Abstract

Women empowerment not only helps in bringing down the gender inequality but it also helps the economy to thrive on higher developmental path. As rightly pointed out by Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, gender equality (which is one of the Millennium Development Goals) is must to achieve other Millennium Development Goals. This aspect holds special significance for India, which is one of the founding members of BRICS nations as it lags behind on all the MDGs. In spite of the imminent need for focusing on gender equality, social welfare programmes in India have not given due attention to this aspect until recently. The last decade saw paradigm shift in its approach when India launched its largest social welfare programme- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The scheme through its novel features sought to empower the women by increasing their participation in the labour force.

It has been a decade since the scheme has been launched and therefore it would be interesting to examine how effective the scheme has been in empowering the women in rural areas. Given this background the paper seeks to examine how far the scheme has been able to empower women at the national and sub-national level with the help of National Sample Survey data on employment and unemployment (2011-12). Our analysis revealed that LFPR and WPR for MGNREG job card holders were much higher than the non-card holders for both males and females and the gap between the two was much more pronounced for females. Our analysis of the care economy showed that MGNREGA has been effective in changing the gender role within the household. Our findings suggested that MGNREGA provides employment opportunities for both men and women; however, it is the women who gain the most from the scheme. Thus, it can be argued that the decision of the successive governments to increase the allocation under the scheme is move in the positive direction.