International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

Women's Participation in MGNREGA Work Force-An Inter-District Analysis of Punjab

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Abstract

This paper analyzes inter-district variation in women's participation in the MGNREGA workforce across Punjab from 2014–15 to 2022–23, using secondary data from the MGNREGA MIS and the Department of Rural Development. Indicators such as job cards, households, person-days, active workers, and funds disbursed were examined through simple statistical tools. Results show a marked feminization of employment, with women's participation exceeding 60–80% in many districts by 2023–24. Growth has been fastest in lagging border districts like Gurdaspur, Pathankot, and Amritsar, while some leading districts show stagnation or slight decline. The overall CAGR of about 2% suggests steady progress with convergence among districts. Policy should support lagging districts with access measures and focus on quality outcomes in mature districts.

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), initiated by the government of India and was notified on September 7, 2005. The fundamental aim of the Act is to improve the quality of life for people living in rural areas in vulnerable conditions. It provides work for at least 100 days to unskilled people at a fixed wage rate, generating socio-economic stability, sustainable development, empowering the poor, and shifting agricultural and disguised unemployed labor towards other work. Since 2006, the Act has been notified in 200 districts and then extended to an additional 130 districts in the financial year 2007-2008. Further, the remaining states have been notified under this scheme from April 1, 2008 (Dreze & Oldiges, 2009).

In this backdrop, the scheme was initiated under many parameters in considering that adults who want to work on a given wage rate should apply for a job card, which provides work in fifteen days; however, it failed. The government may provide an unemployment allowance according to the Minimum Wage Rate Act of 1948. Further, equal wage payment to the male as well female workers and also inclusion of one third women beneficiaries in the MGNREGA workforce (Azam, 2012) Additionally, the work included like afforestation, soil conservation and land development and its

major feature *i.e.* availability of social audit by Gram Panchayat, also account and other related records clearly shows to the public (Panda and Majumder, 2013). Thus, from the above given scenario of the MGNREGA scheme inferred a clear picture which mentioned the accountability and transparency towards the beneficiaries.

MGNREGA in Punjab

Punjab has an agrarian economy where the majority of the population is engaged in crop cultivation, livestock rearing, fisheries, and poultry-related activities. However, the absorptive capacity of the agricultural sector has been on the decline, necessitating state intervention through employment generation schemes. The Government of Punjab initially launched MGNREGA in Hoshiarpur district in 2005 as a pilot initiative to provide wage employment to the rural workforce. Following its success, the scheme was gradually expanded, covering Muktsar, Amritsar, Nawanshahr, and Jalandhar by 2007–08, and eventually reaching all districts of the state. Since its inception in Punjab on February 2, 2006, MGNREGA has prioritized works related to water conservation, drought-proofing (afforestation and tree plantation), land development, flood protection, drainage in waterlogged areas, and rural connectivity through all-weather

roads (Khera & Nayak, 2009). Over the years, MGNREGA has become a critical policy instrument for rural livelihoods. For instance, official records indicate that the scheme generated employment for nearly 15 lakh households in 2019–20, positioning Punjab among the leading states in terms of household coverage (Satyam & Dey, 2021). Moreover, Punjab has maintained relatively high notified wage rates under MGNREGA, reaching ₹263 in 2021–22, which is among the highest across Indian states (Narayanan *et al*., 2020). Beyond employment, the scheme has contributed significantly to the development of rural infrastructure, such as roads, ponds, and water conservation structures, which provide long-term community assets and improve agricultural productivity (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010).

Review of Literature

Review of literature provides a clear vision that further helps in the development of research design, selection of sample, explanation, and the discussion of results of the research problem under study. The researchers and scholars could not remain unconcerned with this area, and as a result number of studies have been conducted both at the individual and institutional levels. In our country, the impact of MGNREGA on the women beneficiaries has been analysed by different scholars from different perspectives. Every investigator makes tactics and works on their plan on the basis of their proficiency in that specific area, which is related to the research. An attempt has been made to review some of the relevant studies based on the empirical studies related to MGNREGA and its impact on the social and economic conditions of women beneficiaries in Punjab, as well as in different states of India. According to Sainath (2008), MGNREGA has multiple effects in a positive manner in terms of better wages that provide easy access to basic needs. However, due to the fixed wage rate, farmers also rectify the wage rate for agricultural labor. Additionally, the study suggested removing the restrictions of fixed days, which is beneficial to the whole community. Khera and Nayak (2009) conducted one of the earliest field-based studies, using qualitative surveys in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, to analyze how women perceived MGNREGS. They found that women valued the scheme not just for wages but also for reducing dependence on exploitative contractors. Importantly, equal wage provisions challenged patriarchal labor norms. Their findings remain foundational, as they established that MGNREGS has both immediate economic and symbolic empowerment effects. Siwach *et al*. (2011), in their study on the impact of MGNREGA on women in rural Haryana, found that after the implementation of MGNREGA, there has been an increase in employment opportunities during the lean season in the rural area, and the economic condition of rural women has improved. They found that market wage rate for women has increased after the implementation of the scheme. According to their study, MGNREGA has not been successful in achieving its target because fund was not released timely manner. They suggested that the fund should be released timely manner, and 100 days of employment is not sufficient and should be increased. Sasi Kumar (2012) studies the socio-economic penalties of the MGNREGA for women workers. In spite of the disadvantages in the execution of the legislation, important advantages were initiated accruing to women through better rights to use to employment in local areas at a minimum scale with comparatively fair and safe work conditions. The investigation figured out that the MGNREGA had brought about major changes in the lives of women.

However, the act overlooked the fact that childcare was a problem for many of the working women, especially for young mothers. Liu and Barrett (2013) conducted a quantitative study using panel data across several Indian states to assess the indirect benefits of MGNREGS. They found that rural assets created under the program reduced women's drudgery, particularly in fetching water and fuel. Such findings are important for Malwa, where irrigation structures built under MGNREGS have contributed to agricultural stability, indirectly benefiting women by reducing household vulnerability. In the same way, Negi, Singh, and Dhana (2015) argued that MGNREGA ensures the economic security of the poor people of rural areas and also provides employment to women. Furthermore, the study also focused on the various types of work, which include: water harvesting and conservation, soil protection, irrigation facilitation, renovation of canals, land development, etc. Carla Grass *et al* (2014), in their study on the impact of MGNREGA on social transformation in Tamil Nadu, found that the scheme has benefitted the poorest households – and Dalits and women in particular – especially in terms of providing a safety net and as a tool for poverty alleviation. It has also produced significant transformative outcomes for rural labourers, such as pushing up rural wage levels, enhancing low-caste workers' bargaining power in the labour market, and reducing their dependency on high-caste employers. However, in terms of creating durable assets and promoting grassroots democracy, the scheme's outcomes are much less encouraging. Bishnoi, S. and V K Rampal (2016) in their study compare the Impact of MNREGA on the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of Rural Women in Punjab and Rajasthan. The study has revealed that the non-beneficiaries owning more acreage of land holding are not much interested in participating in MGNREGA works, as they are busy with their own agricultural activities, when compared with beneficiaries who are landless or have marginal landholdings are more inclined to work in MGNREGA. Kaushal Shaveta (2017), in her study on the impact of MGNREGA on rural women workers in Hoshiarpur and Amritsar districts of Punjab, found that there were no proper facilities for a crèche, and therefore, women feel constrained to bring their children to the worksite. However, MGNREGA has played a vital role in solving the problems of unemployment and poverty to a large extent for rural women. It has enhanced the purchasing power and raised the socio-economic status of women, especially of those who are unable to go far away in search of employment. Chahal, M.and Pardeep Kumar (2021) in their study on the impact of MGNREGA on the employment generation in Haryana find out that it satisfies some aspects of environmental protection, social protection, and rural infrastructure development, promotes women's employment, gender equality, asset creation, and improves the migration problem. Accordingly, MANREGA is acting as an important tool not only for employment creation. Apart from providing equal participation opportunities to rural poor females promotes gender equality in the workplace. MGNREGA not only decreased unemployment but also developed rural development.

It is clear from the review of literature that different researchers have different views regarding MGNREGA implementation, problems, and its impact on women beneficiaries in different states of India. Since the study of socio-economic impact on the status of women beneficiaries is challenging and changing over time, and few comprehensive research works have been done to analyze the

impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries in Punjab. Impact of MGNREGA requires study at regular intervals, and it appears that more research and data analysis are needed in this context, on the basis of primary data, to know the impact of MGNREGA on the status of women beneficiaries. So, there is an urgent need for more empirical and analytical studies on this important subject to remove the yawning gap in the body of literature. No comprehensive research work has been done to analyze the impact of MGNREGA on women beneficiaries in the Malwa region of Punjab in the present situation and ground reality in Punjab. The present study has covered the empirical gaps regarding the impact of MGNREGA in Punjab. This enlarges our understanding of the impact of MGNREGS on women beneficiaries in Punjab.

Objectives
The main objectives of the study are described below.
1. To quantify inter-district levels and trends in women's participation in MGNREGA, benchmarked against the 33% statutory norm.
2. To find and analyse inter-district disparities in women's participation in MGNREGA.
3. To suggest actionable, district-specific policy recommendations to enhance women's participation and work conditions under MGNREGA.

Methodology
Analytical, inter-district study using secondary data with a panel structure over multiple financial years from 2014-15 to 2022-23 to capture levels and trends. The unit of analysis is the district; all districts in Punjab are included except Malerkotla. Data regarding different indicators was obtained from the MGNREGA Management Information System and the Department of Rural Development. The main indicators used in the study include the number of Job cards, households, person-days, active workers, total amount disbursed (in lakhs), total funds available (in lakhs), and district-wise women's participation. Simple statistical tools such as tables, bar diagrams, and annual compound growth rates were used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussions: This section is divided into two sections, i.e., working of MGNREGA in Punjab and District-wise women's participation in Punjab.

Working of MGNREGA in Punjab: This section analyzes data related to various indicators, including the number of Job cards, households, person-days, active workers, total amount disbursed (in lakhs), and total funds available (in lakhs). Table no. 1 presents a decade-long profile of MGNREGA scale and financing in Punjab, showing strong expansion in coverage, employment generation, and disbursements, followed by a mid-period spike and partial normalization by 2022–23. The compound annual growth rates (CAGR) highlight rapid growth in person-days and fiscal disbursements, contrasted with a near-flat count of active workers, indicating intensity-driven rather than registry-driven gains.

Table 1: MGNREGA in Punjab (All Districts)-Trends

Indicators	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	CAGR
No. of Job cards	1111193	1194506	1285720	1464868	1590291	1727594	2008268	2008268	1801552	6.23
Households	288722	473984	536372	663684	674884	753429	953318	953318	845658	14.38
Persondays	6453360	14433841	15773309	22310598	12417883	23525371	37675326	33143058	32113692	22.21
Active Workers	1573730	1573730	1576641	1576641	1576641	1576641	1576629	1575850	1575850	0.02
Total Amount Disbursed (in Lakhs)	15007	22245	42979	51021	46481	57000	93204	79713	83537	23.94
Total Funds Available (in Lakhs)	21620	30722	54259	20283	24095	18859	23092	43924	48697	10.68

Source: Department of Rural Development/ Ministry of Rural Development /Government of India

The number of job cards increased from 11.1 lakh to 20.08 lakh in 2020–21, followed by a moderate contraction to 18.01 lakh in 2022–23. Similarly, the number of households employed increased in 2014-15 by 2.88 lakh to 9.53 lakh in 2020–21, before stabilizing at 8.45 lakh by 2022–23. On the other hand, Person days generated demonstrate the significant growth, i.e., sixfold from 64.5 lakh in 2014–15 to 376.7 lakh in 2020–21, and subsequently reaching 321.1 lakh in 2022–23. In contrast, the number of active workers remained stable at 15.7 lakh during the study period, financial indicators reflect with total disbursements increasing from ₹15,007 lakh in 2014–15 to ₹93,204 lakh in 2020–21, while available funds exhibited marked year-to-year volatility, ranging from a low of ₹18,859 lakh in 2019–20 to a high of ₹54,258 lakh in 2016–17. Thus, the notable increase in job cards, household employment, person-days generated, and financial assets demonstrates the remarkable role of MGNREGA in Punjab. The trends represent the consistent growth in the given parameter during the study period; however, a slight decline was recorded in 2022-23 due to the impact of COVID-19, which affected the entire world.

CAGR is highest for the total amount disbursed at 23.94% and person-days at 22.21%, reflecting the rapid scaling of both employment volume and expenditure over the period. Household worked grows at 14.38% and job cards at 6.23%, while active workers are essentially flat at 0.02%, underscoring that most of the increase in employment is intensive (more work per participating unit) rather than extensive (more unique active workers).

The faster growth of person-days relative to households implies rising intensity of work per participating household over time, consistent with the observed peaks and subsequent stabilization in the later years. The near-constant active worker count alongside rising disbursements and person-days indicates that average person-days per active worker and per household rose substantially before easing, a pattern typical of programmatic scale-up and subsequent normalization.

District-Wise Women's Participation in Punjab: The series represents women's participation as a percentage of total person-days, which, in policy terms, tracks the gender composition of employment generated and is often benchmarked against the 33% program threshold. A rising percentage reflects either stronger female uptake, program design that favors women's access, or shifts in district-level administration and social norms. Inter-district variation signals uneven implementation capacity, demographic composition, and labor market alternatives. Table no.2 shows that Punjab's districts show a clear, statewide rise in women's participation from 57.5% in 2014–15 to 68.7% in 2023–24, but with large inter-district gaps and varied growth

trajectories. The fastest gains come from historically low-participation districts (e.g., Gurdaspur, Pathankot), while many high-base districts continue steady, incremental improvement.

Table 2: District-wise women's participation in Punjab

S. No	Districts	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	CAGR%
1	AMRITSAR	18.8	17.7	27.5	38.8	43.4	40.7	44.4	46.8	55.1	58.5	13.443
2	BARNALA	64.2	65.8	66.6	68.5	68.3	68.3	67.5	71.9	71.1	71.5	1.204
3	BHATINDA	67.5	69.0	69.9	69.9	67.8	66.9	67.1	69.0	74.0	74.5	1.102
4	FARIDKOT	63.3	63.7	63.8	65.8	63.0	60.7	59.9	64.0	67.8	68.7	0.914
5	FATEHGARH SAHIB	67.1	71.6	73.1	74.7	76.6	76.7	73.8	77.4	79.9	81.0	2.114
6	Fazilka	39.7	43.9	45.8	51.4	53.2	51.1	54.1	55.0	59.6	59.0	4.500
7	FEROZEPUR	32.8	35.2	37.1	43.0	45.2	43.5	42.5	44.4	51.2	53.5	5.587
8	GURDASPUR	11.0	13.0	15.6	31.4	31.9	29.5	31.7	32.9	37.6	46.1	17.259
9	HOSHIARPUR	55.8	55.9	58.0	56.8	53.0	54.8	52.2	54.9	59.5	61.2	1.032
10	JALANDHAR	63.0	64.4	64.6	68.1	68.7	66.9	64.6	65.7	72.5	75.4	2.016
11	KAPURTHALA	61.4	65.6	68.2	69.9	71.4	70.1	66.6	68.2	72.4	75.5	2.324
12	LUDHIANA	71.1	71.9	72.8	76.2	76.7	74.8	73.0	77.2	81.2	81.9	1.584
13	MANSA	53.9	62.9	65.7	67.0	60.5	62.1	63.5	65.2	73.1	72.9	3.412
14	MOGA	71.2	69.0	69.6	69.1	68.0	64.4	64.3	65.8	70.3	72.2	0.155
15	MUKATSAR	70.5	68.2	66.8	64.5	59.9	59.5	60.0	62.3	68.8	69.4	-0.175
16	NAWANSHAHR	63.9	66.5	67.8	69.3	68.6	68.0	64.7	66.9	72.0	75.0	1.796
17	Pathankot	7.9	10.3	12.4	17.7	22.8	23.7	23.2	23.2	25.2	28.9	15.501
18	PATIALA	55.3	59.4	59.9	65.4	62.6	63.2	64.3	71.0	75.3	78.7	3.999
19	ROPAR	45.4	50.8	56.3	64.3	67.0	67.1	65.6	69.3	77.3	78.6	6.288
20	SANGRUR	60.4	60.7	61.2	64.9	62.9	63.0	64.3	68.6	70.0	73.6	2.220
21	SAS NAGAR MOHALI	42.5	50.3	58.0	68.9	64.1	66.2	64.0	72.0	80.6	84.0	7.864
22	TARN TARAN	27.8	27.3	30.9	35.4	37.1	35.3	35.3	36.9	50.5	56.4	8.178
	Total	57.5	58.0	60.0	62.7	60.7	58.8	56.9	60.4	66.6	68.7	1.997

Source: Department of Rural Development/ Ministry of Rural Development /Government of India
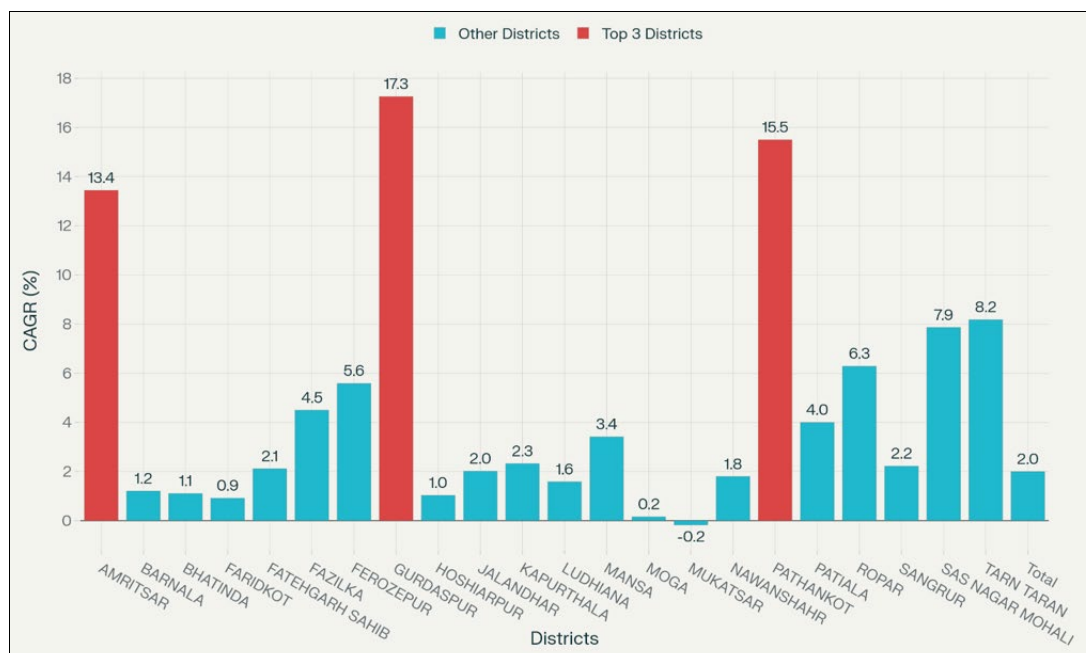**Note:** Malerkotla is not included in this table due to the non-availability of data.

From 2014–15 to 2017–18, participation increased from 57.5% to 62.7%, showing early widespread gains. A mid-term slowdown (60.7% in 2018–19 to 56.9% in 2020–21) was followed by a strong recovery to 68.7% by 2023–24, indicating both cyclical influences and later administrative catch-up or pent-up demand being addressed.
High-base districts (Ludhiana, Fatehgarh Sahib, Patiala, Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr) maintain levels near or above 75% by 2023–24, reflecting mature inclusion dynamics. Low-base districts in Majha and the border belt (Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Tarn Taran, parts of Amritsar and Ferozepur) show the sharpest percentage growth from modest starting points, indicating convergence but still with a persistent level gap.
Fastest compound growth is observed in districts with low initial baselines: Gurdaspur (17.259%), Pathankot (15.501%), Tarn Taran (8.178%), SAS Nagar (7.864%), and Ropar (6.288%). Moderate accelerations appear in Ferozepur (5.587%), Fazilka (4.500%), Patiala (3.999%), and Mansa (3.412%), while mature, high-base districts show smaller-but still positive-CAGRs (e.g., Jalandhar 2.016%, Kapurthala 2.324%, Sangrur 2.220%). Minimal or negative growth in Mukatsar (-0.175%), Moga (0.155%), Faridkot (0.914%), Bathinda (1.102%), and Barnala (1.204%) suggests plateauing or structural frictions that policy must address.
Urban–rural adjacency and diversified local economies (Ludhiana, Mohali, Patiala) tend to correlate with sustained high participation, likely via administrative capacity and awareness. Border and agrarian districts with entrenched social constraints (Pathankot, Gurdaspur, Tarn Taran) show delayed but rapid catch-up once enabling conditions improve. Districts with mid-period dips often mirror state-wide fluctuations, hinting at supply-side factors (fund flow timing, worksite availability) rather than demand alone. With many districts consistently above 60–80%, women's participation far exceeds the minimum benchmark, indicating deep program feminization. In high-base districts, low CAGRs likely reflect saturation effects, while policy energy in low-base districts yields high CAGRs through expanding access, childcare provisioning at worksites, and targeted mobilization.

Source: Draw from the above table

Fig 1: Women's CAGR by District (2014-24)

The figure 1 clearly show that women's work participation is highest in Gurdaspur, followed by Pathankot and Amritsar. These districts appear to lead in facilitating or enabling greater female involvement in the workforce. In addition to that, Tarn Taran and S.A.S. Nagar (Mohali) also exhibit a substantial share of women workers, suggesting they are doing comparatively well in gender inclusion in employment. However, there remain several districts that lag significantly behind. Among them, Mansa, Bathinda, and Sangrur are particularly deficient when it comes to women's work participation. These areas have much lower percentages of women in the workforce, pointing to persistent social, economic, or structural barriers that inhibit women from joining or being counted in formal work.

Conclusion
Punjab has achieved marked feminization of MGNREGA employment over the last decade, with many districts now recording women's participation above 60–80% by 2023–24, though substantial spatial heterogeneity persists across the state. Growth has been most rapid in historically low-participation border districts-Gurdaspur (~17.3%), Pathankot (~15.5%), and Amritsar (~13.4%)-while several high-base districts display modest gains or stagnation, with Mukatsar showing a slight decline, underscoring convergence from low baselines alongside saturation effects in leaders. The statewide CAGR of roughly 2% reflects steady but tempered improvement once fast catch-up in laggards and ceiling constraints in leaders are aggregated, pointing to momentum without an overall boom. Policy should consolidate gains in high-momentum lagging districts through last-mile facilitation, proximate worksites, and safeguards, while mature districts pivot from quantity to quality via asset productivity, programme convergence, and care supports to translate high participation into durable livelihood outcomes. Future work should couple growth rates with absolute person-days and financing trajectories to distinguish momentum from material scale and to identify district effects linked to demographics and administrative capacity for targeted, evidence-led interventions.

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