

# RURAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

**Keerthan Rose Alexon Puthukkeril**

**Abstract :** Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a flagship programme of the central government which came into effect from 2006. It is to provide livelihood security through hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to all rural households whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual labour. The present paper is an empirical study which examines the impact of MGNREGS on women empowerment in Chengannur block in Alappuzha district of Kerala. The study looks into mainly four aspects. First, it gives a socio-economic background of the surveyed labourers. Second, it examines the impact of the scheme on female employability in Chengannur block. Third, it looks into how this programme has impacted on economic empowerment of the ordinary women labourers who are a part of this scheme. Fourth, it gives a general idea about MGNREGS' impact on women empowerment. For this, 105 women labourers of this programme selected through random sampling are interviewed using a structured questionnaire. An overview of the various provisions in the MGNREG Act which makes this scheme woman friendly is given. Finally, the researcher concludes by giving some suggestions as given by the workers themselves for the betterment of this programme in Chengannur block.

**Keywords:** MGNREGS, Women Empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), previously called National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), is a historic legislation passed by the Government of India in September 7, 2005. It was enacted in order to address the crucial issues of unemployment and poverty in rural India. The objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual labour. It is fundamentally different from all other wage employment programmes operating in India in that these programmes do not guarantee employment as a legal right.

### Motivation for undertaking the study

A well- designed employment guarantee programme can, under favourable circumstances, promote job creation, gender equality and pro poor development (Rania Antonopolous, 2007). The MGNREGS has great potential to tap the hitherto under-utilized labour of women in developing rural India by providing equal wages for both men and women; MGNREGA upholds the social position and integrity of women and thus promotes gender equality (K.N.Nair, T.N., 2009). This study focusing on the impact

of MGNREGS on women empowerment is thus very significant.

The present paper looks into what women empowerment is and how a national programme like MGNREGS has impacted on women empowerment though it was not the original intention of the scheme. This paper looks into how this problem named 'women empowerment' which is addressed worldwide in the modern era, can be associated with a highly ambitious programme called MGNREGS which is implemented in a large scale throughout the rural India. Is MGNREGS actually bringing in 'empowerment' of rural women? The study examines this through careful analysis of the impact of this programme in the Chengannur block on three different fronts- the female employability, economic empowerment and general empowerment of women.

The study area is Chengannur block in Alappuzha District. Chengannur is one among the twelve blocks in Alappuzha District. It has nine Gram Panchayats namely Ala, Cherianad, Thiruvanvandoor, Pandanad, Puliyoor, Budhanoor, Mannar, Mulakkuzha and Venmony. MGNREGS is undertaken in these entire Gram Panchayats.

This paper examines the empowerment effects of MGNREGS on rural women at the individual level. This has been examined through finding out the impact of the programme on (1) female employability; (2) economic empowerment; and (3) women empowerment.

### **BASIC CONCEPT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, METHODOLOGY USED IN THE STUDY AND ITS LIMITATIONS**

According to United Nations, Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

#### **Methodology and sample population**

A structured questionnaire was formed for data collection. One hundred and five respondents are interviewed. Active worksites and working women were randomly selected. Both primary and secondary data are collected. The study proceeds by analysing the surveyed facts using a two-point and five-point attitude scale. Percentage analysis is used for analyzing the data.

Approximately 5 per cent of the total works undertaken in the surveyed period in each of the nine Panchayats were visited. Thus, except Thiruvandoor and Pandanad, where the researcher visited two worksites each, in all other Panchayats, one worksite each was visited. Out of the total labourers present in each of the visited worksites, 27 per cent of female labourers were interviewed through random sampling. Secondary data was mainly collected from the official website of MGNREGA, [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in).

#### **Limitations of the study**

The study is limited to only 105 women beneficiaries. Even though care is taken to see that the beneficiaries selected are representative in character, the researcher does not exclude the other possibility also. Analysis is done only through a two-point and five-point scale attitude measurement. Only percentage analysis has been used. Thus, there is further scope for use of advanced statistical tools. A uniform percentage of 5 per cent of total works undertaken in the surveyed months was intended to be visited. But this uniformity could not be met due to various

reasons. Also, there was time constraint for collection of data. So the scope of the study is limited on these accounts.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE PROVISIONS IN THE MGNREGA WHICH MAKES IT WOMAN-FRIENDLY**

Women's empowerment was not among the original intentions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and is not among its main objectives. (Ashok Pankaj, 2010). However, the following provisions in the Act make it a women friendly programme. Provision of giving priority to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under this Act [schedule II (6)] gives a legal entity to women labourers to demand work under this scheme. The Act also ensures safety of women workers under the following provisions of not permitting any contractor for implementation of the projects under it [Schedule I (11)]. Also, as far as possible, employment is to be provided within a radius of five kilometres of the village where the applicant resides at the time of applying [schedule II (12)]. This ensures both the safety and convenience of women labourers. In cases the employment is provided outside such radius, it must be provided within the Block, and the labourers shall be paid ten per cent of the wage rate as extra wages to meet additional transportation and living expenses [schedule II (14)]. The Act envisages to provide facilities of safe drinking water, shade for children and periods of rest, first-aid box with adequate material for emergency treatment for minor injuries and other health hazards connected with the work being performed at the work site [schedule II (27)]. If any personal injury is caused by accident to a child accompanying any person who is employed under a Scheme, such person shall be entitled to, free of charge, such medical treatment for the child as may be specified in the Scheme [schedule II (33)]. This shows how much the policy makers have tried to ensure the health-care of the workers. In case the number of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site is five or more, provisions shall be made to depute one of such women worker to look after such children [schedule II (28)]. The person thus deputed is to be paid wage rate [schedule II (29)]. This provision of crèche facilities is an innovative step not seen in any other public programme. The Act has also looked into bringing in gender equality by providing equal wages for both men and women. Thus, the Act says that in case of every employment under the Scheme, there shall be no discrimination solely on the ground of gender and the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (25 of 1976), shall be complied

with [schedule II (34)]. Also special care has been taken in the Guidelines of the Act to give widowed women, deserted women and destitute women who are highly vulnerable to be given required special attention. The GP should identify such women and ensure that they are provided 100 days of work. Pregnant women and lactating mothers (at least up to 8 months before delivery and 10 months after delivery) are to be treated as a special category. Special works which require less effort and are close to their house should be identified and implemented for them. (MGREGA operational guidelines 2012).

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

38.095 per cent of total women labourers surveyed belong to SC, 31.43 percent are OBC and 29.52 per cent come under general category. One person accounting for 0.952 percent did not reveal her community. This community wise classification shows the high participation rate of Scheduled Caste women in MGNREGS works. This is a positive indicator showing how effective this programme has been in addressing the needs of the weaker, deprived sections of the society. The provisions in the Act to provide work in the private lands of SCs might be a strong factor behind this trend. A huge majority of surveyed women were an educated lot with more than half of the respondents passing SSLC, accounting for 51.43 per cent. 28.57 per cent of respondents have education ranging between 1<sup>st</sup> standard to 9<sup>th</sup> standard, i.e., the primary education. Eighteen per cent were pre-degree holders and 0.952 per cent, i.e., one respondent had completed degree. Only one respondent, accounting for 0.952 per cent is illiterate with no education. When read together with the fact that Kerala is the highest literate state with an average of above 90 per cent, it is not surprising that the surveyed MGNREGS labourers are literate with the exception of just one. Most of them accounting for 92.38 per cent of surveyed women were married. Only 6.67 per cent were widows and only one woman, i.e., 0.952 per cent of the total respondents was unmarried. Of them, 59.05 per cent had just two children, 14.29 per cent of respondents had just one child showing that most of them had good family planning. Most of the respondents fall in the age category of 31-40, accounting for 42.86 per cent. Around 31 per cent are in the age group of 41-50. There are only 6.67 per cent of respondents in the age group of 18-30. While 17.14 per cent are of the age of 51-60 years, only 2.86 per cent were senior citizens with an age ranging between 61 and 70 years.

The asset base of the respondents was generally poor. More than half of the respondents were landless labourers, i.e., 56.19 per cent. 16.19 per cent were only marginal

landholders with a possession of one cent to five cents. And also, 84.76 per cent possessed no cattle or poultry. But, 4.76 per cent of labourers had sufficiently good amount of land as their household possession with about 21 cents and above.

The income base of the MGNREGS labourers in Chengannur block along with the type of houses they live in, reveals that they cannot be categorised in the poorest class, though most of them were reluctant to reveal their actual household incomes. Majority of respondents lived in roofed houses, accounting for 46.67 per cent. 31.43 per cent lived in concrete houses, while 17.14 per cent lived in houses constructed with sheet. 3.81 per cent of labourers lived in concreted houses with sheet, and only 0.952 per cent (one person) lived in thatched house.

Most of their spouses i.e., 67.62 per cent, were earning substantial amount as unskilled manual labourers with an amount ranging between 250 to 350 rupees per day. And more than 85 per cent of the respondents admitted that they were unemployed and were housewives before the advent of this scheme. This shows most of them did not have the need to work in order to remove hunger. MGNREGS is just a supplementary source of income for them, so that they can support their spouses to meet their household finances. They mostly come out to work as it gives them an opportunity to socialise while earning. 20 per cent of the heads of the households were skilled labourers. Skilled labour work includes, school peon with a salary of Rs. 5000 per day (only one respondent's husband was school peon), photography, business, carpentry which helped them earn an amount of Rs. 500 per day, driving which earned them approx. Rs. 450 in one day, company job, construction works (Rs. 300 per day), painting which fetched them a wage of Rs. 325 per day, work on iron and workshop job. Around 4 per cent of heads of the households found their income from agriculture earning approx. 300 rupees per day when work was available. One respondent, accounting to 0.952 per cent said, head of the household did only MGNREGS work. 6.67 per cent of heads of the households had no work and one person left this question uncommitted.

## IMPACT ON EMPOWERMENT

This section looks into how MGNREGS has impacted on the lives of the rural women basically through three major objectives: (1) female employability; (2) economic empowerment; and, (3) women empowerment. Impact on female employability is measured on the basis of the participation of women in the unskilled labour force, despite of the fact that MGNREGS wages are not in par with the other unskilled manual labour wages. Also, it is a note worthy fact that so many women who otherwise would

have preferred to be mere housewives are coming out to be a part of this public works programme. Economic empowerment aspect tries to evaluate the impact of this scheme on women labourers in the financial front- how it has improved their individual and household financial standing. Finally, the women empowerment aspect examines whether there is any impact by this scheme in the overall improvement in decision-making inside their households and also their public standing.

### **Impact of MGNREGS on female employability**

The first step to determine the impact of this scheme on employability of women in Chengannur is to find out whether any lucrative alternative employment opportunities are present in its place. 93.33 per cent of respondents said that there were no other productive alternative opportunities suitable for them in Chengannur, which shows the extend of effectiveness of this programme in Chengannur for women. 87.62 per cent told they were unemployed or just housewives before joining MGNREGS. In the absence of this programme, 86.67 per cent of the surveyed women would have remained completely unemployed. 2.86 per cent would have gone for unskilled manual daily wage household labour otherwise. Another 2.86 would have gone for construction work. Paddy field work would have been undertaken by 1.9 per cent and another 1.9 per cent would have reared cattle instead of this job. Only one respondent (0.952) said she would have taken up tailoring in the absence of this job. Three people were unresponsive to this enquiry. The wide acceptability of this programme is derived due to several factors. These factors are given in the order of priority. The reasons starts with the dignity associated with this programme as a government scheme, nearby availability, opportunity for socialisation with friends and relatives, social acceptability, fixed timing, less chances of exploitation, fixed minimum wage and ends with the non-availability of other works.

The fact that NREGA work is offered by the local government rather than by a private employer in some ways frees potential women workers from caste, and community based strictures related to who they can and cannot work with ( Reetika Khera, 2009). 'Building up unity and cooperation' despite of all caste and community discrimination has been a great achievement of this programme. Now, people belonging to both backward and forward communities work together in each others' fields and cooperate in all levels- which has created a friendly atmosphere in the worksites from working and helping in each others' ailments to having food together and so on. This amicable atmosphere created in the worksites has

prompted many women to come out and work which has helped in their social interaction and thus has caused this programme to be a tremendous success in Chengannur block. Approximately 77 per cent of the respondents strongly agree to the proposal that MGNREGS has helped in building unity among labourers. Another 19.05 per cent agrees to the proposal. While, 1.905 per cent neither agrees nor disagrees, only 1.905 per cent is strongly disagreeing to the proposal.

Regarding the general awareness about the programme, 56.19 per cent of labourers came to know about this programme through Gram Panchayat. This shows how efficient the grass root local self governance in Chengannur is. 14.29 per cent became aware of this programme through the NHG (Neighbourhood group) Kudumbashree-ayalkoottam under which the programme is implemented in the state. The rest of the respondents became aware of this programme through various sources like, radio, newspaper, Gram Sabha etc. The extend of job satisfaction these women are able to derive from this programme is a clear indicator of how much this programme can survive further since the very speciality of this scheme is its demand driven nature. This is an indirect measure of the employability of labourers as this determines how much willingly they will come to work under MGNREGS. The following table reveals the satisfaction of women labourers on various fronts like work timings, work quantity, worksite facilities, authorities' behaviour and leisure time.

Regarding the work timings, 52.38 per cent of employees were strongly satisfied and another 21.9 per cent were satisfied. Only 11.43 per cent were dissatisfied and 7.62 per cent were strongly dissatisfied. More than half of the women labourers accounting for 51.43 per cent were strongly satisfied with the quantity of work they were assigned. Another 31.43 per cent also were satisfied with the work quantity. 3.81 per cent were neutral, and 5.71 per cent were dissatisfied with the quantity of work. Another 5.71 per cent were strongly dissatisfied. In regard to the worksite facilities, 37.14 per cent were strongly satisfied and 40.95 per cent of workers were satisfied with these facilities. Only 12.38 per cent were neutral and 7.62 per cent were dissatisfied. A large majority of 64.76 per cent were strongly satisfied with the authorities' behaviour and another 29.52 per cent were also satisfied. Only very negligible per cent of employees were not satisfied with the behaviour of authorities. 51.43 per cent felt strongly satisfied with the leisure time provided in between the work. 35.244 per cent also were satisfied with the above. But 6.67 per cent were strongly dissatisfied with the leisure time when enquired about it and 3.81 per cent were satisfied to the above enquiry. Only 1.9 per cent were neutral to this question.

Apart from job satisfaction, another factor which will determine greater female employability in this scheme is by ensuring positive general response of the current employees. As such, the researcher tries to find out the general feeling of the ordinary MGNREGS women employees towards this programme. 99.05 per cent of labourers except one respondent told that they felt happy to be a part of this scheme. 81.9 per cent claimed they were duly acknowledged by the authorities. All the respondents accounting for 100 per cent of labourers said that they were not exploited in any way under this scheme—thanks to the abolition of middlemen and contractors. This shows how effective the intention of the programme policy makers have been, in ensuring safety and security to the women workers of this programme. This also is a major reason for the women to feel the 'dignity of labour' while working in this scheme. This is a major factor attracting the women labour force towards MGNREGS.

#### **Impact of MGNREGS on economic empowerment**

Since most of the women are housewives who were earlier engaged in unpaid household works, MGNREGS has given them a platform to convert some unpaid work into paid work especially for those women who have MGNREGS as their primary income source outside the home. (Ashok Pankaj, 2010). MGNREGS income is generally a supplementary source of income for the women workers in Chengannur. Regarding the utility of the wages, it is mostly used for meeting children's education expenditure, to pay debt, to remove hunger, for medical expense and to meet the financial insufficiency in the descending order of priority. Studies have revealed that when a woman is earning, she spends it more on family needs than her own personal wants. This study also substantiates the above fact. However, the MGNREGS wages are not in any way more than what they could have earned if they were engaged in other unskilled manual labour. 94.29 per cent of respondents tell that MGNREGS wages are less than other unskilled manual labour wages prevailing in Chengannur. This fact has to be seen in the background of majority choosing to be unemployed in the absence of this scheme. This shows the general acceptance level of MGNREGS among the rural households that, despite the wages being comparatively low when compared with other works, so many are willing to work only in this scheme. The reason can definitely be attributed to the 'dignity of labour' associated with this programme. The importance of MGNREGS is further clarified by the fact that, it has put a minimum standard for unskilled manual wages for women in Chengannur. This employment guarantee programme is guaranteeing them a wage of Rs. 164 daily in Chengannur. 62.86 per cent women think MGNREGS has actually helped in increasing their wages and has put a

respectable standard wage rate in Chengannur for unskilled manual labour of women.

Wage payment through banks/post office: The mode of payment of MGNREGS wages is welcomed by a huge percentage of women workers in Chengannur. 90.48 per cent agrees with the payment of wages through banks/post office accounts. Only 7.62 per cent thinks they should be paid in cash. The main reasons in favour of payments through bank/post office accounts include the perception that payment through banks will increase the possibility of saving and a reduction in the possibility of being cheated by those who distribute wages in the village. Other reasons why people want bank payments include the perception that a lump-sum of money will be available in one instalment. Interestingly, for women, it is also seen as an effective tool for increasing their control over the use of this money (Reetika Khera, 2009).

33.33 per cent of women strongly agree that MGNREGS has helped them in increased savings. Another 12.38 percent also agrees to the above fact. But, 30.48 per cent disagreed to this and 14.29 per cent strongly disagreed to this. Increased savings economically empowers an individual and eventually, a household. Since no clear majority has claimed that this scheme has helped in savings, it can be concluded that, in general, this scheme has not helped in savings, especially large scale savings. But, a major development which has occurred for these women workers in the financial front is that, their earning through this scheme has given them the freedom to spend. A large majority of 70.48 percent strongly agrees that earning in this scheme has given them the freedom to spend. Paid employment under MGNREGS has given both the freedom and choice to use their earnings. MGNREGS has increased the choice set for women by reducing their economic dependence on other family members (Ashok Pankaj, 2010). 33.33 per cent of respondents strongly agree that MGNREGS wages have been sufficient to meet their daily household expenditure. Another 16.19 per cent also agrees with the above fact. 8.57 per cent of surveyed women labourers were neutral to this enquiry. 19.05 per cent strongly disagreed to the argument and another 18.09 per cent disagreed to it. 4.76 per cent were unresponsive to the question. MGNREGS also seems to be functioning as a 'helpline' for many rural households (Reetika Khera, 2009). 22.86 per cent strongly agreed that MGNREGA wages was helping them meet health care expenditure. This means, expense to meet doctor, to buy medicines etc. 26.67 per cent also agreed to the above statement. 6.67 per cent were neutral while 18.09 per cent were not agreeing to the above argument, 22.86 per cent strongly disagreed and said that MGNREGA wages was not at all sufficient in meeting their health expenses. 2.86 left this question unanswered.

Another indicator to measure the importance of MGNREGS as perceived by the ordinary women employees in Chengannur is by finding out what they think about this scheme in improving their living standard. 31.43 per cent strongly thinks that MGNREGS in general has helped in improving their standard of living. A good majority of 47.62 per cent also agreed with this fact. 12.38 per cent were neutral to the enquiry. Only a very small percent of 3.81 per cent disagreed to this statement and another 4.76 per cent strongly thinks that MGNREGS has not done anything in improving their living standards. The importance of this programme is further highlighted by the fact that this earning has helped them to send their children to study rather than work. About 55.24 per cent together either strongly agrees or agrees to this fact. But, 30.48 per cent of the respondents didn't think MGNREGS has played any significant role in this matter. They told they would have never sent their children for work even if they didn't have income from MGNREGS. But, for 11.23 per cent of the respondents, this was not relevant as they didn't have children of school/college going age. Whether MGNREGS has given the women labourers financial security is an important factor showing how much this scheme has impacted on economic empowerment. More than half of the respondents accounting for 53.33 per cent agreed that MGNREGS has given them financial security. Another 30.48 per cent strongly believes thus. Only 10.48 per cent of the respondents were neutral to this fact. A negligible percentage of respondents accounting to 3.81 per cent disagreed with this and one person, i.e., 0.952 per cent strongly disagreed that MGNREGS is giving financial security. One person left this question unanswered. All this proves that in Chengannur, MGNREGA has given the ordinary women labourers, economic empowerment to a substantial extend.

### **MGNREGS and women empowerment**

The MGNREGS has broadened choices for rural women in two ways. One, it has opened for them an entirely new avenue for paid employment. Two, it has broadened their choices and capability as a result. An important fact is that a large number of women decided on their own to work under MGNREGS (Ashok Pankaj, 2010). This statement is substantiated in the present study. Sixty per cent of the respondents told it was their own decision to work in this programme. This indicates the kind of decision making these women enjoyed inside their households. Only around 15 per cent told that their husbands took the decision for them. Approximately 21 per cent told it was a decision taken together by the family members. One respondent told that her parents took this decision and 2.86 per cent left this question unanswered. Whether MGNREGS has increased their intra household decision-making capacity was enquired in a direct way. Around 67.81 per cent of

respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that MGNREGS has helped in increasing their decision-making capacity inside their households. It was only natural that since they were also earning an income to their households, their say in the family matters would increase. Around 11 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed to the above proposal. While 16.19 per cent disagreed to the proposal, 4.76 per cent strongly disagreed to it. To measure the level of empowerment these women felt since joining this scheme, the researcher enquired whether they have got the courage to stand as candidates for public election since working in this scheme. Approximately 57 per cent i.e., more than half of the respondents responded positively to this question indicating that they have got the courage to stand as candidates for public elections after they had started working in this scheme. Around 41 per cent of respondents said they have not got any courage to stand for elections. Around 2 per cent left this question uncommitted. A large majority, accounting to 88.57 per cent feels that working under MGNREGS has empowered them to go to any private or government firms and get things done. They were now confident enough to meet and interact collectively with government officials and PRI representatives. Only 11.43 per cent of respondents said 'no' to this question. A large majority of respondents accounting to 85.71 per cent said working in this scheme has helped them gain courage to speak in public, such as parent-teachers' meetings. Around 7 per cent said 'no' to this question. Around 8 per cent left this question uncommitted as it was not applicable to them since, they had no school going children. To a large extent, MGNREGS has given the women labourers the courage to speak in public. Approximately 98 per cent of the respondents are very much aware of the importance of Gram Sabha meetings and thus, took part in them. Lastly, to get an idea about how important this programme has been on women, the researcher enquired about the women workers' perception regarding the scheme's impact on them, their family and also on the society as a whole. More than half of the respondents accounting to 55.24 per cent agree that MGNREGS has been positive in contributing to the well-being of themselves, family and the society. Approximately 37 per cent strongly thinks thus. Around 8 per cent were neutral to the enquiry. On a whole, it can be concluded that, MGNREGS has been instrumental in empowering women workers in the Chengannur block.

### **AREAS OF CONCERN**

While reiterating the whole bunch of positives of this programme towards women empowerment, there are contradicting findings too. A lot of respondents accounting for 45.72 per cent either agrees or strongly agrees that their workload in this programme is burdensome. But, 34.28 per cent thinks just the opposite way. 19.05 per cent were neutral to this enquiry.

Though the percentage of response to whether this programme has led to any health decline was small, the researcher found that in Mannar Gram Panchayat, works in barren lands which are usually water logged caused lot of ailments due to poisonous worm bite and consequent fever, body rashes and body pain. Due to this, they couldn't participate in continuous projects. This constituted about 8.57 per cent of total respondents. But approximately 55.24 per cent thinks that MGNREGS has not brought in any health problems. In fact, there was a general opinion among workers that since they started coming out to work under this scheme, they attained greater levels of health- their blood pressure and sugar level became normal, they gained new levels of energy, they were happier etc. Of course, small forms of ailments like body pain, heat stroke, body cuts have occurred but it's a part of this kind of work and for that, first-aid box was available in every worksite.

Due to the absence of adequate facilities in the worksites to take care of young children, most of the mothers with young children never brought them to the worksites because of lack of safety. Of course, some worksites had the presence of young children, but that was less than the stipulated number of five given by the Act so that an aaya could be appointed for taking care of these children.

When enquired about why households didn't complete hundred days of work in a financial year, the reasons given were varied. 50.96 per cent told labour for the demanded period was not available. This is certainly a matter of concern, as it is given in the Act that labour should be given at the point of demand. 24.04 per cent told they would have been engaged in more days of work, provided they were duly informed. 8.65 per cent could not work more in this scheme due to ill-health. One person accounting for 0.96 per cent of the respondents who didn't complete 100 days, said she couldn't join this programme early as she got her job card late. One person told that she would have worked more under this scheme provided the works were continuous without any time lag in between. *Only one person's household had completed 100 days of work.*

Out of all the eleven worksites visited, no site had full-fledged child care facilities and also toilet facilities. The women had to depend on nearby houses or else their own homes which were usually near to the sites. This is a matter of great concern. But all worksites had drinking water, shade and first-aid box.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is obvious that MGNREGS has played a significant role in the empowerment of its women labourers in Chengannur block. The need of various provisions like,

quality work equipments for efficient work, a proportionate increase in the wages in accordance with the increase in living expenses, provision of continuous work under this scheme without much time lag in between, more convenient work timing etc were suggested by the women workers themselves for the improvement of this programme in Chengannur.

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**Keerthan Rose Alexon Puthukkeril,**  
Ph.d. Research Scholar (UGC- MANFMS scholar),  
Department of Applied Economics,  
Cochin University of Science And Technology,  
Kerala- 682 022  
Email: [keerthan.rose@gmail.com](mailto:keerthan.rose@gmail.com)

**Address for Communication**  
Puthukkeril House, Puthukkeril Road,  
Puthencavu P.O., Chengannur,  
Alleppy district,  
Kerala – 689123