

Impact of MGNREGA on Women's Social Mobility : A Study of Rural Punjab

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was initiated by Government of India to provide employment opportunities at village level. This scheme specially focused on women employment opportunities and providing them employment within village periphery. The present study explores the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on women's social mobility in rural Punjab. For this, primary data from 320 respondents, equally divided between MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA participants were collected. In-depth interviews were conducted to analyze social mobility, employment security, and access to essential resources among women workers. The results revealed notable improvements in women's autonomy and social participation due to MGNREGA. However, participation in activities as village gatherings and school meetings remained predominantly collective across both groups, highlighting persistent cultural norms. Employment opportunities and infrastructure under MGNREGA were significantly better. There is a need in promoting social and economic empowerment for women, though entrenched societal barriers and infrastructural limitations remained areas for further improvement.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Women, Social mobility, Rural employment, Social participation

JEL Classification: J31, E24, E29, J23, J11

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced in 2005, is one of India's most significant policy initiatives aimed at addressing rural unemployment and poverty (Dey and Bedi, 2010). This legislation guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year to rural households willing to engage in unskilled manual work. As a flagship program of the Government of India, MGNREGA also incorporates provisions to empower women by mandating a minimum of one-third participation of women workers (Pankaj and Tankha, 2010). This gender-inclusive focus has been particularly transformative in states like Punjab, where patriarchal norms and rural socio-economic structures have historically limited women's participation in the workforce (Khera and Nayak, 2009).

Punjab, known for its agrarian economy, faces a paradoxical challenge. While the state exhibits relatively higher levels of income compared to other Indian states, it also grapples with rural unemployment, declining agricultural profitability, and entrenched gender disparities (Kak, 2013). The implementation of MGNREGA in rural Punjab has

provided a platform for women to step into economic roles, breaking away from the constraints of household labour and societal norms. By offering consistent work opportunities, financial independence, and a safe work environment, the scheme has begun to shift the narrative around women's roles in rural society (Sudarshan, 2011). The role of MGNREGA in enhancing women's employment opportunities is significant. Traditionally, rural women in Punjab were relegated to unpaid domestic or agricultural labour, with little access to formal employment or decision-making roles within their families or communities (Sharma et al., 2020). The guaranteed work under MGNREGA, accompanied by timely wage payments and provisions for workplace safety, has not only ensured financial autonomy but also contributed to improved social mobility. Women workers under MGNREGA have reported increased confidence, better decision-making power, and active participation in community affairs (Mahanta and Choudhury, 2025).

This transformation, however, is not uniform across all regions or communities within Punjab. The state is divided into three distinct cultural and economic zones: Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. Each zone presents unique challenges and opportunities for implementing MGNREGA effectively

(Kaur and Randhawa, 2016). Majha, characterised by a strong agrarian base, often witnesses lower female workforce participation due to rigid social structures. Malwa, the largest and most diverse zone, struggles with poverty and inadequate infrastructure, making the success of MGNREGA critical. Meanwhile, Doaba, known for its higher rates of migration and education, reflects distinct patterns of women's engagement with the scheme. Understanding the impact of MGNREGA requires a nuanced analysis of these regional variations and their implications for women's empowerment (Malhotra and Kour, 2013). The concept of social mobility moving upwards in the socio-economic hierarchy is central to understanding the transformative potential of MGNREGA for rural women (Drèze and Sen, 2013). Social mobility encompasses various dimensions, including economic independence, access to education and healthcare, enhanced bargaining power within families, and reduced gender-based discrimination. For women in rural Punjab, the program represents a step toward dismantling systemic barriers that have historically confined them to the margins of society.

The guaranteed employment, MGNREGA provides a stable income that enables women to contribute to household expenses, invest in their children's education, and save for future security. This economic empowerment often translates into greater respect and influence within families and communities (Liu and Barrett, 2013). Another critical dimension of MGNREGA's impact is its role in promoting employment opportunities for women. The scheme has created an unprecedented avenue for rural women to participate in wage labour without requiring specialised skills or education. By ensuring gender parity in wages, MGNREGA challenges the pervasive issue of wage discrimination in rural India (Azam, 2012). Moreover, the program's emphasis on community-based projects such as the construction of roads, water conservation structures, and sanitation facilities aligns with local development needs, further reinforcing the relevance of women's participation (Meitei, 2022). Despite these positive outcomes, the journey of MGNREGA in Punjab is not without challenges. The program has faced criticism for delays in wage payments, inadequate infrastructure, and limited awareness among beneficiaries (Bhatia and Dreze, 2006). Women workers, in particular, encounter barriers such as a lack of childcare facilities at work sites, social stigma around manual labour, and restricted mobility due to patriarchal norms. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as providing crèches at work sites, enhancing community awareness about the scheme, and promoting capacity-building programs for women (Khera and Nayak, 2009).

The broader implications of MGNREGA's impact on women in rural Punjab extend beyond individual empowerment. The scheme has the potential to reshape rural labour markets by normalising women's participation in the

workforce. This normalisation challenges traditional gender roles, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. Furthermore, the visible presence of women in public spaces through MGNREGA projects serves as a powerful symbol of changing social dynamics, inspiring other women to step out of their homes and explore economic opportunities (Bhattacharyya, 2016). The case of rural Punjab serves as a microcosm for analysing how targeted policy interventions can drive social change at the grassroots level (Patwardhan and Tasciotti, 2023). Thus, the present study has the specific objective (i) to study the multifaceted impact of MGNREGA on women's social mobility and employment opportunities in rural Punjab, shedding light on both its achievements and limitations. The research highlights the transformative potential of the scheme while acknowledging the structural and cultural barriers that persist. By focusing on the lived experiences of women workers, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and academics striving to enhance the effectiveness of MGNREGA.

Data Sources and Methodology

The present study is based on primary data, focusing on changes in women's mobility after participation in MGNREGA. Data was collected from three cultural zones of Punjab: Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. One district was chosen from Majha and Doaba, while Malwa, being the largest zone, contributed two districts, selected through multistage random sampling. From each district, two blocks were randomly chosen for the study. Further, one village was chosen from each block. A total of 40 respondents, comprising 20 MGNREGA and 20 non-MGNREGA, were selected from each village, leading to a comprehensive sample of 320 respondents (160 from each group). Data were collected through a semi-structured interview schedule. Both open-ended and closed-ended questions were asked from women to get in-depth knowledge of the stated problem. The study examines the role of MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities in enhancing women's social mobility mean score was calculated by giving weightage respectively alone (1), with other family members (2). The primary data collected pertained to the year 2022-23.

Results and Discussion

The demographic analysis of MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA respondents revealed significant differences across caste, religion, marital status, and family size. Scheduled Caste (SCs) form the majority in both groups, with a higher representation among MGNREGA participants (96.25%) compared to non-MGNREGA participants (86.25%), indicating effective outreach and inclusivity efforts. These results align with the findings of (Singh and Singh, 2019) that respondents, 91.15 per cent, were from the Scheduled. Castes. Conversely, Backwards Castes

(BC) had a larger presence in the non-MGNREGA group (13.75%). Regarding religion, Sikhs represented the majority in MGNREGA participants (87.05%) than non-MGNREGA participants (78.12%), while Hindus were more prevalent in the non-MGNREGA group (21.87%). Education is the organised method of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and experiences that shape an individual's personal and professional growth. In the overall sample, nearly 70 percent of MGNREGA respondents and 46.25 percent of non-MGNREGA respondents were unable to read and write.

Data showed that the majority of the respondents in both groups were married, with a slightly higher percentage among MGNREGA workers (88.75%). Widow representation was notably higher among MGNREGA participants (10.00%) compared to non-MGNREGA (7.50%), highlighting their increased dependence on the scheme. Family size analysis indicated that households with 4–6 members were predominant in both groups, but smaller families (1–3 members) were more frequent among MGNREGA workers (28.12%)(Table 1). A majority of respondents lived in nuclear

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Particulars		MGNREGA n=160	Non-MGNREGA n=160
Caste	BC	6 (3.75)	22 (13.75)
	SC	154 (96.25)	138 (86.25)
Religion	Sikh	140 (87.05)	125 (78.12)
	Hindu	20 (12.50)	35 (21.87)
Education	Can not read and write	111 (69.38)	74 (46.25)
	Primary	24 (15.00)	44 (27.50)
	Middle	17 (10.63)	24 (15.00)
	Matric	8 (5.00)	18 (11.25)
Marital status	Married	142 (88.75)	141 (88.12)
	Unmarried	2 (1.25)	5 (3.12)
	Widow	16 (10.00)	12 (7.50)
	Divorced	0 (0)	2 (1.25)
Family size (member)	1-3	45 (28.12)	36 (22.50)
	4-6	107 (66.87)	117 (73.12)
	7-9	68 (5.00)	7 (4.37)
Family type	Joint	70 (43.75)	59 (36.87)
	Nuclear	90 (56.25)	101 (63.13)

Note: The figure in parentheses indicates the percentage to total

families, i.e. 56.25 per cent of MGNREGA and 63.13 per cent of non-MGNREGA. In contrast, 43.75 per cent of MGNREGA and 36.88 per cent of non-MGNREGA had joint families. Overall, more than half of the families were nuclear in both categories.

The findings of the study presented in Table 2 revealed that the social mobility of women after participation in MGNREGA reflected significant changes across various social indicators. The percentage of women visiting markets alone increased from 8.75 percent to 58.13 percent, suggesting enhanced autonomy in handling personal and household responsibilities. Similarly, attendance at social ceremonies independently rose from 1.25 percent to 19.38 percent. As regards Consulting health professionals, by themselves had a dramatic increased from 2.50 percent to 68.75 percent, underscoring improved confidence and access to healthcare. These findings, aligned with (Narayanan, 2008), emphasised the empowerment of women through MGNREGA, enabling them to break traditional mobility barriers. However, some indicators showed limited progress. For instance, participation in social gatherings and village activities independently remained below 5.00 percent. Additionally, the percentage of women independently visiting parents' homes increased marginally from 3.75 percent to 5.63 percent, reflecting societal constraints that persist despite financial and employment benefits. This is consistent with (Ravi and Engler, 2015) argued that while MGNREGA contributes to financial inclusion, its impact on challenging entrenched social norms is limited. Yet, the rise in independent purchasing things for children (1.88% to

23.75%) and meeting government officials (0% to 4.38%) highlighted an evolving agency among women, as suggested by (Verma et al., 2021).

The study also discussed the social mobility of women in non-MGNREGA activities. Table 3 revealed that the non-MGNREGA women exhibited significant improvements in various indicators. The percentage of women visiting markets alone increased from 9.38 percent to 80.63 percent, reflecting a major shift toward greater autonomy in managing household and personal tasks. Similarly, the proportion of women attending social ceremonies alone rose from 3.13 percent to 48.13 percent, and those independently consulting health professionals grew from 8.13 percent to 81.88 percent. These findings suggested that women in the non-MGNREGA group have experienced more independence and decision-making power. It was also observed by (Afridi et al., 2012) found that economic independence plays a pivotal role in women's social mobility. However, these improvements were not uniform across all categories, as participation in village activities and social gatherings remained dominated by collective involvement rather than individual engagement.

The participation in children's school meetings, for instance, showed that 65 percent of women were attending school meetings along with other family members. This observation aligns with the findings of (Carswell and De Neve, 2014) emphasised the persistence of traditional social structures, even as women gain more economic independence still face barriers in going out alone. The study revealed that a significant improvement in consulting

Table 2: Impact of MGNREGA on social mobility of the respondents

Particulars	Alone		With other family member	
	Before	After	Before	After
Visit to market	14 (8.75)	53 (33.12)	146 (91.25)	107 (41.87)
Attending social ceremonies	2 (1.25)	31 (19.37)	158 (98.75)	129 (80.62)
Attending children's school meeting	3 (1.87)	88 (55.00)	157 (98.125)	72 (45.00)
Going parents' home	6 (3.75)	70 (43.75)	154 (96.25)	90 (56.25)
Consulting health professional	30 (18.75)	47 (29.37)	130 (81.25)	113 (70.62)
Purchasing things for children	3 (1.87)	34 (21.25)	157 (98.12)	126 (78.75)
Participation in social gatherings	0 (0)	7 (4.37)	160 (100)	153 (95.62)
Visiting the relatives	0 (0)	7 (4.37)	160 (100)	153 (95.62)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates the percentage in total

Table 3: Impact on social mobility of non-MGNREGA respondents (N=160)

Particulars	Alone		With other family member	
	Before	After	Before	After
Visit to market	15 (9.37)	40 (25.00)	145 (90.62)	120 (75.00)
Attending social ceremonies	5 (3.12)	47 (29.37)	155 (96.87)	113 (31.87)
Attending children's school meeting	24 (15.00)	104 (65.00)	136 (85.00)	56 (35.00)
Going to parents' home	6 (3.75)	47 (29.37)	154 (96.25)	113 (70.62)
Consulting health professional	13 (8.12)	70 (43.75)	147 (91.87)	90 (56.25)
Purchasing things for children	15 (9.37)	40 (25.00)	145 (90.62)	120 (75.00)
Participation in social gatherings	7 (4.37)	32 (20.00)	153 (95.625)	128 (80.00)
Visiting the relatives	5 (3.12)	18 (11.25)	155 (96.87)	142 (88.75)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates the percentage in total

health professionals without being accompanied by other family members (8.12 % to 43.75%) and purchasing things alone for children increased from 9.37 per cent to 25.00 per cent. However, visiting relatives had not shown a change in women's social mobility, as 88.75 per cent of respondents were still moving with their other family members. These mixed results indicated that while non-MGNREGA women were experiencing increased independence, deep-rooted social and cultural norms influence certain aspects of their daily lives (Table 3).

Table 4 highlighted the varying perceptions of women regarding employment opportunities under MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities, reflecting their experiences with job security, access to microfinance, and other critical support mechanisms. Notably, all of the MGNREGA respondents across the three regions (Majha, Malwa, and Doaba) reported having regular jobs, compared to only 56.25 percent in Malwa and 70 percent in Doaba under non-MGNREGA, which indicates a significant disparity in regular employment opportunities for women in these regions. Similarly, job security was acknowledged by all the MGNREGA participants (100%), whereas only 53.75 percent in Malwa and 67.50 percent in Doaba felt secure among non-MGNREGA jobs. These findings align with previous research of (Pellissery and Jalan 2011) reported that MGNREGA provides more consistent employment opportunities for women compared to non-MGNREGA activities, contributing to increased job security. Additionally, 95.63 percent of MGNREGA women had access to microfinance, whereas just 73.13 percent of non-MGNREGA women had similar access,

Table 4: Suggestion for expanding employment opportunities for women under MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA (multiple responses)

		MGNREGA	Non-MGNREGA
Regular work for women	Yes	160 (100)	113 (70.62)
	No	0 (0)	47 (29.37)
Job security	Yes	160 (100)	110 (68.75)
	No	0 (0)	50 (31.25)
Wage rate should be increased	Yes	153 (95.62)	117 (73.12)
	No	7 (4.37)	43 (26.87)
Availability of crèche	Yes	144 (90.00)	157 (98.12)
	No	16 (10.00)	3 (1.87)
Toilet facility	Yes	156 (97.50)	159 (99.37)
	No	4 (2.50)	1 (0.62)

further highlighting the gap in economic empowerment.

Moreover, the data also emphasised the availability of essential infrastructure such as toilet facilities and crèche for MGNREGA workers. 97.50 per cent of MGNREGA and approximately all non-MGNREGA employees emphasised that there is a need for toilet facilities at the workplace. Moreover, there was a need for crèche, which was negligible at the MGNREGA women's (90.00%) workplaces as well as the non-MGNREGA women's (98.12%) workplace. The data also suggested that MGNREGA offers a better framework for women's participation in work and access to essential services. While non-MGNREGA activities still face significant challenges in providing regular and secure employment, as well as basic amenities.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

MGNREGA has marked a significant milestone in India's efforts to address rural poverty and gender disparities. For women in rural Punjab, the scheme represents more than just a source of income—it is a pathway to empowerment, self-reliance, and social mobility. The study explores the interplay between policy implementation and socio-cultural dynamics, offering a comprehensive understanding of MGNREGA's impact on women's lives. The demographic analysis of MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA revealed that the majority of the MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA women workers were particularly from the scheduled caste and Sikh. Surprisingly, the study found that not a single woman belonged to the general caste. It showed that caste barriers still exist for women's participation in manual work activities. Family size and marital status showed that the majority of the women were married and from nuclear families, suggesting a greater economic dependency on MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities. The majority of women in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities had basic education, which was also one reason for driving women to seek employment in MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities. These challenges were exacerbated by low skill and irregular work opportunities, which made MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA jobs more accessible but less stable.

The study demonstrated the significant impact of MGNREGA on enhancing women's social mobility and employment opportunities in rural Punjab. The findings revealed that MGNREGA participants experienced greater autonomy in various aspects of their lives. Improvements were observed in independent market visits, consulting health professionals and attending social ceremonies. However, limited progress in areas such as individual participation in village activities and school meetings reflected persistent societal and cultural constraints. Women in non-MGNREGA activities also exhibited advancements in social mobility in visiting markets and consulting health professionals independently. Despite this, collective participation in social

and community activities remained dominant, consistently highlighting the enduring influence of traditional norms even as women gained economic independence. In terms of employment opportunities, MGNREGA responded by emphasising job security and regular employment. Additionally, access to microfinance and better infrastructure further enhanced inclusivity under MGNREGA. However, the negligible availability of support like crèches reflected infrastructural gaps, suggesting the need for improvement. Overall, the study underscored MGNREGA's transformative role in empowering women economically and socially while pointing to persistent barriers such as entrenched norms and infrastructural inadequacies. These findings suggested targeted interventions are needed to further amplify MGNREGA's impact on rural women in Punjab. By analysing the scheme through the lens of gender, the study underscores the importance of inclusive policies in fostering sustainable development and social equity.

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