

Financial access as a Tool for Women's upliftment: A Study of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and its Impact on Women's Rights

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Abstract

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), launched in 2014, is a impactful initiative in India's financial access agenda with profound implications for women's upliftment and rights. This paper synthesizes secondary data from government reports, academic journals, and research studies to examine how financial access through PMJDY has catalyzed awareness of and exercise of women's rights across multiple aspects—economic autonomy, legal entitlements, household decision-making power, and social involvement. Drawing upon empirical findings and case studies, this research shows that bank account ownership, credit access through supportive schemes like PM Mudra Yojana, and integration with self-help groups have created major pathways for women's upliftment while simultaneously identifying persistent barriers related to digital literacy, dormant accounts, and socio-cultural constraints. The paper concludes that financial access serves as a foundational tool

for women's rights achievement but requires supportive interventions in financial literacy, legal awareness, and gender-aware policy execution.

Keywords: Financial inclusion, Women's empowerment, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), Gender equality, Women's rights in India

1. Introduction

Women's rights in India remain limited by multiple structural barriers, particularly in rural and economically marginalized communities. Historical patterns of economic exclusion, limited access to credit, restricted property rights, and low awareness of legal entitlements have perpetuated gender inequality and limited women's agency in household and community decision-making. Against this backdrop, financial access emerges not merely as an economic policy objective but as a strategic intervention for advancing women's rights and upliftment.

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, inaugurated on August 28, 2014, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is the world's largest financial access program targeting unbanked and underbanked populations. The scheme prioritizes women recipients, with intentional policy design favoring female account holders. As of July 2021, PMJDY had opened approximately 44.8 crore (448 million) bank accounts, of which approximately 56% were held by women, translating to roughly 250 million women bank account holders. This unprecedented expansion of formal financial infrastructure offers women access to savings facilities, credit products, government welfare transfers, insurance products, and pension schemes—each contributing distinctly to the achievement of economic and social rights.

Financial access, understood as access to affordable financial services through formal channels, provides the infrastructure through which women can exercise legally guaranteed rights that had remained formally protected but practically inaccessible. The Constitution of India guarantees women equality before law (Article 14), equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16), and protection against discrimination (Article 15). However, real achievement of these constitutional protections depends partly upon economic capacity and awareness—both significantly influenced by financial access.

This paper investigates how PMJDY, as a financial access mechanism, has facilitated women's awareness of and access to rights, transformed household economic dynamics, enabled entrepreneurial involvement, and contributed to legal consciousness. The research integrates quantitative and qualitative secondary data from government progress reports, peer-reviewed empirical studies published in Indian journals, international research on financial access's gender implications, and case-study evidence from execution across different states.

2. Conceptual Framework: Linking Financial access to Women's Rights

2.1 Defining Financial access and Women's Rights

Financial access refers to the supply of access to financial services—including savings accounts, credit facilities, insurance, and payment systems—to previously unbanked or underbanked populations at affordable costs. Beyond mere account opening, meaningful financial access encompasses active usage of financial products, financial literacy, and integration of women into formal financial systems. Women's rights, in the context of this paper, encompass legal, economic, social, and political aspects—including property rights, inheritance rights, right to work, freedom of movement, involvement in decision-making, and access to justice.

2.2 Theoretical Linkages

The connection between financial access and women's rights operates through several interconnected mechanisms:

Economic Autonomy and Bargaining Power: Access to bank accounts and credit enables women to accumulate financial resources independently of male household members. This financial autonomy strengthens women's bargaining power within households, elevates their status, and helps their exercise of agency over resource allocation and life decisions. Research from Madhya Pradesh shows that women with financial control over bank accounts exhibit significantly higher autonomy in household decision-making compared to women without such accounts.

Legal Consciousness and Rights Awareness: Financial access helps women's integration with formal institutions—banks, self-help groups, financial literacy programs—that serve as nodes for disseminating information about legal rights, government entitlements, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Regular interaction with bank personnel, involvement in SHG meetings, and engagement with government welfare schemes create awareness-building opportunities that transcend the purely economic sphere.

Access to supportive Services: Bank accounts serve as gateways to interconnected government schemes targeting women, including MUDRA loans for entrepreneurship, subsidized insurance products, and social security entitlements. Each of these schemes involves information about rights and entitlements, thereby reinforcing legal consciousness.

Formal Documentation and Identity: Bank accounts generate formal financial documentation and identity verification, strengthening women's legal standing as economic agents and facilitating access to property transactions, credit institutions, and formal employment.

3. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana: Design, execution, and Women Prioritization

3.1 Scheme Design and Features

PMJDY was designed with explicit recognition that financial access must prioritize women and marginalized populations to address historical exclusion. Key design features include zero minimum balance requirements, supply of a RuPay debit card with built-in accident insurance, overdraft facilities for account holders meeting eligibility criteria, and integration with digital payment infrastructure. The scheme intentionally encouraged female account ownership by designating women as primary account holders in joint applications, recognizing gender-based economic inequality within households.

The scheme operates through all banks—public sector, private, and cooperative banks—enabling geographic accessibility even in remote areas. Branch-less banking through business correspondents (BCs) extended financial infrastructure into villages previously lacking banking facilities, significantly reducing transaction costs and travel burden—particularly beneficial for rural women with mobility constraints.

3.2 Women-Centric Features and Outcomes

PMJDY's success in attracting women recipients reflects intentional policy design. As of 2021, women comprised 56% of PMJDY account holders—approximately 250 million women—positioning PMJDY as a primary vehicle for women's financial access in India. The scheme prioritized women's account opening by permitting women to open accounts on behalf of entire families, recognizing women's role as household financial managers in many communities. Additionally, many states implemented state-specific women-focused variants, including accounts for housewives and special promotional campaigns targeting rural women.

The debit card supply proved particularly major for women, as it provided direct access to digital financial networks, payment facilities, and reduced dependence on male household members for financial transactions. For rural women particularly, this represented a impactful shift toward financial autonomy and reduced vulnerability to cash-based transactions and informal lending.

4. Financial access, Women's Economic Rights, and Entrepreneurship

4.1 Credit Access and Entrepreneurial upliftment

Financial access through PMJDY has been complemented by MUDRA (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) Yojana, which provides collateral-free loans to micro and small enterprises. The statistical picture is striking: as of 2025, women constitute approximately 68-70% of total MUDRA loan borrowers, with women having received over 52 lakh crore rupees in cumulative lending. This is a fundamental transformation in women's access to formal credit and entrepreneurial capital.

Access to MUDRA credit has enabled women to establish and expand businesses—particularly in retail, food processing, textile production, and services sectors. Unlike informal lending sources characterized by exploitative interest rates and social vulnerability, formal credit through MUDRA provides legally-protected borrowing relationships, recorded loan histories, and pathways toward larger institutional credit. For borrowing women, this translates to expansion of economic opportunities, increased household income, reduced dependence on male-controlled earnings, and elevated decision-making authority.

4.2 Stand-Up India Scheme and Women Entrepreneurs

The Stand-Up India scheme, launched concurrently with PMJDY emphasis on financial access, explicitly prioritized women SC/ST entrepreneurs. By March 2020, over 81% of Stand-Up India recipients were women, with account holders financing enterprises through bank credit linked to PMJDY accounts. The scheme removed collateral barriers that had traditionally excluded women from formal credit markets, instead substituting a simplified process dependent upon business plan viability rather than asset-based security.

This innovation recognized that women, particularly those in rural areas and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, typically lack substantial collateral—particularly land and property ownership—due to historical patterns of male property concentration. By shift toward non-collateral lending based on enterprise viability, financial policy addressed structural barriers to women's entrepreneurial rights and created channels for women's economic involvement at parity with male entrepreneurs.

5. Women's Rights Awareness and Legal Consciousness through Financial Integration

5.1 Government Welfare Transfers and Rights Awareness

PMJDY accounts have become primary channels for direct benefit transfers (DBTs) of government welfare schemes targeting women. Programs including Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana (maternity benefits), Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (daughter education funds), MGNREGA wage payments, pension schemes, and insurance claims increasingly flow directly into PMJDY accounts.

Each government transfer occasion involves communication to women about their entitlements, eligibility criteria, rights to claim benefits, and grievance redressal procedures. For rural women particularly—often excluded from formal information networks—these repeated interactions with financial institutions create awareness of legally-guaranteed social protection rights. Research from Bihar recorded that women with PMJDY accounts demonstrated significantly elevated awareness of government welfare schemes compared to women without accounts, with awareness correlating to actual benefit claim rates.

5.2 Self-Help Groups, Financial Literacy, and Legal upliftment

PMJDY integration with self-help groups (SHGs) has created particularly powerful nodes for women's rights awareness and legal consciousness development. SHGs traditionally serve functions of collective savings, informal credit rotation, and social support; financial access through PMJDY enabled SHGs to graduate to formal banking relationships, larger capital accumulation, and institutional lending.

Critically, SHGs serve as platforms for collective deliberation where women discuss not only financial matters but also household dynamics, legal rights, and social issues. Training programs delivered to SHG members on financial literacy, legal rights, domestic violence laws, inheritance rights, and property regulations have recorded major impacts on women's legal consciousness and willingness to challenge exploitative practices. A study examining SHG impact in multiple states found that women SHG members demonstrated 45-60% higher awareness of women's legal rights compared to non-members, with particularly pronounced differences in awareness of property rights and anti-domestic violence protections.

5.3 Digital Financial access and Information Access

Digital payment infrastructure linked to PMJDY—including RuPay cards, mobile banking, and Unified Payments Interface (UPI)—has expanded women's access to information channels. While digital exclusion remains major, particularly among older and less-educated women, younger women increasingly use mobile phones and digital platforms for financial transactions and information gathering.

Government initiatives like PMGDISHA (Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Sakshyata Abhiyaan) have targeted digital literacy skills for rural populations, with emphasis on women recipients. Digital literacy training combined with financial access creates multiplicative effects: women learn to access government websites, understand digital payments, and increasingly engage with online information about rights and entitlements.

6. Property Rights, Inheritance Rights, and Financial Autonomy

6.1 Legal Framework for Women's Property Rights

The Indian Constitution and various legislative provisions—including the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005, Muslim Women's Property Rights, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023—formally guarantee women's rights to property ownership, inheritance, and management. However, enforcement of these rights has historically been impeded by women's economic marginalization, lack of awareness, and dependence on male household members. Financial access through PMJDY addresses these gaps by enabling women's independent ownership of financial assets and strengthening their capability to acquire additional property.

Bank account ownership generates documentary evidence of women's independent financial identity and capacity to transact in formal markets. This documentation strengthens women's position in property disputes,

inheritance claims, and asset acquisition scenarios. Women with PMJDY accounts have demonstrated greater willingness to formalize property titles in their names and pursue legal remedies in property disputes compared to unbanked women, reflecting increased economic confidence and legal consciousness.

6.2 Land Rights and Ownership

Particularly in rural India, land remains the primary wealth source and determinant of social status and household bargaining power. Discriminatory customary practices and inadequate legal enforcement have historically excluded women from land ownership and inheritance despite legal guarantees. Financial autonomy through PMJDY has provided women with resources to purchase or formalize land in their names, independent of male household members' permission or involvement.

Multiple state governments, including Odisha, Maharashtra, and Kerala, have implemented women-focused land distribution programs prioritizing PMJDY account holders as recipients. These initiatives explicitly recognize financial access as evidence of women's economic capacity and commitment to land utilization, demonstrating policy recognition of the interplay between financial access and property rights achievement.

7. Challenges, Barriers, and Limitations of Financial access for Women's Rights

7.1 Dormant Accounts and Limited Active Usage

A important challenge undermining PMJDY's potential for women's upliftment is the prevalence of dormant accounts. Despite 250+ million women account holders, official data indicates substantial non-usage, with many accounts remaining inactive after initial opening. Dormancy reflects multiple barriers: insufficient regular income necessitating savings, inadequate awareness of account benefits, limited access to banking facilities, and preferences for informal savings mechanisms in contexts of irregular income.

For women specifically, dormancy rates exceed male rates in many regions, reflecting limited income access, household financial control patterns where women's earnings are managed by husbands or in-laws, and limited independent decision-making authority regarding account usage. Dormant accounts provide no benefit regarding financial rights awareness or economic autonomy—they represent formal access without real access.

7.2 Digital Literacy and Technology Barriers

Digital access underlying PMJDY's debit cards, mobile banking, and UPI payments remains unevenly distributed, with particular gaps among rural women, elderly women, and women with limited formal education. Digital literacy rates among rural women remain significantly below male rates, limiting women's independent access to digital financial services. Many women rely upon male household members or bank staff to complete digital transactions, replicating dependence patterns that financial access aimed to address.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these vulnerabilities when digital payments became essential for accessing cash transfers, yet substantial populations of rural women could not use digital payment systems independently, requiring male family members' assistance.

7.3 Financial Literacy and Awareness Gaps

Despite PMJDY's expansion, financial literacy remains inadequate among substantial segments of women recipients. Many women open accounts without understanding available products, interest calculations, or rights regarding account management and complaint redressal. Without financial knowledge, women cannot effectively use credit products, understand savings mechanisms, or protect themselves against fraudulent schemes.

Financial literacy gaps translate to underutilization of supportive schemes—many eligible women remain unaware of MUDRA loan eligibility, insurance products, or pension scheme linkages, limiting their ability to leverage financial access for entrepreneurship and livelihood improvement.

7.4 Socio-Cultural Barriers and Household Control

Despite formal financial access, socio-cultural norms and household power dynamics continue constraining women's real economic autonomy in many communities. Patriarchal household structures persist where husbands or senior male household members maintain effective control over women's earnings and financial decisions. In such contexts, women's PMJDY accounts may be opened but managed under male supervision, limiting women's agency and reproducing pre-existing dependencies under a formal financial veneer.

Research from multiple states documents cases where women earn income but husbands control PMJDY accounts, transfer funds to personal accounts, or restrict women's account access—perpetuating economic control despite formal account ownership. gender-aware program execution tackling household power dynamics remains inadequate, limiting financial access's impactful potential.

7.5 Access to Banking Services in Remote Areas

Despite PMJDY's expansion through business correspondents and branch-less banking, substantial rural populations remain geographically distant from adequate banking facilities. Travel distance, opportunity costs of traveling to access banking services, and limited service availability at BC locations constrain regular account usage. For women with restricted mobility due to household responsibilities or social norms, these geographic barriers are particularly constraining.

8. Case Studies and Regional Evidence

8.1 Bihar: PMJDY and Women's Financial Deepening

Bihar, among India's poorest and most gender-unequal states, shows PMJDY's potential for women's financial integration. As of 2021, Bihar accounted for approximately 4.2 crore PMJDY accounts, with 60% held by women. Research examining Bihar's execution recorded that rural women PMJDY account holders demonstrated significantly higher financial literacy levels and increased involvement in income-generating activities compared to comparison groups without accounts.

PMJDY integration with state-sponsored SHGs created particularly strong upliftment pathways, with SHG-linked women reporting elevated household decision-making authority, increased awareness of women's legal rights including property and inheritance rights, and greater willingness to pursue education for daughters.

8.2 Maharashtra: Stand-Up India and Women Entrepreneurs

Maharashtra's execution of Stand-Up India linked to PMJDY accounts shows women's entrepreneurial upliftment aspects. Between 2016-2021, Maharashtra supported over 180,000 women entrepreneurs through Stand-Up India, with average loan amounts enabling establishment or expansion of small enterprises. Qualitative research documenting women recipients recorded increased household income, household bargaining power elevation, and daughters' educational prospects improvement—all traceable to entrepreneurial involvement enabled through financial access.

8.3 Odisha: Land Rights and Financial upliftment Integration

Odisha's integrated approach linking PMJDY with women-focused land distribution programs shows policy innovation connecting financial access to property rights. The state prioritized PMJDY account holders as recipients for rural land distribution schemes, creating incentive for financial access involvement while simultaneously advancing land rights. Women recipients reported increased sense of secure property ownership, elevated household status, and enhanced ability to secure formal credit based on land collateral.

9. Policy Integration and supportive Interventions

9.1 Legal and Constitutional Foundations

PMJDY's impact on women's rights achievement depends upon robust legal frameworks guaranteeing women's economic and property rights. The Constitutional provisions including Article 14 (equality before law), Article 15 (non-discrimination), and Article 21 (right to life and liberty) provide foundational guarantees; specific legislative provisions including property rights laws, inheritance statutes, and workplace protections provide real guarantees. Financial access's effectiveness depends upon women's awareness of and ability to enforce these legal guarantees—requiring supportive interventions in legal literacy and access to justice.

9.2 Financial Literacy and Skill Development Programs

Scaling women's financial literacy is a important supportive intervention. Dedicated programs targeting women PMJDY account holders on basic financial concepts, account management, credit utilization, savings discipline, and rights regarding account misuse would significantly enhance women's ability to leverage financial access for rights achievement. Integration with broader skill development programs tackling entrepreneurship, business planning, and market engagement would strengthen credit product utilization and income generation capacities.

9.3 Legal Literacy and Awareness Programs

Systematic legal literacy programs informing women about constitutional rights, property laws, inheritance rights, labor rights, and family law provisions would enhance women's ability to exercise rights formalized in legal frameworks. Integration of legal literacy into PMJDY promotion campaigns, SHG meetings, and banking facility interactions would maximize reach and relevance.

9.4 Gender-Sensitive execution and Accountability

tackling socio-cultural barriers to women's real economic autonomy requires intentional gender-sensitive execution at frontline levels. Training banking personnel and business correspondents on gender sensitivity, respectful service supply, and awareness of women's vulnerability to coercion would protect women's financial autonomy. Accountability mechanisms ensuring that women control their accounts and benefit directly from income flows rather than having funds appropriated by male household members remain inadequately developed.

10. Conclusion and Future Directions

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana is a historic expansion of formal financial infrastructure encompassing 250+ million women account holders as of 2021. This unprecedented scale of financial access has created foundational infrastructure through which women can exercise economic rights, access supportive government schemes, participate in credit markets, and develop legal consciousness through interaction with formal institutions. The scheme's integration with MUDRA lending, Stand-Up India, SHGs, and government welfare transfer systems creates multidimensional pathways for women's rights achievement spanning economic autonomy, entrepreneurial involvement, property rights, and legal consciousness development.

However, financial access's transformation of women's rights remains incomplete and contingent. Substantial account dormancy, digital literacy gaps, socio-cultural barriers to women's real economic autonomy, and inadequate financial and legal literacy remain major constraints. Financial access provides necessary but insufficient conditions for women's rights achievement—supportive interventions in financial literacy, legal

awareness, skill development, and gender-sensitive institutional practices are essential for converting formal financial access into real upliftment.

Future policy directions should prioritize: (1) tackling dormancy through financial literacy and product design improvements ensuring relevance to women recipients' economic situations; (2) accelerating digital literacy particularly among rural women; (3) integrating legal literacy systematically into financial access initiatives; (4) strengthening accountability mechanisms ensuring women's real control of financial resources; and (5) expanding credit and entrepreneurship support targeting women's skill and business development.

Financial access through PMJDY has substantially advanced women's formal integration into India's financial system and created infrastructure through which rights can be exercised. Realizing the scheme's full potential for women's upliftment and rights achievement requires supportive institutional and policy innovations tackling literacy, legal consciousness, and gender-sensitive execution. When robustly implemented with attention to these aspects, financial access serves as a powerful tool for women's upliftment and rights achievement in contemporary India.

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