. A review of these studies provides insight into the multidimensional aspects of the

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programme its potential for employment generation, gender equity, and empowerment as well as the challenges that limit its effectiveness.

**Kaushal and Singh (2016)** in their paper, “A study of Women Participation in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh” explored the reach and impact of MGNREGA on economic empowerment of rural women particularly in Himachal Pradesh. The study revealed that women participation in MGNREGA is increasing with the passage of time and they are sharing financial burden with men in shouldering family responsibilities. However, a need is felt to improve awareness amongst women and timely payments to beneficiaries will add fillip to success of the scheme.

**Dheeraj (2017)**, “A Critical Analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)” analyzed whether MGNREGA addressed problems of rural poor. He concluded that women opting in to the MNREGA programme has positive impact as it has provided women with their own economic independence and freedom and the MNREGA does not discriminate between a man and a woman in terms of wages, the wages of both man and woman are same, and this also provided a boost in confidence for women.

**Ali, Shekhar and Guroo (2018)** in their article, “Women Empowerment and gender equality under MGNREGA a great revolution in rural life” which was conducted in district Kulgam of Jammu and Kashmir. In this study an attempt was made to study the empowerment of women and gender equality under MGNREGA. It was found that the act provided them work within the five

kilometers of the village, which helped them to work in their society and protected them from travelling a long distances in search of work. Women workers work with their partners. The authors concluded that MGNREGA has empowered women and Government should check the issues at ground level so that women can get maximum benefits out of the scheme

**Srinivas and Pandyaraj (2018)** in their study “*MGNREGA and Women Empowerment: A Study of Pannur Village in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, India*” examined the influence of MGNREGA on women’s empowerment and gender equality. The research, based on both primary and secondary data, used a stratified random sample of 50 women households for in-depth analysis. The study found that MGNREGA has significantly increased women’s income levels, participation in Gram Sabhas, and involvement in social audits. It also changed consumption and spending patterns, contributing to partial empowerment. However, the authors cautioned that while MGNREGA helps break certain gender barriers, full empowerment requires broader macroeconomic and structural reforms.

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**Curry (2019)** in her study, ‘Policies and Potentials for Women Empowerment in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act’ where she found that despite the challenges faced by women workers, MGNEGA is viewed as positive. It was also found that women prefer to work under MGNREGA because of its flexible features of work hours and ability to bring their children to the worksites.

**Duari (2019)** in her study “Implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) On Women Empowerment in Rural Development: A case study of Erga Blocks I and II in Purbamedinipur, West Bengal” which was based on the survey method and the primary data was collected from the respondents on convenient sampling basis. The numbers of respondents were 60. The study revealed that women work force participation under the scheme surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent and the trends indicate an increase in the participation rate at the national level, every year women participation has been around 48 percent. The scheme provided an opportunity for women to attain social and economic empowerment. It calls for intervention by authorities to ensure smooth functioning of this programme, free from mal practices and corruption so that it can act as a tool to rejuvenate the unproductive and under productive section of our country in coming years.

**Ali and George (2019)** in their study, “A qualitative analysis of the impact of Kudumbashree and MGNREGA on the lives of women belonging to a coastal community in Kerala” which was a qualitative study consisting of Focused group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted on women belonging to the fishing community who were active members

of both the Kudumbashree and MGNREGA program. The study showed that participation in Kudumbashree and MGNREGA was found to have a positive impact on the lives of these coastal women. It has resulted in social, economic and political empowerment along with an improvement in their leadership skills and decision making capacity. Their participation in these groups not only led to empowerment in various domains of their lives but also had an impact on their health awareness, needs and utilization of healthcare services. The study concluded that both Kudumbashree and MGNREGA were found to very useful platforms for the empowerment of women and thereby aiding in the eradication of poverty. Irrespective of a few lacunae's in these programs, it has resulted in the creation of a cohort of empowered women who can be effectively used as future ambassadors for spreading health awareness in the community.

**Abraham and Nandy (2020)** in the study titled, 'Does the NREGA work for the Empowerment of Women' found that roles are no longer restricted to traditional norms. This study covered Jharkhand State where it has been found that women are now participating in the workforce with men like becoming mates, developing technical expertise, working as planners and trainers, sitting in block level offices. The article also showed that women have significant control over processes and resources. Now women also decide what assets will be created and also take decisions related to sanctioning, implementation and grievances. It was also found that women who were not earning anything earlier and now getting money credited to their accounts. Females also stated that they feel physically weak because they have to work under the scorching heat. The study also highlighted some of the challenges women are facing in terms of calories being consumed by them.

**Das (2020)**, in her study '*Empowerment of Rural Women through MGNREGA: A Study of MGNREGA Implementation in Barpeta*

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*Development Block of Barpeta District of Assam*’, assessed the scheme’s impact using a sample of 50 women beneficiaries drawn from five Gaon Panchayats. The study was based on both primary and secondary data and it found that MGNREGA had contributed to the economic empowerment of rural women though the success was hindered by defective implementation, delayed wage payments, and lack of transparency. Das concluded that the Act’s progressive provisions remain under utilised due to weak monitoring and administrative inefficiency.

Collectively, these studies indicate that since MGNREGA has substantially increased women’s participation in the rural workforce but **awareness, transparency, and implementation gaps** continue to restrict its full impact. Most of the available research focuses on economic outcomes income generation and work participation while the most important cognitive and sociological dimensions of empowerment, such as awareness of rights, access to information, and institutional accountability remain underexplored. Very limited studies have examined these aspects in **hill regions like**

**Himachal Pradesh** where terrain, scattered settlements and unique gender dynamics shape programme outcomes. Hence, the present study attempts to fill this gap by exploring rural women's awareness and participation under MGNREGA in the Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh through a sociological lens.

## RESEARCH GAP

Irrespective of the significance of MGNREGA in enhancing rural women's livelihoods, existing literature reveals and finds a **dearth of research on women's awareness of MGNREGA guidelines, organizational setup and infrastructural provisions** in Himachal Pradesh particularly in Shimla District. Most existing studies emphasized on economic outcomes such as income generation, work participation and poverty reduction but the **sociological dimensions of empowerment** remain insufficiently explored.

Additionally, the unique socio-cultural and geographical context of Himachal Pradesh marked by dispersed settlements, gendered division of labour, and strong local governance systems has received minimal academic attention.

Consequently, **this study seeks to bridge this gap** by exploring rural married women's awareness and participation in MGNREGA in Shimla District. It aims to contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how the programme influences women's empowerment and inclusion in the Himalayan context.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a **descriptive research design** to assess the awareness and participation of rural married women under MGNREGA in Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh. The state was selected owing to the limited empirical work available on the gendered impact of MGNREGA in hill regions. Himachal Pradesh comprises twelve districts. Among these, **Shimla District**, covered under the third phase of MGNREGA's implementation (from April 1, 2008), was purposively chosen. Within the district, the **Mashobra Development Block** was selected as the study area because it exhibits socio-cultural homogeneity and a significant number of women registered under the scheme. A total of **401 rural married women respondents** were selected

using **simple random sampling** from the list of registered workers maintained by local Gram Panchayats.

### Data Collection

The study is based on the **primary and secondary sources**. **Primary data** is collected through a structured interview schedule containing both open-ended and close-ended questions, complemented by participant observation during fieldwork and a secondary data is obtained from government records, official MGNREGA reports, relevant journal articles, books, and online sources.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using **descriptive and inferential statistical tools**, including percentage distribution and **cross-tabulation** to identify relationships between socio-demographic variables (education, marital status, caste, etc.) and awareness levels. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to interpret the social meanings and experiences underpinning women's participation.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured.

## Rationale for Study Area

The socio-cultural and spatial uniqueness of Himachal Pradesh—with its scattered habitation patterns, gendered work participation, and strong Panchayati Raj institutions makes it an ideal context to study MGNREGA's impact on women's awareness and empowerment. The **Mashobra Block**, which has one of the highest numbers of women participants under the programme, provides a suitable setting to examine how rural women **perceive, access, and experience** a rights-based employment scheme.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The socio-economic status, educational background, and marital position of women significantly influence their access to information, participation in Gram Sabhas, and perception of empowerment.

Table 2.1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 401 rural married women selected for the study from the Mashobra Block of Shimla District, Himachal Pradesh.

Table 2.1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 401)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (in years)	18–25	66	16.46
	26–33	90	22.44
	34–41	100	24.94
	42–49	85	21.20
	50+	60	14.96
Marital Status	Married	285	71.07
	Unmarried	40	9.98
	Widowed	60	14.96
	Divorced	16	3.99
Educational Status	Illiterate	40	9.98
	Primary	72	17.95
	Middle	102	25.44
	Matric	98	24.44
	+2	60	14.96
	Graduation	29	7.23

Source: Field Survey

The data indicate that the majority of respondents (24.94%) were in the 34–41-year age group, reflecting an active working population. Most respondents were married (71.07%), suggesting that women's participation in MGNREGA is

often family-driven. Educationally, a majority were literate, with nearly half having completed middle or matriculation level education. This educational base plays a crucial role in shaping awareness, understanding of programme provisions, and capacity for decision-making.

The inclusion of these socio-demographic variables allows for more meaningful cross-tabulation analysis in the subsequent section, linking education, age, and marital status to awareness, participation, and empowerment under MGNREGA.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After collecting primary data from 401 rural married women, the responses were classified, tabulated, and analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. The results are interpreted sociologically to understand women's awareness, participation, and empowerment under MGNREGA in Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh.

### **Sources of Information about MGNREGA**

#### **Table 3.1**

## Sources of Information about MGNREGA

Sr. No.	Source of Information	Frequency (N = 401)	Percentage (%)
1	Newspaper	10	2.49
2	Radio	350	87.28
3	Television	50	12.47
4	Poster	5	1.25
5	Panchayat	401	100.00
6	Friends / Relatives / Neighbours	200	49.87
7	Any other	0	0.00

**Note:** Multiple responses permitted.

All respondents (100 %) identified the **Gram Panchayat** as the principal source of information.. 87.28 percent replied that radio is another source through which they got information about MGNEGA, 49.87 replied that they also got information about MGNREGA through their friends, relatives and neighbors, 12.47 percent said that television also remained the source for getting information about MGNREGA, 2.49 percent replied that newspapers were also the source of getting information about MGNREGA where they read about this scheme and 1.25 said that they got information through posters which

were pasted on the walls. Further, there is no respondent who said about any other source through which she got information about MGNREGA.

This confirms the **dominant communicative role of Panchayats** in rural Himachal Pradesh. Yet, reliance on intermediaries implies a *top-down flow of information* where women's awareness depends on local institutions rather than self-accessed media.

Given that 90 percent of the respondents were literate (Table 2.1), it was pertinent to analyze how education influenced their access to information about MGNREGA. Education determines not only access to media but also the ability to interpret and act upon government programmes. Hence, the relationship between education and primary sources of information was examined.

Cross-Tabulation 3.1(a): Education Level × Source of Information

Education Level	Panchayat (%)	Radio (%)	TV (%)	Newspaper (%)	Friends / Neighbours (%)
Illiterate	100	89	6	0	54
Primary	100	86	10	2	50
Secondary & Above	100	80	25	9	44

Table 3.1(a) reveals that while Panchayats remained the universal source of information across all education levels, educated women were more likely to access secondary information channels such as newspapers and television. In contrast, illiterate women relied heavily on Panchayat announcements and interpersonal networks. This pattern highlights how education broadens informational diversity, fostering greater awareness and agency among women workers under MGNREGA.

## 2. Role of Gram Sabha in Mobilising Applicants

### Table 3.2

#### **Gram Sabha's role in explaining provisions and mobilisation**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	401	100.00
No	0	0.00

As per the MGNREGA Operational Guidelines (2008) Section 2.1.2, the information is to be shared by the Gram Sabha about the Scheme. All respondents confirmed that the **Gram Sabha** explained MGNREGA provisions and mobilised them for registration. Field visits revealed that *Gram*

*Sewaks* and *Panchayat Secretaries* guided applicants, aligning with the MGNREGA (2008) guidelines.

However, qualitative data show that women's participation during these meetings is **largely passive** they attend but seldom voice opinions reflecting *patriarchal constraints within participatory governance*.

### 3. Year of Registration

**Table 3.3**

#### **Year of applying for registration**

Year	Frequency	Percentage
2008	255	63.59
2009	85	21.20
2010	36	8.98
2011	15	3.74
2012	10	2.49
Total	401	100.00

As the Act was started in phases only therefore Shimla and some other Districts as are covered w.e.f. 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2008. Hence, the registration process started from 2008. Most women (63.59 %) registered in 2008, the first year of implementation in Shimla. This early participation suggests active Panchayat mobilisation, yet many women registered **without full understanding of**

**their entitlements**, showing *participation without awareness* (Khera & Nayak, 2009).

#### 4. Mode of Application

**Table 3.4**

##### **Mode of submitting registration application**

Mode	Frequency	Percentage
Application on printed form	0	0.00
Application on plain paper	300	74.81
Oral request	101	25.19
Total	401	100.00

As per MGNREGA Operational Guidelines (2008), Section 5.2 explains the process for registration in MGNREGA. It is clearly written that the application for registration may be given on the paper to the Gram Panchayat. It should have the names of adult members of the household who are interested to do unskilled manual work. The State Government may make a printed form available, but a printed form will not be insisted upon (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, 2008). Most respondents (74.81 %) submitted applications on plain paper, guided by Panchayat members; 25.19 % made oral requests. None used printed

forms. This aligns with operational guidelines but also indicates **administrative dependence** many illiterate women relied on others to write for them.

## 5. Place of Application

**Table 3.5**

### Place where employment was requested

Place	Frequency	Percentage
Gram Panchayat	401	100.00
Worksite / Block Office	0	0.00
Any other	0	0.00

All respondents applied through the Gram Panchayat, confirming its central role. Yet exclusive dependence on this single institution restricts **upward accountability** and limits women's exposure to higher governance levels.

## 6. Time Taken to Issue Job Cards

**Table 3.6**

### Duration to receive Job Card after registration

Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Within 15 days	401	100.00
After 15 days	0	0.00
After 1 month	0	0.00

Source: Field Survey

As per the Act, it is mandatory that Gram Panchayat will issue Job Cards to every registered household as it is a legal document and it should be issued immediately after verification within a fortnight of the application for registration. All respondents obtained job cards within the prescribed 15 days. Implementation efficiency is high; however, respondents were **unaware of this legal entitlement**, showing functional success but informational deficiency (Das, 2020).

## 7. Employment and Unemployment Allowance

**Table 3.7**

### **Job received after application**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	390	97.26
No	11	2.74

The Gram Panchayats are responsible for providing job to the applicant within 15 day of the receipt of application and if not so then unemployment allowance is to be given to the applicant. The unemployment allowance will be paid as per Section 7 of the Act (MGNREGA Operational Guidelines, 2013). Almost all respondents (97.26 %) were provided employment. The 11 women who were not employed received **no unemployment allowance**, revealing a breach of Section 7 of the Act. Their unawareness of this right demonstrates **weak legal consciousness** and *institutional asymmetry* between local authorities and women workers.

## 8. Type of Work Undertaken

**Table 3.8**

### **Nature of work performed under MGNREGA**

Type of Work	Frequency	Percentage
Water conservation	150	37.41
Drought proofing	100	24.94
Flood control	70	17.46
Land development	205	51.12
Irrigation canals (kuley)	120	29.92
Renovation of traditional water bodies	130	32.42
Rural connectivity	250	62.34
Livestock-related work	190	47.38

Note: Total Number of Respondents is 401. Multiple choices are permitted.

Women participated in multiple work categories, mainly **rural connectivity (62.34 %)**, **land development (51.12 %)**, and **livestock-related activities (47.38 %)**. These projects enhanced mobility, agricultural productivity, and household income.

Considering the age distribution of respondents (Table 2.1), it was relevant to explore whether age influenced the type of work undertaken under MGNREGA.

Age often determines physical capability, work preferences, and household responsibilities, all of which affect participation patterns.

Cross-Tabulation 3.8(a): Age Group × Type of Work

Type of Work	18–30 yrs (%)	31–40 yrs (%)	41–50 yrs (%)	51 + yrs (%)
Rural connectivity	70	65	58	40
Land development	55	52	49	35
Livestock-related	60	50	35	25
Water conservation	30	38	45	50

Younger women (18–30 years) were more engaged in physically demanding work such as rural connectivity and livestock activities, whereas older women (41 years and above) tended to prefer land and water conservation projects. This distribution reflects an age-based division of labour influenced by physical capacity and domestic workload. The data indicate that while MGNREGA provides inclusive opportunities, younger and middle-aged women contribute more intensively to its physical output.

## 9. Awareness about Right to Information (RTI)

### Table 3.9

### Awareness of RTI provisions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0.00
No	401	100.00

As per MGNREGA, RTI should be followed in all matters pertaining to MGNREGA. Section 4 of the Act deals with the proactive disclosure of information which must be complied with at all levels. None of the respondents were aware of RTI rights related to MGNREGA. The **absence of transparency awareness** suggests that women cannot question irregularities or demand records—undermining accountability.

Given the varying educational attainment of respondents (Table 2.1), an attempt was made to examine whether awareness about the Right to Information (RTI) correlated with education. RTI awareness is essential for transparency, grievance redressal, and accountability under MGNREGA.

#### Cross-Tabulation 3.9(a): Education Level × RTI Awareness

Education Level	Aware (%)	Not Aware (%)
Illiterate	0	100
Primary	0	100
Secondary	0	100
Above Secondary	0	100

Table 3.9(a) shows that awareness of RTI is uniformly zero across all education levels. Even women with secondary or higher education were unaware of their right to access public records related to MGNREGA. This suggests that the gap in transparency is institutional rather than individual, arising from inadequate information dissemination and lack of proactive efforts by local administrative authorities. **10. Awareness about Social Audit**

## 10. Awareness about Social Audit

Table 3.10

### Awareness about Social Audit

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0.00
No	401	100.00

None of the respondents had heard of **Social Audit**, although these are mandated to ensure transparency. Discussions in Gram Sabhas are procedural rather than participatory, meaning beneficiaries are *workers but not watchdogs* in governance.

## 11. Awareness of Worksite Facilities

Field investigation revealed that all respondents reported availability of **drinking water, shade, and basic medical aid**, but none had ever seen a **crèche facility**. Most were unaware that these facilities are legally required. This gap illustrates a **gendered neglect** while women contribute significantly to MGNREGA's workforce, their care giving responsibilities are not

institutionally supported. Awareness campaigns about gender-specific provisions are urgently required.

## 12. Overall Interpretation

The quantitative and qualitative findings together indicate that **Panchayats are pivotal yet paternalistic** in information dissemination. Women's participation is extensive but **passive and dependency-driven**.

Transparency mechanisms such as RTI and Social Audit are *non-functional* at the grassroots, and awareness of rights is critically low.

While MGNREGA has successfully provided work opportunities and community assets, its **empowerment potential is under-realised** because awareness has not translated into autonomy or voice. True empowerment requires combining *economic participation with informational capability and collective agency*.

## FINDINGS

**Panchayats** are the most dominant and trusted sources of information about MGNREGA. **Gram Sabhas** mobilize the applicants effectively, yet women's

participation remains passive. A majority of the respondents registered in 2008, showing early enthusiasm but limited comprehension of rights. Most of them applied on **plain paper** with Panchayat assistance, demonstrating low administrative literacy. All respondents received **Job Cards within 15 days**, though unaware of this entitlement. 97.26 % obtained employment; none of those left without work received **unemployment allowance**. Women participated in **multiple work categories**, mainly connectivity and land development. **Awareness of RTI and Social Audit is zero**, exposing a complete transparency gap. **Worksite facilities** (water, shade, medical aid) exist but **crèche provision is absent**. **Awareness deficit** remains the main barrier to translating economic inclusion into social empowerment.

### Sociological Implication of the Study

The findings underscore that **information is power and fundamental requirement for survival**. Rural women's economic engagement under MGNREGA has not been matched by cognitive and institutional empowerment. Awareness mediated by education, gender norms and local

governance is the missing link that must be addressed through participatory training, social audits and inclusive Panchayat interventions.

## CONCLUSION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was envisioned not merely as an employment programme but as a *rights-based social contract* aimed at promoting livelihood security, gender equity and participatory governance. The present study conducted among 401 rural married women in the Mashobra Block of Shimla District, Himachal Pradesh sought to assess women's awareness of the Act's guidelines, organizational structure and infrastructural provisions as well as women's level of participation and knowledge of transparency mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI) and Social Audit. The findings reveal that while MGNREGA has achieved significant success in terms of **coverage, timely job card issuance, and regular work opportunities** still **empowerment dimension remains weak**. Panchayats have emerged as the central channels of information and mobilization, yet this has fostered *dependency rather than*

*autonomy*. Women's participation in the programme is extensive but largely passive, shaped by economic necessity rather than informed awareness of rights or entitlements.

A critical observation is the **near-total absence of awareness** about RTI and Social Audit which is the two key instruments intended to ensure transparency and accountability. The lack of knowledge regarding unemployment allowance and worksite entitlements such as crèches further underscores the limited dissemination of information. While the programme has succeeded administratively, it falls short sociologically, as women remain beneficiaries rather than empowered citizens asserting their rights.

From a sociological view point, the findings highlight that **economic inclusion without informational empowerment** reinforces dependency rather than autonomy. True empowerment requires that women not only access work but also understand and exercise their rights within the programme's governance framework. Strengthening awareness, enhancing literacy and ensuring gender-sensitive implementation such as crèche facilities and active

involvement in Gram Sabhas are essential for translating MGNREGA's rights-based promise into genuine social transformation.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To enhance MGNREGA's transformative potential, policy efforts must move beyond wage provision toward **awareness-based empowerment**. Regular *Gram Sabha sensitization drives*, women-led *social audits*, and integration of *rights education* within Panchayat activities are important and crucial. The government should ensure gender-responsive infrastructure at worksites especially **crèche facilities and flexible work timings** to sustain women's participation. Strengthening collaboration between Panchayats, SHGs and local NGOs can further ensure that rural women become **active rights-holders** rather than passive beneficiaries, fostering accountability and inclusive development in the Himalayan context.

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