# Women's Participation in MGNREGA: Empowerment and Equity in Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** *This study examines women's participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) within the Upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on the Batak-Patum Village Panchayat of Daporijo Block. Drawing on primary data from 77 randomly selected job card holders, the study explores the socio-demographic profile of participants and evaluates the extent and impact of women's engagement in the program. The findings reveal that women constitute 45.45% of the workforce, reflecting significant progress toward gender inclusivity, despite traditional gender roles and cultural constraints. The analysis highlights that MGNREGA is particularly impactful for individuals aged 31-50 years and those with limited educational qualifications, providing essential livelihood opportunities to marginalized sections of the population. The program has also enabled widows, and other vulnerable groups, to achieve financial independence, thereby fostering social equity. Trends in women's participation at national, state, and district levels between 2019-2020 and 2022-2023 indicate a steady increase, though disparities persist. While the district outperforms the state average, it lags behind the national participation rate, underscoring the need for targeted interventions. The study concludes that MGNREGA has played a transformative role in empowering women and reshaping rural labour markets in Upper Subansiri. However, to sustain this progress, policy measures must address challenges such as childcare, worksite facilities, and skill development. By enhancing gender-specific support and fostering local collaboration, MGNREGA can further strengthen its impact as a tool for inclusive rural development and gender equity.*

**Keywords:** MGNREGA, Rural, Employment, Women participation, Empowerment

## 1. Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, is a landmark initiative aimed at providing livelihood security and promoting inclusive development in rural India. By guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment to every rural household willing to engage in unskilled manual labor, the program seeks to address rural poverty, unemployment, and social inequalities. A key provision mandates that women comprise at-least one-third of the workforce, thereby contributing to their economic and social empowerment.

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, where cultural norms and limited economic opportunities have historically constrained women's participation in the labor market, MGNREGA has emerged as a crucial platform for gender inclusivity. The Upper Subansiri District, characterized by its remote location and socio-economic challenges, offers a unique lens to examine the effectiveness of MGNREGA in fostering women's participation and empowerment.

This study focuses on understanding the level of women's engagement in MGNREGA activities within the Batak-Patum Village Panchayat of Daporijo Block in Upper Subansiri District. By analyzing primary data collected from registered job card holders and examining demographic factors such as age, education, and marital status, the study provides insights into the socio-economic dynamics shaping women's participation in the program. The findings highlight the progress achieved, the challenges faced, and the potential of MGNREGA to transform rural labor markets and promote gender equity in Arunachal Pradesh. This research thus underscores the critical role of MGNREGA as a tool for inclusive rural development, with a particular focus on empowering women in marginalized communities.

In Upper Subansiri, MGNREGA has played a pivotal role in bridging gender gaps and fostering women's active involvement in local governance and development. However, challenges such as delayed payments, inadequate awareness, and logistical issues often hamper the program's effectiveness, requiring robust administrative support and monitoring mechanisms to achieve its full potential (Borah, 2020).

## 2. Literature Review

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been extensively studied as a transformative program for rural employment and socio-economic development. The literature highlights its impact on women's participation, empowerment, and the role of local governance in its implementation. This review synthesizes key studies relevant to women's participation under MGNREGA. Khera and Nayak (2009) emphasized that MGNREGA has significantly enhanced women's economic agency by providing consistent income, often the first opportunity for many rural women to earn independently. The study of Dutta et al. (2012) pointed out that MGNREGA ensures gender parity in wages, which has helped reduce the traditional wage gap in rural India. Sharma and et al. (2015)

noted that proactive engagement of PRIs ensures that MGNREGA projects are better aligned with community needs, including those of women.

The existing studies provide valuable insights, there is limited research on the specific experiences of tribal women in remote regions like Upper Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh. This study addresses this gap by exploring localized barriers, the role of PRIs, and strategies to enhance women's participation under MGNREGA in a geographically and culturally distinct context. In regions like the Upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, economic opportunities are limited, MGNREGA has emerged as a crucial platform for women to engage in gainful employment. Their participation in MGNREGA projects not only impacts household income can also influences broader dimensions of empowerment, such as decision-making, social mobility, and access to resources.

## 3. Objectives

1) To analyse the women participation in MGNREGA projects at different level i.e. National, State and Study area district i.e. India, Arunachal Pradesh and Upper Subansiri District respectively.
2) To suggest suitable measures to improve women's participation in MGNREGA, focusing on inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability in the Upper Subansiri District.

## 4. Methodology

The present paper was based on Primary Data as well as Secondary Data. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were considered through Interview Schedule. This study is mainly descriptive in nature based on respondent's view regarding the level of women participation in MGNREGA. The primary data have been collected through interview schedule. For the present study, Batak-Patum village panchayat of Daporijo Block, Upper Subansiri District was considered based on purposive sampling. Furthermore, out of the total 193 registered job card holders under MGNREGA, 77 job card holders were selected on random basis as 77 respondents, i.e. 40 per cent of the total registered job card holders, ensuring representativeness of the total population. The collected data were systematically analysed using tabulation and the simple percentage method to identify trends, patterns, and key findings related to women's participation.

## 5. Data Analysis and DiscussionTop of Form

The data has been analysed and interpreted in a simplified manner in order to know the participation of women workers under MGNREGA in a selected gram panchayat.

**Table 1:** Distribution of the respondents on the basis of their Gender (N=77)

| Gender | Respondents |
|---|---|
| Male | 42 (54.55) |
| Female | 35 (45.45) |
| Total | 77 (100.0) |

*Source: Primary Data*

The table 1 shows that among the 77 respondents, 54.55 per cent were male (42 respondents), and 45.45 per cent were female (35 respondents). This near equal gender split suggests strong female participation in MGNREGA activities in the region. The findings from Table 1, indicating 45.45 per cent female participation in MGNREGA activities in the Upper Subansiri District, reflect a significant step toward gender inclusivity in rural labor markets. This near-equal representation of male and female workers aligns with MGNREGA's provisions that mandate at least one-third participation of women, fostering their economic and social empowerment **(Ministry of Rural Development, 2005)**.

Empirical studies have shown that MGNREGA not only provides wage employment but also addresses rural gender inequalities by offering work opportunities at equal pay rates for men and women. This contributes to improving women's bargaining power within households and communities **(Pankaj & Tankha, 2010)**. Furthermore, the availability of work within village limits under MGNREGA allows women, who often juggle domestic responsibilities, to balance paid employment and caregiving roles **(Khera & Nayak, 2009)**.

In Upper Subansiri, where cultural norms and limited economic opportunities have historically constrained women's participation in formal labor markets, MGNREGA's framework has opened avenues for their active involvement. The nearly balanced gender ratio among respondents underscores the scheme's role in reshaping local labor dynamics and promoting gender equity in development practices.

**Table 2:** Respondents on Age groups

| Age group | Male | Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Below 30 years | 8 | 6 | 14 (18.18) |
| 31-40 years | 15 | 12 | 27 (35.06) |
| 41-50 years | 14 | 12 | 26 (33.77) |
| Above 50 years | 5 | 5 | 10 (12.99) |

*Source: Primary Data*

The age group 31-40 years had the highest representation, comprising 35.06 per cent (27 respondents) of the total workforce, indicating active participation of individuals in their prime working years. The age group 41-50 years followed closely with 33.77 per cent (26 respondents), showing a continued interest in employment beyond the early working years. Younger participants (below 30 years) formed 18.18 per cent (14 respondents) of the workforce, while those above 50 years constituted 12.99 per cent (10 respondents), reflecting a relatively smaller but notable engagement among the elderly. Female participation was consistent across age groups, though slightly lower than males in most categories. This finding is similar to the findings of Ravi, S., & Engler, M. (2015), where they stated that MGNREGA attracts productive workers and stand as an effective employment providing choice for rural household.

**Table 3:** Marital Status of Respondents

| Marital status | Male | Female | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Married | 38 | 31 | 69 (89.6) |
| Unmarried | 4 | 2 | 6 (7.8) |
| Widow | ------- | 2 | 2 (2.6) |

*Source: Primary Data*

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Married respondents made up the overwhelming majority at 89.6% (69 respondents), comprising 38 males and 31 females. This indicates that MGNREGA primarily attracts individuals with family responsibilities. Unmarried individuals accounted for only 7.8% (6 respondents), while widows (2 respondents) were exclusively female, highlighting the program's potential to support vulnerable women. Carswell, G., & De Neve, G. (2014), asserted that MGNREGA provide regular wage earning to married coupons to support their family financially. Further, MGNREGA Support the widows, vulnerable group to lead a financially independent life.

**Table 4:** Education qualification Status of Respondents

| Education Qualification | Male | Female | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Illiterate | 5 | 8 | 13 (16.9) |
| Below 10th | 10 | 17 | 27 (35.10) |
| 10th – 12th | 22 | 8 | 30 (39.00) |
| Above 12th | 5 | 2 | 7 (9.00) |

*Source: Primary Data*

Illiteracy was observed in 16.9 per cent (13 respondents), with a higher proportion among females (8) compared to males (5). The majority of the respondents 35.10 per cent, (27 individuals) had education below the 10th grade, indicating that MGNREGA is particularly beneficial for those with limited formal education. 10th–12th grade education was the most common qualification among males (22 males, 8 females), accounting for 39 per cent of the workforce, indicating a higher literacy rate among male participants. Only 9 per cent (7 respondents) had education above the 12th grade, showing limited representation of highly educated individuals, likely due to better job opportunities outside MGNREGA.

While women's participation (45.45 per cent) is slightly lower than men's, it demonstrates a significant engagement given traditional gender roles in rural areas. The highest participation comes from the 31-50 years age group, signifying the importance of MGNREGA as a livelihood source for middle-aged individuals. MGNREGA provides opportunities for women, including widows and those with limited education, thereby contributing to social inclusivity. The program is particularly beneficial for those with low or moderate educational qualifications, affirming its role in offering employment to less-privileged segments of society.

This demographic profile emphasizes the need to address challenges specific to women, such as childcare and worksite facilities, while leveraging the program's inclusivity to further empower women and other vulnerable groups.

**Table 5:** Women's Participation in MGNREGA at the level of National, State and District from 2019-2020 to 2022-2023

| | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 | 2022-2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| National (India) | 54.79 | 53.20 | 54.82 | 57.43 |
| State (Arunachal Pradesh) | 40.47 | 41.33 | 44.73 | 45.85 |
| District (Upper Subansiri) | 43.08 | 45.28 | 47.39 | 48.44 |

*Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India, published by PIB, Delhi*

The table 5 shows that the rate of women's participation at the national level increased from 54.79 per cent to 57.43 per cent over the four-years period. "Women's participation shows steady growth, peaking in 2022-2023". The consistent figures (around 54 per cent to 57 per cent) suggest that women's participation is well-established but growing incrementally.

Women's participation in Arunachal Pradesh rose significantly from 40.47 per cent in 2019-2020 to 45.85 per cent in 2022-2023, reflecting a notable increase of 5.38 percentage points over four years. The growth rate is more pronounced in the state compared to the national level, which may indicate successful regional efforts to enhance women's involvement in MGNREGA. Despite this progress, the percentage remains lower than the national average, suggesting the need for targeted measures to bridge the gap.

In Upper Subansiri, the rate of women's participation increased from 43.08 per cent in 2019-2020 to 48.44 per cent in 2022-2023, marking an increase of 5.36 per cent points over four years. The district figures consistently outperform the state average, reflecting relatively better inclusion of women in MGNREGA projects locally. The steady upward trend indicates sustained efforts at the district level to promote gender inclusivity in rural employment programs.

The national participation rate remains significantly higher than Arunachal Pradesh's rate, with a gap of over 10 percentage points in 2019-2020 (54.79 per cent vs. 40.47 per cent) that narrows to around 11.58 percentage points in 2022-2023 (57.43 per cent vs. 45.85 per cent). This highlights the need for state-level interventions to match national performance. Upper Subansiri consistently outperforms the state average, with a narrower gap compared to the national average. This reflects effective district-level implementation but also underscores room for improvement to achieve parity with national trends. All three levels show consistent year-on-year increases, signalling a positive trajectory in women's participation across the board.

The analysis demonstrates encouraging progress in women's participation in MGNREGA at the national, state, and district levels. However, significant disparities persist, with Arunachal Pradesh lagging behind the national average, despite Upper Subansiri's relatively with better performance of women. Sustained efforts, including capacity-building programs, improved worksite facilities, and targeted policies, are needed to further enhance women's engagement, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and similar regions.

The findings underscore the significant role of MGNREGA in promoting gender inclusivity and economic empowerment in rural areas. The program has provided women with a platform for financial independence and increased social standing, particularly in regions like Upper Subansiri District, where cultural norms and limited economic opportunities have historically restricted women's participation in the workforce. Despite women's participation (45.45%) being slightly below that of men, the nearly balanced representation

is a significant achievement, especially in rural contexts where traditional gender roles dominate.

MGNREGA's focus on providing work within village limits has been particularly beneficial for women, enabling them to balance caregiving responsibilities with wage employment. However, challenges such as childcare, limited mobility, and traditional norms continue to restrict women's full participation. Addressing these barriers and leveraging the program's inclusivity can significantly enhance its impact, further empowering women and fostering gender equity in rural development.

## 6. Suggestions

To enhance the impact of MGNREGA and promote greater gender inclusivity, several targeted measures are recommended. First, the program should address barriers specific to women, such as the lack of childcare facilities and inadequate worksite infrastructure. Providing crèches, separate rest areas, and sanitation facilities at worksites would enable more women, particularly those with young children, to participate effectively. Additionally, awareness campaigns and training programs tailored for women could help improve their understanding of the scheme's provisions and empower them to take on supervisory or leadership roles.

Second, efforts should focus on improving literacy and skill development among women. Initiatives such as functional literacy classes and vocational training tailored to local market demands could enhance their employability and enable them to transition to more diversified income-generating opportunities. These programs can also help bridge the educational gap observed in the study, particularly among female participants.

Third, to increase women's participation rates in states like Arunachal Pradesh and districts like Upper Subansiri, community engagement and advocacy efforts should be strengthened. Collaborating with local self-help groups (SHGs), Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and community leaders can help overcome cultural resistance and encourage more women to enroll and actively participate in MGNREGA activities.

Fourth, regular monitoring and evaluation of women's participation at the district and state levels should be institutionalized. Data-driven methods can pinpoint trends, gaps, and priorities for intervention, enabling policymakers to design more effective strategies. Ensuring transparency and accountability in wage payments and work allocation will further build trust in the program.

Lastly, fostering collaboration between government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can amplify the program's reach and effectiveness. NGOs can play a vital role in mobilizing women, providing skill training, and advocating for policy changes that promote gender equity. By implementing these measures, MGNREGA can strengthen its role as a transformative tool for empowering women and fostering inclusive rural development.

## 7. Conclusions

This study shows that MGNREGA has played a pivotal role in promoting gender inclusivity and economic empowerment in rural areas, particularly in Upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh. The near-equal representation of male (54.55 per cent) and female (45.45 per cent) participants reflects the program's success in fostering gender equity, despite traditional social and cultural constraints. MGNREGA's provisions for equal wages and proximity to workplaces have empowered women by providing them with economic opportunities while enabling them to balance their domestic responsibilities.

While the steady growth in women's participation at the district, state, and national levels is encouraging, the study highlights persistent disparities. Arunachal Pradesh and Upper Subansiri District, despite showing better performance than the state average, continue to lag behind the national participation rate. This gap indicates the need for targeted interventions and policy measures to bridge the divide and achieve parity with national trends. However, MGNREGA has proven to be a transformative initiative, fostering inclusive development and addressing rural unemployment. By sustaining and amplifying efforts to address gender-specific challenges, enhance capacity-building, and improve infrastructure, the program can further strengthen its role as a catalyst for social and economic empowerment in rural India.

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**Binjay Nirin** is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Social Sciences at Arunachal University of Studies, Arunachal Pradesh. His research focuses on rural development, participatory governance, and employment generation schemes in Northeast India, with special reference to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Guided by Dr. B. Komow, he is particularly interested in exploring the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in promoting inclusive and sustainable development in remote tribal areas. His academic work reflects a strong commitment to understanding the socio-economic challenges of marginalized communities and contributing to policy-relevant research.

**Dr. B. Komow** is presently working as Associate Professor and is Head of the Department of Political Science, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from Teaching, he has also worked as a Senior Research Associate in National Project under Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) at SSA Cell, Department of Elementary Education, NCERT, New Delhi. He was an awardee of Maulana Azad National Fellowship for Minority Students by UGC under Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India. He has also done a Research Project funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. His main research interest has been in the area of Education Administration, Health Administration, Rural and Urban Issues and Development, Tribal Studies, North-East India related studies and Women issues. He has participated as a Resource Person in various Workshops and has published research papers in National and International Journals as well as presented papers at the National and International level including in Chiang Mai, Thailand.