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Changes in women decision-making after participation in MGNREGA: A study of Rural Punjab (India)

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of MGNREGA on women's economic and social independence in Majha, Malwa, and Doaba regions of Punjab, based on primary data from 320 respondents (160 MGNREGA and 160 Non-MGNREGA participants). The analysis highlights significant improvements in women's independent expenditure and mobility. For MGNREGA participants, independent spending on food increased from 41.88 percent to 52.50 percent, while personal spending rose dramatically from 0.63 percent to 38.13 percent. Social mobility improved, with women visiting markets alone increasing from 8.75 percent to 58.13 percent and consulting health professionals alone rising from 2.5 percent to 68.75 percent. However, participation in village activities and visits to parents' homes showed minimal growth, indicating persistent societal constraints. Non-MGNREGA women exhibited similar trends, with higher autonomy in some areas. Independent spending on food rose from 21.25 percent to 53.75 percent, and personal spending increased from 6.88 percent to 64.38 percent. Social mobility gains were more pronounced, with 80.63 percent visiting markets and 81.88 percent consulting health professionals alone. However, activities like school meetings and interactions with officials remained collective. Employment under MGNREGA provided better job security and access to microfinance, with 100 percent reporting regular jobs and 95.63 percent accessing financial services, compared to 56.25 percent and 73.13 percent for Non-MGNREGA participants. Infrastructure gaps, such as inadequate childcare provisions, were noted across both groups. The findings emphasize MGNREGA's role in enhancing women's empowerment through economic opportunities and social mobility, though societal norms and infrastructural challenges limit its full potential. Addressing these barriers is crucial for amplifying the scheme's impact.

Keywords: MGNREGA, women empowerment, economic independence, social constraints, job security, gender norms

Introduction

The issue of women's social independence has garnered increasing attention in recent years, particularly in rural India, where patriarchal norms and socio-economic inequalities have long constrained women's agency. Social independence, which entails the capacity to make autonomous decisions, access resources, and participate in community life, is pivotal for achieving gender equality and holistic development. In this context, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) emerges as a transformative policy initiative. Enacted in 2005, MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of paid employment to rural households, with the overarching goal of alleviating poverty and enhancing livelihoods. While its primary focus is on employment generation, the program has had significant implications for women's empowerment and social independence, particularly in states like Punjab, where rural women often face systemic barriers to economic participation and social mobility.

Punjab, despite being one of India's most agriculturally prosperous states, exhibits pronounced gender disparities in labor force participation and social indicators. Rural women, in particular, have limited access to paid work opportunities and often remain confined to unpaid domestic and

agricultural labor. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), female labor force participation in rural Punjab remains significantly lower than the national average, underscoring the entrenched socio-economic challenges faced by women in the region. In this context, MGNREGA provides a critical avenue for women to access paid employment, enhance their financial agency, and challenge traditional gender norms. By mandating equal wages for men and women, ensuring worksite facilities, and reserving at least one-third of the workdays for women, MGNREGA demonstrates a commitment to promoting gender equity in rural employment.

The impact of MGNREGA on women's social independence extends beyond mere economic benefits. Participation in the program often serves as a catalyst for broader socio-cultural change, enabling women to step out of their homes, engage with peers, and build networks within their communities. This visibility in public spaces challenges prevailing stereotypes and fosters a sense of self-worth and confidence among women workers. Several studies underscore the transformative potential of MGNREGA in enhancing women's decision-making power within households and communities. For instance, Mahapatro (2013) ^[4] highlights that women workers in rural

Punjab reported a marked improvement in their ability to influence household decisions related to finances, education, and health, attributing this shift to their economic contributions through MGNREGA. Similarly, Charak *et al.* (2024) ^[3] observed that women's participation in MGNREGA in the Ludhiana district led to increased recognition of their roles as active contributors to household income and community development.

Economic independence is a cornerstone of social independence, and MGNREGA's wage-based employment provides a crucial pathway for rural women to achieve financial autonomy. The guaranteed nature of the program ensures a stable source of income, which many women utilize to meet essential household needs, invest in children's education, and save for future contingencies. This financial agency reduces women's dependency on male family members and enhances their bargaining power within patriarchal households. Moreover, the program's focus on creating durable assets such as roads, ponds, and irrigation canals contributes to the long-term development of rural communities, indirectly benefiting women by improving access to essential services and infrastructure.

While MGNREGA holds immense potential for fostering women's social independence, its implementation is not without challenges. Delayed wage payments, lack of adequate worksite facilities such as crèches and toilets, and discriminatory practices in work allocation often hinder women's participation. Additionally, deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and societal norms continue to restrict women's mobility and limit their access to program benefits. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to strengthen policy implementation, enhance gender-sensitive worksite management, and promote community awareness about women's rights and entitlements under MGNREGA. As noted by Khera and Nayak (2009) ^[2], effective implementation of gender-sensitive measures within MGNREGA can significantly amplify its impact on women's empowerment and social independence.

The broader implications of women's social independence facilitated by MGNREGA are profound. Empowered women are more likely to invest in their children's education and health, thereby creating a ripple effect that benefits future generations. Additionally, their active participation in economic and social spheres contributes to the creation of more equitable and inclusive communities. This aligns with global development goals such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasizes achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. By fostering women's economic and social empowerment, MGNREGA contributes to narrowing the gender gap in India's development landscape and building resilient rural communities.

In the specific context of Punjab, understanding the impact of MGNREGA on women's social independence is particularly relevant, given the state's unique socio-economic and cultural dynamics. The program's potential to enhance women's financial agency, challenge patriarchal norms, and foster community engagement underscores its significance as a tool for promoting gender equality in rural Punjab. However, a nuanced analysis is essential to identify the factors that enable or constrain women's participation

and to assess the extent to which the program's objectives are being realized in the state.

Thus, the study has a specific objective to understand the extent to which MGNREGA impacts women's social independence in rural Punjab, focusing on their economic empowerment, decision-making power, and societal roles.

Data Sources and Methodology

The present study was based on primary data collection with special reference to women's participation in MGNREGA to enhance women's empowerment. For the present study data was collected from three cultural zones of Punjab: Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. One district from Majha and Doaba was selected. As Malwa is the largest zone in Punjab, two districts were selected from this region using a simple random sampling technique. Two blocks were randomly chosen from each district for the study. In Amritsar, the selected blocks were Majitha and Baba Bakala. From Sangrur district, Bhawani Garh and Sherpur were included. Similarly, Pakhowal and Mangat were selected from Ludhiana district, while Balachaur and Banga were chosen from Nawanshahr district. One village was selected from each block for the study. Accordingly, Assi-Kalan from Pakhowal block and Sirah from Mangat block in Ludhiana district were included. In Sangrur district, Kakra village from Bhawani Garh block and Mullowal village from Sherpur block were selected. Similarly, in Amritsar district, Budha Theh village from Majitha block and Ghagar Bhana village from Baba Bakala block were chosen. From Nawanshahr district, Ballowal Saunkhri village from Balachaur block and Baddowal village from Banga block were included. From each village, 40 respondents were selected, comprising 20 MGNREGA respondents and 20 Non-MGNREGA respondents. This resulted in a total of 160 MGNREGA respondents and 160 Non-MGNREGA respondents, forming a complete sample of 320 individuals. Women workers from each household, including participants of MGNREGA and non-MGNREGA activities, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. The respondents were asked a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions to obtain detailed information and perspectives. Change was measured on a three-point continuum that is Agree (3), Neutral (2), Disagree (1).

Results and Discussion

The demographic analysis of MGNREGA and Non-MGNREGA respondents highlights notable differences across caste, religion, marital status, and family size. The results indicate that Scheduled Caste (SC) individuals dominate both groups, with a higher representation among MGNREGA participants (96.25%) compared to non-MGNREGA (86.25%), suggesting targeted outreach and inclusivity. Backward Castes (BC), on the other hand, are more prominent in the Non-MGNREGA group (13.75%). In terms of religion, Sikhs constitute a significant majority in both groups, with a higher proportion in MGNREGA (87.05%) compared to non-MGNREGA (78.12%), while Hindus are more represented in non-MGNREGA (21.87%). Marital status data shows that most respondents in both groups are married, with slightly higher proportions among MGNREGA workers (88.75%). Widow representation is

higher among MGNREGA participants (10%) than non-MGNREGA (7.50%), reflecting their greater reliance on the scheme. Family size analysis reveals that households with 4-6 members dominate both groups, though smaller families (1-3 members) are more common among MGNREGA workers (28.12%), possibly indicating the program's role in supporting such households (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents on the basis of demographic profile

Particulars		MGNREGA n=160	Non-MGNREGA n=160
Caste	BC	6 (3.75)	22 (13.75)
	S.C	154 (96.25)	138 (86.25)
Religion	Sikh	140 (87.05)	125 (78.12)
	Hindu	20 (12.50)	35 (21.87)
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)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

The results highlight the impact of MGNREGA work on various expenditure patterns across three regions of Punjab: Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. For food expenditure, the proportion of women who could spend on food alone rose significantly after MGNREGA work, from 41.88 percent to 52.50 percent across all regions. This trend was most observed in Majha (65% to 75%) and Doaba (42.5% to 57.5%), while Malwa exhibited a smaller increase (30% to 38.75%). Similarly, in clothing expenditure, the proportion of women able to spend independently increased from 18.75 percent to 41.88 percent overall, with the largest improvements in Majha (30% to 50%) and Malwa (15% to 38.75%).

Substantial changes were noted in women's financial contributions post-MGNREGA regarding children's education and health. It was observed that financial contributions for children's health was decreased from 98.75 percent to 90.63 percent while minimal changes were reported for financial contribution in children's education. The social participation of women has been increased as reflected from the data of attending social gatherings i.e. 1.25 percent to 10 percent. Additionally, spending on themselves was increased from 0.63 percent to 38.13 percent. However, areas such as expenditure on children's marriage and asset purchases reflected minimal changes, with "others" remaining dominant in decision-making, though slight increases in independent spending were observed. MGNREGA appears to have enhanced women's

financial autonomy and social participation, though traditional norms still influence many decisions (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to the change of decision-making after joining MGNREGA

Indicators		(Before) n=160	(After) n=160
Food	Alone	67 (41.87)	84 (52.50)
	With other family members	93 (58.12)	76 (47.50)
Clothing	Alone	30 (18.75)	67 (41.87)
	With other family members	130 (81.25)	93 (58.12)
Children's education	Not applicable	1 (0.62)	49 (30.62)
	Alone	0 (0)	1 (0.62)
	With other family members	159 (99.37)	110 (68.75)
Children's health	Not applicable	1 (0.62)	9 (5.62)
	Alone	1 (0.62)	6 (3.75)
	With other family members	158 (98.75)	145 (90.62)
Children's marriage	Not applicable	90 (56.25)	112 (70.00)
	Alone	0 (0)	0 (0)
	With other family members	70 (43.75)	48 (30.00)
Attending social gatherings	Alone	2 (1.25)	16 (10.00)
	With other family members	158 (98.75)	144 (90.00)
Expenditure on self	Alone	1 (0.62)	61 (38.12)
	With other family members	159 (99.37)	99 (61.87)
Purchasing of assets	Alone	1 (0.62)	8 (5.00)
	With other family members	159 (99.37)	152 (95.00)
Visiting parents	Not applicable	8 (5.00)	48 (30.00)
	Alone	1 (0.62)	5 (3.12)
	With other family members	151 (94.37)	107 (66.87)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

Data shows the impact of Non-MGNREGA income sources on women's expenditure and decision-making across Majha, Malwa, and Doaba. For food expenditure, the proportion of women spending independently increased significantly from 21.25 percent to 53.75 percent post-income generation. The rise was most prominent in Malwa (23.75% to 56.25%) and Doaba (27.5% to 57.5%), with Majha showing a smaller but notable increase (10% to 45%). Similarly, for clothing, independent expenditure rose overall from 11.88 percent to 53.13 percent, with significant changes in all regions. These findings align with studies like Sabharwal (2017) [10] and Kumar *et al.* (2015) [6], which emphasize the role of

employment in enhancing women's autonomy in household expenditure.

In areas like children's education and health, there were moderate improvements. Independent spending on education increased from 2.50 percent to 6.25 percent, while health expenditures rose from 2.50 percent to 9.38 percent. These findings suggest that women's contributions to these critical areas remain largely supported by other household members, reliable to findings by Gupta and Sharma (2018). On the other hand, independent spending on self-care rose dramatically from 6.88 percent to 64.38 percent,

highlighting enhanced personal autonomy, as also observed by Dasgupta (2016) [8]. However, participation in significant financial decisions, such as asset purchases (3.13% to 23.13%) or attending social gatherings (0.63% to 13.75%), indicates limited but growing empowerment. While the results reflect progress, entrenched gender norms still constrain women's complete autonomy in many domains, echoing arguments against the transformative potential of Non-MGNREGA incomes made by Mahapatro (2013) [4] (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to the change of decision-making after joining Non-MGNREGA

Indicators		(Before) n=160	(After) n=160
Food	Alone		
	With other family members		
Clothing	Alone	19 (11.87)	85 (53.12)
	With other family members	141 (88.12)	75 (46.87)
Children's education	Not applicable	4 (2.50)	28 (17.50)
	Alone	4 (2.50)	10 (6.25)
	With other family members	152 (95.00)	122 (76.25)
Children's health	Not applicable	3 (1.87)	3 (1.87)
	Alone	4 (2.50)	15 (9.37)
	With other family members	153 (95.62)	142 (88.75)
Children's marriage	Not applicable	114 (71.25)	121 (75.62)
	Alone	0 (0)	1 (0.62)
	With other family members	46 (28.75)	38 (23.75)
Attending social gatherings	Alone	1 (0.625)	22 (13.75)
	With other family members	159 (99.37)	138 (86.25)
Expenditure on self	Alone	11 (6.87)	103 (64.37)
	With other family members	149 (93.12)	57 (35.62)
Purchasing of assets	Alone	5 (3.12)	37 (23.12)
	With other family members	155 (96.87)	123 (76.87)
Visiting to parents	Not applicable	2 (1.25)	28 (17.50)
	Alone	5 (3.12)	22 (13.75)
	With other family members	153 (95.62)	110 (68.75)

Note: Figure in the parentheses indicates percentage in total

The results compare changes in key aspects of women's lives after participating in MGNREGA and Non-MGNREGA activities, highlighting distinct impacts on financial and personal dimensions. For both groups, the highest-ranked improvement was the ability to spend more on clothes, self, and children, with mean scores of 2.46 for MGNREGA and 2.76 for Non-MGNREGA. Financial

security ranked second for both groups, with Non-MGNREGA participants reporting slightly higher mean scores (2.54) compared to MGNREGA participants (2.14). Personal care for children ranked third in both categories, with scores of 1.98 for MGNREGA and 2.39 for Non-MGNREGA. These findings are consistent with Kumar *et al.* (2015) [6] and Sabharwal (2017) [10], who highlighted that

wage employment increases women’s capacity for discretionary spending and financial independence. However, areas such as better care for infant children at worksites scored the lowest across both groups, with mean scores of 0.98 (MGNREGA) and 0.96 (Non-MGNREGA). This indicates a gap in workplace provisions for child care, aligning with Dasgupta (2016) [8], who argued that rural employment schemes often fail to address family care needs. Notably, Non-MGNREGA participants scored higher in aspects such as attention to children’s education (2.13 vs. 1.66) and meeting health-related expenditures (2.33 vs. 1.94), suggesting more comprehensive support for such priorities. These observations reflect Mahapatro (2013) [4], who suggested that while MGNREGA provides critical financial benefits, its impact on broader well-being is limited compared to other income sources (Table 4).

Table 4: Changes occurred after participation in MGNREGA and Non-MGNREGA activities

Particulars	MGNREGA		Non-MGNREGA	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Financial security	2.14	2	2.54	2
Personal care for children	1.98	3	2.39	3
More attention on children's education	1.66	7	2.13	5
Better care for infant children at worksite	0.98	8	0.96	8
Improved household savings	1.78	5	2.03	6
Could able to meet expenditure on health-related issues	1.94	4	2.33	4
Able to spend more on clothes, self, children, etc.	2.46	1	2.76	1
Could able to get better or more wages than agriculture sector	1.71	6	1.80	7

Scale: Agree, disagree, neutral

Conclusion

The study underscores the significant impact of MGNREGA on women’s economic and social independence in Punjab. Through improved financial autonomy, women participating in MGNREGA have shown greater independence in spending on essentials such as food, clothing, and self-care. Social mobility has also seen notable advancements, with women increasingly participating in markets, social ceremonies, and health consultations independently. However, challenges persist, particularly in addressing childcare needs, as well as infrastructural gaps like accessible facilities for workers with disabilities. These findings align with the broader research, such as Kumar *et al.* (2015) [6] and Sabharwal (2017) [10], emphasizing that wage employment enhances women’s discretionary spending and financial independence. Despite these gains, Non-MGNREGA women have faced more limited improvements in economic and social autonomy. Disparities in employment opportunities and job security persist, with MGNREGA offering more stable and consistent jobs, as reflected by higher job security and access to microfinance. The limited progress in social engagement, such as attending village activities or participating in meetings independently, suggests that social norms and collective behaviours still dominate women’s experiences in rural areas.

The findings highlight the need for comprehensive reforms to MGNREGA, particularly in strengthening childcare provisions, expanding financial literacy programs, and integrating skill development opportunities. Additionally, promoting cultural change through awareness campaigns can challenge traditional social norms, empowering women to assert greater autonomy in both economic and social spheres. Furthermore, targeted interventions for Non-MGNREGA women can help bridge existing gaps in employment and access to basic amenities.

In conclusion, while MGNREGA has proven to be a vital tool in enhancing women’s empowerment by providing financial stability and social mobility, the scheme’s full potential is constrained by infrastructural limitations and societal norms. Addressing these barriers through holistic reforms and targeted interventions is crucial to fostering deeper and more sustained empowerment for women. By expanding MGNREGA’s reach and integrating complementary support systems, women can achieve greater independence, contributing not only to individual well-being but also to the broader goal of inclusive rural development.

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