



VIKSIT BHARAT

GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMED



Viksit Bharat @2047

Governance Transformed

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Chapter 18. Building Social Capital Through Gender Inclusion

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Introduction

The Constitution that India adopted after its establishment as an independent nation contained the dreams and aspirations of the Indian people. This is the promise of making India a vibrant democratic republic where every citizen, regardless of religious, ethnic, social groups, and gender identity would have a dignified life based on the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice (Preamble to the Constitution of India).

The journey of post-independent India is witness to the effort to fulfil this promise. Fulfilling the commitment to build “a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation” (Nehru, 1947) required grappling with a centuries-old socio-cultural milieu that was both conservative and patriarchal. Society was characterised by the presence of multiple social, ethnic, religious, and economically diverse groups. Women formed a group that cut across these identities, but also had a separate, distinct identity. Such identities defined the lives of citizens. A resultant gap between intention and ground realities was visible when the benefits of development reached these groups

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unequally. Among the diverse identities present in India, gender remained the largest social category defined by exclusion from policy and decision-making. Disparities and inequality defined the role women played in society. It also needs to be recognised that although gender inequalities were prevalent across social and economic groups, there were hierarchies of gender inequality which was most acute among the poor because of competing interests for scarce resources.

Gender discrimination and inequality remain pervasive and are visible in disparities across sectors like health, education, ownership of assets, incomes, employment, and political representation, as well as the ability to influence decision-making at different levels. Such discrimination and disparities have a direct effect on the physical, mental, social, and economic well-being of affected girls and women. But it also affects families, communities, and the nation, since this limits the ability of almost half the population to fully contribute to their own development and also to the development of family, community, and nation. Equality for women is both an end and a means: an end to realise their own potential and fulfil their aspirations, and a means for meaningful contribution to society. Prevalent inequalities point to the need for a development and growth model which integrates equity and equality as a basic cornerstone of development.

National development priorities found reflection in successive Five Year Plan documents from 1951 to 2017 which stand witness to the transformation of development goals from the earlier Plans that focused on crisis management and economic growth. Initial Five Year Plans were focused on economic growth as the driver of development, although this did not preclude interventions for women. These interventions were largely social welfare measures such as the establishment of maternity and child health centres, provision of nutrition to pregnant women, provision of vocational training, and establishment of homes for destitute women. This approach may be the reason why most interventions were led by the

Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) which was established in 1953. CSWB continued to play a vital role in the setting up of support services like hostels for working women, crèches,

Box 1: Major Legislations Relating to Women

- The Special Marriage Act 1954: enacted to provide a special type of marriage and for registration of such marriage
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956: enacted to prevent the trafficking of women
- The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961: enacted to prohibit the giving or taking of Dowry

counselling centres, homes for women in need, etc.

It was during this initial period that specific social evils relating to women were highlighted and three important legislations were enacted (see Box 1).

Although there were few programmes for women in this period, growth and income rises did result in some improvements in the data relating to women, such as an increase in enrolment of girls in schools. However, the increase in enrolment of boys was greater and the gender gap continued.

By the 1970s, the limitations of this development model were clearly visible, and a change in the approach to gender inclusion commenced. The decade of the seventies saw a shift from welfare to development. This period saw major developments in the field of women's development, both in the international and national arenas. At the international level the first World Conference on Women was held in 1975, resulting in a World Plan of Action and the decade 1976–1985 was proclaimed as the United Nations Decade for Women. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly, which was signed by India in 1980 but ratified in 1994. At the national level, the government constituted a Committee on the Status of Women in 1971 for a comprehensive examination of the questions relating to the rights and status of women, their

Box 2: Terms of Reference for the Committee on the Status of Women

- (1) To examine the Constitutional, legal and administrative provisions that have a bearing on the social status of women, their education and employment.
- (2) To assess the impact of these provisions during the last two decades on the status of women in the country, particularly in the rural sector and to suggest more effective programmes.
- (3) To consider the development of education among women and determine the factors responsible for the slow progress in some areas and suggest remedial measures.
- (4) To survey the problems of the working women including discrimination in employment and remuneration.
- (5) To examine the status of women as housewives and mothers in the changing social pattern and their problems in the sphere of further education and employments.
- (6) To undertake survey or case studies on the implications of the population policies and family planning programmes on the status of women.
- (7) To suggest any other measures which would enable women to play their full and proper role in building up the nation.

education and employment and to provide a guideline for formulation of social policy (see Box 2 for the terms of reference for the Committee).

The 1974 Report of the Committee entitled *Towards equality* was a watershed for women's development. It highlighted in detail discriminatory socio-cultural practices and political and economic processes, and gave recommendations for different sectors: economic, social, and cultural. It also emphasised women's development as a human rights issue, rather than a welfare activity. Even today, half a century after the submission of the report, many of the recommendations made by the Committee remain relevant, pointing to the long journey that still needs to be undertaken.

The Sixth Five Year Plan document that followed in 1980, for the first time, included a chapter on women. The decade of the 1980s saw a multidisciplinary approach to women's issues, with a focus on health and employment. This was the period when the Department of Women and Child Development was established in 1985. The decade of the 1980s also saw the framing of a New Education Policy in 1986, which was a watershed for women's empowerment. This was followed by the National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988, and the constitution of another important commission—the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector. An important decision taken during this time

was that all transfers of assets from the government, such as land and houses, would be in the joint name of the husband and wife.

In terms of programmes and institutions, the decade of the 1980s saw the commencement of the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) in 1982–1993, which pioneered the concept of organising women into small groups for income generation through the provision of credit, training and support services like childcare. Programmes for the support of women entrepreneurs were provided an institutional structure in the form of Women Development Corporations at the State levels. These corporations facilitated loans to women through financial institutions and banks, promoted marketing facilities, organised skill development programs for women to take up self-employment, and promoted women's self-help groups (SHGs). In 1987, another programme "Support for Training and Employment" (STEP), with components for skill upgradation and market linkage, was commenced. During this period an exclusive National Vocational Training Centre for Women was started.

The decade of the 1990s envisioned the empowerment of women as "Agents of Change," and empowerment of women was one of the major objectives of the Ninth Plan. This period saw a slew of initiatives. This included setting up of National Commission for Women in 1992 to safeguard the interests of women. The National Nutrition Policy was adopted in 1993. The concept of a "Women's Component Plan" was commenced, wherein one-third of the budget for many Departments was reserved for women. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills were passed during this period which provided the reservation of one-third of seats for women in local bodies. A bill to amend the Constitution to reserve seats for women in Parliament and State legislatures was first introduced in 1996, although it subsequently lapsed.

Initiatives that focused on the economic empowerment of women received special emphasis during this period, which saw the establishment of the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) in 1993 to establish a national-level mechanism to meet the credit needs of poor and assetless women in the informal sector.

Schemes of significance for economic empowerment that started in this period included two schemes in the agriculture sector: “Scheme to Assist Women in Cooperatives” in 1993–1994 to take up economic activities in agriculture-based sectors and “Women in Agriculture,” launched in 1993 to train women farmers having small and marginal holdings in agriculture and its allied sectors like animal husbandry, dairying, horticulture, fisheries, and beekeeping. Three schemes for organising women SHGs for a host of economic activities, including promoting savings, credit facilities, awareness generation, and technical assistance for economic empowerment, were commenced. These were Mahila Samridhi Yojana (1993), Indira Mahila Yojana in 1995, and Swa-Shakti (1998) to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of women through setting up of self-reliant SHGs and developing linkages with lending institutions to ensure women’s access to credit facilities for income-generation activities. This period also saw an emphasis on strengthening vocational training for women through women’s Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and women’s wings in general/private ITIs and an initiative for skill building in modern trades.

The National Creche Fund was established in 1994 as a national initiative for the provision of crèches. The Mahila Samakhya Programme (Education for Women’s Equality) commenced in 1989, and the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) in August 1995 aimed at extending financial assistance to pregnant women for the first two live births, which can be seen today in the form of Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY). At the international level, the Beijing Declaration was adopted by the UN at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women which flagged 12 key areas for

action. The turn of the century saw some significant developments: The first National Agriculture Policy 2000 was adopted which sought to mainstream gender concerns in agriculture by building capacities and improving access to inputs, technology, and other farming resources. Gender budgeting was introduced in 2000–2001. National Policy on Empowerment of Women was adopted in 2001, and the year was celebrated as “Women’s Empowerment Year” to create awareness for women to take their place in the mainstream of the nation’s social, political, and economic life.

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007) emphasised participation of women and proposed “all necessary steps to guarantee equal access and full participation to women in decision-making bodies, including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, statutory bodies and their advisory Commissions/Committees, Boards etc.” and introduction of women-friendly personnel policies (Tenth Five Year Plan Document, Planning Commission, Government of India). The Plan document continued the focus on women SHGs, which had crossed the one million mark by the end of the Ninth Plan period. SHGs were expected to be the agents of social change, development, and empowerment of women to facilitate financial and material resources, information, and services. The Union Budget 2005–2006, for the first time, included a separate statement highlighting the gender sensitivities of the budgetary allocation under 10 demands for grants. Gender Budgeting Cells were set up in 52 Central ministries. The Tenth Five Year Plan period saw the enactment of two women-related legislations: Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) (2005) and Amendments to the Married Women’s Property Act (1874) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956).

The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012) vision was a continuation of the strategy to empower women as agents of economic and social growth. The focus of the Plan was on gender equity which included: provision of basic entitlements, addressing the impact of globalisation and its effect on women

in the economic field, addressing the issue of physical, economic, social, and psychological violence against women (VAW), ensuring the participation and adequate representation of women at the highest policy levels, and strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming and effective policy implementation.

The Plan further recognised the need for mapping and addressing the specific deprivations of different categories of women and, apart from the general programme interventions, special targeted interventions catering to the differential needs of different groups.

The focus of the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017) was economic empowerment, and it aimed to improve the conditions of self-employed women with a focus on women's workforce participation, particularly in secondary and tertiary sectors, ensuring decent work for them, reaching out to women in agriculture and manufacturing, promoting financial inclusion, extending land and property rights to women, and increasing women's employability in the formal sector (Successive Five Year Plan Documents, Planning Commission, Government of India.). The year 2015 saw the launch of four new schemes. These include "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" a scheme for communication and sensitisation aimed at bringing about a change in the mindset with respect to the girl child and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana in 2015 for financial inclusion. Although this is not a scheme exclusively for women, they constitute the maximum number of beneficiaries with almost 29 crore bank accounts opened. Also launched in 2015 was the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, a savings scheme for the girl child which bears a higher interest rate, and the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, a skill development scheme started in 2015, which has around 50% women beneficiaries. Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) a programme to provide collateral free credit up to ₹10 lakhs (raised to ₹20 lakhs in the 2024 budget) to micro enterprises, commenced in 2015; here, women constitute a majority of the beneficiaries.

Stand-Up India scheme commenced in 2016 to promote entrepreneurship among women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. By the beginning of 2024, around 1.82 lakh women accounts had been opened. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) was commenced in 2016 to provide LPG connections for provision of clean cooking fuel to households. More than 10 crore women have been covered under the scheme.

In 2023, the Women's Reservation Bill for the reservation of one-third seats in the Parliament and State legislatures was finally passed. In 2024, the economic survey heralded the move from women's development to women-led development, with women as equal partners. Women's development is multidimensional, encompassing almost all development sectors, but this paper covers government policies and interventions in the five critical areas of elementary education and health, violence against women, and economic and political empowerment, which have maximum impact on women's lives and where the government has made significant interventions for gender inclusion.

Education

The centrality of education for women's development has long been acknowledged. The Constitution, in Article 45, directed that the State would endeavour within a period of 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution to provide free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years. Education remains perhaps the single most important factor for the empowerment of women. Education raises self-esteem and self-confidence of women and is crucial both as a means of realising the potential of women, individually and collectively, and as a social determinant that impacts all other aspects of women's lives, facilitating informed decision-making in different areas like health, income

generation, and political participation. Subsequent Development Plans reinforced the importance of girls' education and female literacy. The first three Five Year Plans acknowledged the problem of girls education. The Second Five Year Plan document noted (Second Five Year Plan Document, Planning Commission, Government of India),

A most urgent problem is that of girls' education. Public opinion in every part of the country is not equally alive to the importance of girls' education. Special efforts at educating parents, combined with efforts to make education more closely related to the needs of girls, are needed. Where there are difficulties in the acceptance of co-education, other methods will need to be explored.

The document identified many issues relating to girls education, but did not suggest major initiatives.

At the time of Independence, there was a huge gender gap in the educational sector. In 1951, when the First Five Year Plan period commenced, 59% of boys in the 6 to 11 age group and 25% of girls in this age group were enrolled in primary schools. In middle school (11 to 14 age group), this was 22% and 5%, respectively. The Second Five Year Plan set a target of improving girls' enrolment in primary school from 25% to 33% and for boys from 59% to 69% (Second Five Year Plan Document, Planning Commission, Government of India). It was in this situation that the Education Panel of the Planning Commission, in 1957 recommended the setting up of a National Committee on Women's Education. The committee was tasked with suggesting measures at the primary and secondary levels for improving women's education and examining continuing education and vocational training for adult women to earn a living and participate in projects of national reconstruction.

The Committee in its report highlighted gender disparities in education at various levels, both overall, but also between urban and rural areas and among States, and the rising gender gap in appointment of women teachers. The report (see Box 3 for

summary) stated that the major reason for this gap was “due to our failure to realise that the education of women has still to be treated as a major ‘special’ problem and not merely as part of the ‘whole’ problem of education and that some vigorous ‘special measures’ have to be adopted to advance it” and suggested that schemes and funds should be made available along with special machinery (National Committee on Women’s Education, Ministry of Education: *Towards equality* 1974).

Box 3: Major Factors Impacting Girls Education Highlighted by the National Committee on Women’s Education

- Socio-cultural Factors: Low awareness on girls’ education, which is not uniform and exists more in urban areas and among more socially advanced classes. Unwillingness to send girls to mixed schools, dearth of women teachers, early marriages, dowry system, parents’ illiteracy, and a feeling that education is not much of use in their lives.
- Economic Conditions: Poverty, domestic and occupational help by girls, inability of parents to provide for equipment and clothes for girls if they go to school, inability to pay tuition fee where education is not free, school timings and holidays which do not suit occupational needs of girls, such as household and seasonal work during festivals, marriage, and agricultural seasons.
- School Environment: Lack of suitably located, well-equipped and well-run schools, separate lavatories for girls.

In its report, the Committee recommended the following measures to promote girls schools:

- Provision of school facilities where they do not exist; ensuring free education through the provision of scholarships to poor meritorious students, free books, and stationery
- Educating public opinion, enrolment drives, with support from school committees and Mahila Mandals, enforcing compulsion.

- Improving quality of schools including provision of staff, teachers, school mothers, equipment subjects, and separate lavatory for girls.
- Inclusion of co-curricular activities to make education less bookish and practical.
- Providing conveniences and incentives: adjustment of school timings and vacation to local needs, subsidised/free mid-day meals, free medical and health facilities for school children, establishment of crèches, attendance prizes, enrolment grants to schools, rewards to villages and individuals.
- Introduction of part-time education, night schools for girls who cannot attend in daytime.
- Provision of hostels and subsidised transport at the secondary level where schools are far.
- Correcting the imbalance in the syllabus that was dominated by an urban bias and boy's view point.

A number of other committees in the education sector submitted their reports in the 1950s and the 1960s, such as the Education Commission (1964–1966), the Secondary Education Commission (1952), and Bhaktavatsalam Commission on Women's education (1965).

The next important milestone for girls' education was the adoption of the First National Policy on Education in 1968 which recommended the restructuring of the education system. One of the many recommendations of this policy was that girls' education should receive emphasis, not only on the grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation.

Despite the comprehensive nature of the report of the National Committee on Women's Education and the Bhaktavatsalam Commission, girls' education, regardless of statements highlighting its importance, largely remained part of the "whole" issue of education for many decades to come. Some interim recommendations of the Commission were accepted by the government. But the holistic framework recommended

would take a few more decades to be implemented. The focus initially remained on increasing the number of schools, which did pay some dividends as the enrolment rose.

It was in the decades of the 1980s that a transformative shift in the approach to girls' education became visible. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 brought the fundamental issue of women's equality centre stage:

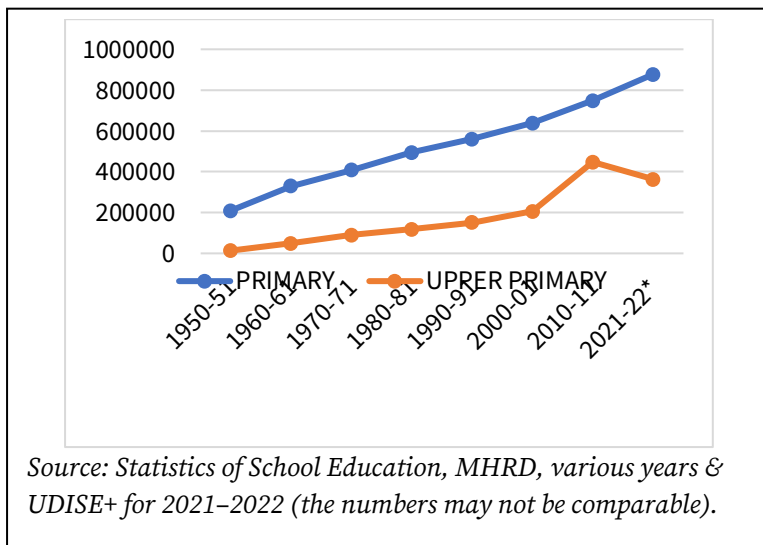


Figure 1: Number of Schools

Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favor of women... This will be an act of faith and social engineering... The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services setting time targets and effective monitoring ... (National Policy on Education, 1986).

Since the 1980s a host of proactive initiatives were undertaken to achieve Universalisation of Elementary Education with a special focus on school dropouts, working

children, girls who cannot attend formal school, and children of disadvantaged social groups.

The first of these schemes was the Non-Formal Education Scheme (NFE) (1979–2001), for out-of-school children in the 6–14 years age group, which provided flexibility and diversity in learning activities to reach out to children outside the school system. Of the 2.41 lakh NFE centres, there were 1.18 lakh NFE centres exclusively for girls throughout the country.

This was followed by two programmes of special significance for girls' education:

- Basic Education programmes which included the State-specific programmes which were followed by a National Programme, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).
- Mahila Samakhyas (Education for Women's Equality) (MS) 1989: To concretise the ambitious National Policy on Education 1986 objectives into an implementable strategy, MS was designed as an innovative, path-breaking programme to mobilise and organise women for education by creating an environment for learning.

Mahila Samakhyas, partly inspired by the Women's Development Programme (WDP), launched in Rajasthan in 1984, was possibly one of the first programmes that moved away from viewing women as objects of welfare. The centrality of education in the struggle to achieve equality was the predominant focus of Mahila Samakhyas. The principal strategy was organising women into collectives called Mahila Sanghas or Samooah—a women's collective. The Mahila Sangha provided the space where women could meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analysing and above all feeling confident to articulate their needs through this collective. Educational inputs in the form of Adult Education, Non-Formal Education, Vocational Training, Support Services, Mahila Shikshan Kendra, and ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) centres were introduced

in a phased manner, responding to the needs and priorities expressed by the women. Education in Mahila Samakhya was defined as a continuous process of gaining the consciousness and ability to critically engage with one's environment and society and to acquire the knowledge from a position of strength.

The spheres of sangha activity and action were flexible, ranging from accessing basic civic amenities; learning to deal with health issues; committing themselves to ensuring learning opportunities for their children, especially girls; trying doggedly to make themselves literate; breaking gender stereotypes in acquiring new skills like becoming mechanics; learning to manage credit; effectively participating in Panchayati Raj processes (local self-government); learning legal procedures and understanding how administrative and social structures work; gaining the strength to demand accountability and effective delivery of services; to confidently addressing issues like violence against women, child marriage, and the devadasi system, etc. Persuading parents to send their children to schools and monitoring teacher attendance were common activities of sanghas in many places. A host of other innovative educational interventions emerged from this process. These include the Bal Mitra Kendra, designed for working girls aged 9 and above in Andhra Pradesh, the Jagjagi Kendra in Bihar—non-formal education centres designed for adolescent girls, the Kishori Sanghas, etc. These were decentralised education initiatives that catered to the needs of the local community.

The programme gained national and international recognition, including the Noma International Literacy Award from UNESCO. The programme covered 126 districts when it was shut down in 2014.

Basic Education Programmes and DPEP

A series of externally aided State-level basic education programmes were commenced in the 1980s and 1990s. These

included the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme (APPEP) (1984), the Bihar Education Programme (BEP) (1990), the Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Programme (UPBEP) (1993), and Lok Jumbish (1992) in Rajasthan. In 1994, a national programme, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), was launched.

These programmes were aimed at both the universalisation of primary education and a transformation of the quality of primary education. What differentiated these programmes from earlier programmes was the decentralisation and micro-planning that responded to local needs, which could make a significant dent in the system. Since girls, along with other socially disadvantaged groups, children with special needs, and migrant children, formed the bulk of children with low participation, retention, and learning achievements, they became the focus group of these programmes from the outset. Bridging the gender gap was a stated goal for these programmes. These programmes progressively provided a comprehensive framework for girls' education, with many innovative initiatives. The Lok Jumbish and BEP programmes also retained a strong focus on education for women's equality in keeping with the NPE 1986, similar to the Mahila Samakhya programme (in fact, MS was a part of the BEP programme in Bihar).

Lok Jumbish commenced many innovations like women's collectives; Adhyapika Manch, a forum for women teachers; bridge camps for out-of-school girls like Balika Shikshan Shivirs; and Samvadika including a review of all field-level activities from the gender perspective. It also pioneered self-defence classes for girls. The BEP, along with Mahila Samakhya, similarly adopted a number of initiatives that focused not only on out-of-school girls, but also on components like life skills, legal literacy, and self-defence for both women and girls.

District Primary Education Project (DPEP) furthered the initiatives for girl's education (see Box 4) initiated in the earlier Projects in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It was a national initiative with a holistic approach to reduce gender and social disparities

and to universalise access, retention, and achievement. Gender and equity concerns informed all aspects of the programme design. Since DPEP attempted a systemic change, an integrated approach to gender was built into planning and management, pedagogical improvement, affirmative interventions for girls' education and strategies for community mobilisation and participation. Gender-related activities were clearly articulated in annual work plans. To concretise and sustain the gender focus within the programme, gender coordinators were appointed at the State and District levels.

The overall outcome of this strategy was a very conducive and supportive environment for girls' education, with an effective role of the community in the management and monitoring of ECE, alternative schooling, and school construction. The active involvement of women was able to influence location of schools, the alternative schooling, and ECCE centres ensuring easy access. A significant outcome of women's mobilisation was an added focus on issues like child marriage and other social attitudes that affect the girl child.

With a conducive environment for girls' education created at the community level, girls' enrolment also saw a significant upward trend in DPEP districts compared to non-DPEP districts and the issue of girls' education was brought firmly centre stage.

In 2001, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a national programme for UEE, was commenced. Soon thereafter, DPEP was merged into this programme. A separate gender component plan in the educationally backward blocks of the country (around one-thirds of the total blocks) was included as a part of the SSA programme with components of community mobilisation, incentives to girls, gender sensitisation, remedial teaching, etc.

Box 4: Major Initiatives for Girls Education Institutionalized Under DPEP

- Ensuring a management structure for girls' education from the national level to the field level that ensured a continuing focus on girls' education.
- Elimination of gender bias from textbooks and other TLM (teacher learning material) through the preparation of checklists, orientation of writers and illustrators, and a systematic review of textbooks. A significant achievement of DPEP was the pedagogical improvement processes. Gender review of learning material, and the overhaul of most textbooks, was completed in all the States.
- Initiative for classroom processes study from the gender perspective to feed into the gender training programmes.
- Representation of women in village education committees and other grassroots bodies like parent-teacher associations, along with special training for women members.
- Appointment of women teachers as well as para teachers which allowed flexibility where women teachers were not available.
- Alternative schooling specially designed for girls aged 9+ and those with sibling care responsibilities.
- Gender training for programme personnel, teachers, educational administrators, and teacher educators.
- Emphasis on school infrastructure like toilets for girls.
- Community mobilisation with a gender focus in awareness drives, with specially designed material. Community participation was institutionalised within the programme through Village Education Committees, mother-teacher associations, parent-teacher associations, and mothers' associations and self-help groups ensuring a greater ownership of the educational process.

Over and above the SSA interventions, two new schemes were formulated for the Tenth Plan (2002–2007) in 2,198 blocks that were backward in terms of female literacy:

- The “National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level” has been designed to address both girls out of school and those already in the system. The programme works through women's groups at the village level to build an environment conducive to girls' education

and to follow up on girls' enrolment and attendance. The programme allows flexibility to enable specific village wise interventions in order to prevent any drop outs, which could vary from incentives to escort systems and remedial classes. At the cluster level, one school was to be developed as a "model" school. This school functioned as a resource centre for all schools in the cluster, with components like supplementary gender-sensitive reading material, teacher training for gender, and classes on additional subjects like self-defence, gender, life skills, etc. which had been trialled in schools run under the Mahila Samakhya programme. The programme aimed to encourage a gender-sensitive environment in schools and the classroom, so that girls could pass out with self-confidence and self-esteem.

- The second major initiative was the Kasturba Gandhi Swatantra Vidyalay (later renamed as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya [KGBV]) scheme, to set up residential schools in the educationally backward blocks. These schools drew on the experience of Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK) established under Mahila Samakhya to impart a gender-sensitive education. This scheme targeted areas that have small, scattered habitations where no schools were provided, and distances made it impossible for girls to attend the formal primary schools. These schools also targeted communities where girls were more disadvantaged, that is, SC/ST, OBC, and minorities. Girls from many KGBVs have performed well and have also entered professions like the civil services.

These initiatives had a positive impact on the education of women and girls, not only in increasing enrolment and reducing dropouts, but in fostering the education system as a catalyst for gender equity. By 2005–2006, the Gross Enrolment Rate for girls at the primary level had crossed 100, and by 2010–2011, the Gross Enrolment Rates for both boys and girls crossed 100, with GER for girls surpassing that for boys. It would,

however, take a few years for GER at the upper primary level to reach parity.

The improved GER for girls indicates parity in elementary education, but newer forms of discrimination are visible. For example, more boys are being enrolled in private schools which are perceived to be of “better quality,” while more girls are being sent to “free” government schools that also offer incentives like scholarships, midday meals, uniforms, etc. (UDISE+ 2021–2022; Ministry of Education, UDISE+).

Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Rate

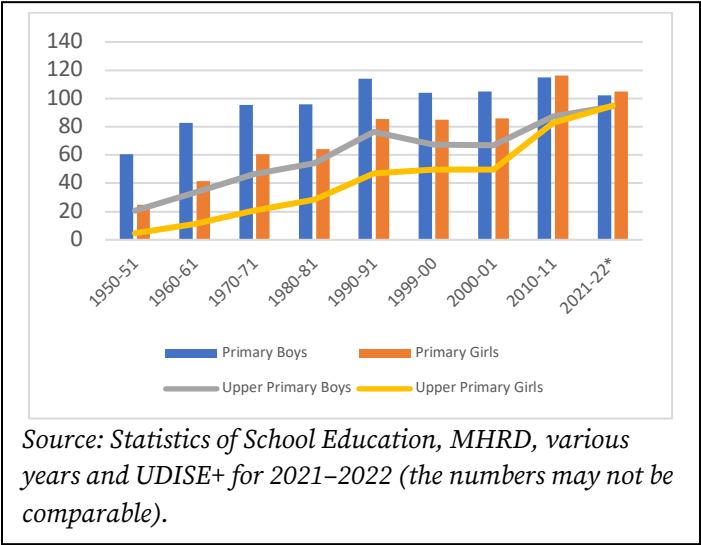


Figure 3: Percentage of Children enrolled in Private Unaided Schools of Total Children enrolled by Gender

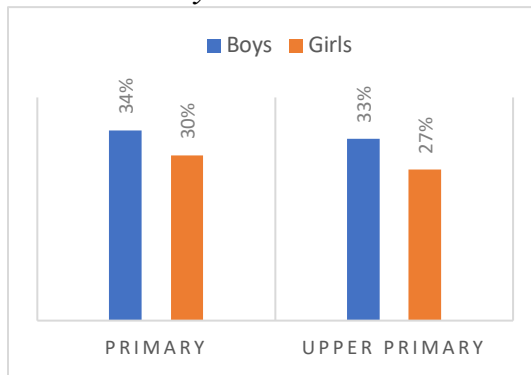
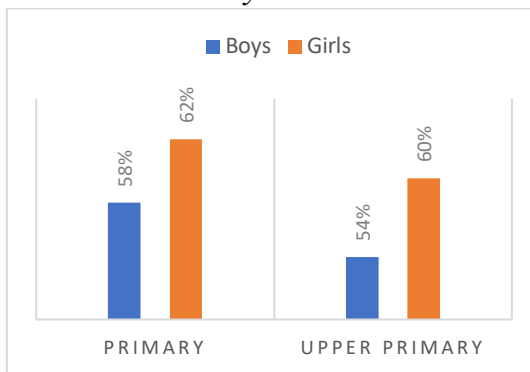


Figure 4: Percentage of children enrolled in Government Schools of Total Children enrolled by Gender



Subsequently, the Budget 2018–2019 announced the Samagra Shiksha scheme, an integrated scheme for school education from pre-school to Class XII, which encompassed earlier schemes. The stated objectives of the scheme include bridging social and gender gaps in school education and ensuring equity and inclusion at all levels of school education. In 2020, a New Education Policy (NPE 2020) replaced the earlier NEP 1986 (Box 5) (National Education Policy, 2020).

While girls' education remains a stated focus area, the holistic approach to gender adopted by the Basic Education

Programmes, DPEP, NPEGL, and Mahila Samakhya, and the focus on education as a transformational tool for gender equality has not, however, found the same focus in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or Samagra Shiksha or in NPE 2020.

Women's Health

The universal provision of quality health care at affordable prices for all citizens remains a central premise for the development of any nation. The economic and social cost of a development policy that does not prioritise health care would necessarily be high. This is also in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.”

Since Independence, India has placed the provision of health care as central to its development policy. The strategy adopted focused initially on creation of infrastructure at different levels

Box 5: New Education Policy 2020: Recommendations for Girls' Education

- Policies and schemes designed to include students from socio-economically disadvantaged groups should be especially targeted towards girls.
- Government of India to constitute a “Gender-Inclusion Fund” for States to implement priorities determined by the Central government for assisting female and transgender children (such as the toilets, bicycles, conditional cash transfers, and community interventions).
- Free boarding facilities in school locations where students may have to come from far particularly for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Strengthening and expansion of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas up to Grade 12.

and provision of manpower. Disease-specific programmes, which initially focused on communicable disease, and subsequently included non-communicable disease, followed.

Maternal child health programmes, including nutrition and safe deliveries were integrated into the health strategy from the outset. The linkage of referral services with maternity and child health services in primary health units was included in the 1960s. By the Third Five Year Plan (1961–1966), the importance of other determinants of health like rural sanitation and water supply, health education, and family planning was acknowledged.

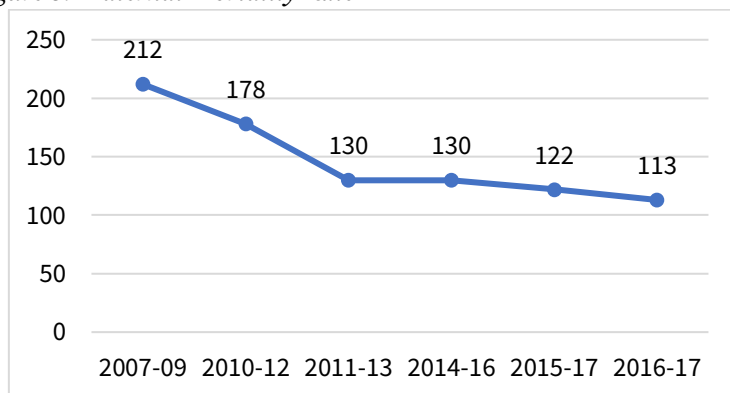
The focus on women's health has so far been largely confined to reproductive health. A series of programmes on reproductive health were initiated, like the Programme of Maternal Child Health, the Child Survival and Safe Motherhood Programme (1992–1993). In the Ninth Five Year Plan period, this became the Reproductive Child Health Programme (RCH), followed by RCH II. The RCH II programme was succeeded by the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, Adolescent Health and Nutrition (RMNCAH+N) programme, including adolescent health in the programme.

Maternal health, with sustained attention from policymakers is an area which has resulted in a steady improvement in indicators. Some of these are:

- Reduction in Maternal Mortality from 212 in 2007–2008 to 113 in 2016–2018 (Office of Registrar General, Sample Registration System [SRS]).
- Institutional delivery has increased from 78.9% in National Family Health Survey fourth round (NFHS-4) (2015–2016) to 88.6% in the fifth round (NFHS-5) (2019–21).
- Ante natal check-up (ANC) in first trimester has increased from 58.6% in NFHS-4 to 70% in NFHS-5.
- Percentage of women receiving four ANC has increased from 51.2% in NFHS-4 to 58.1% in NFHS-5.
- Post-natal check-up (PNC) has increased from 62.4% in NFHS-4 to 78% in NFHS-5.
- Percentage of women with BMI below normal has reduced from 22.9% in NFHS-4 to 18.7% in NFHS-5 (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health

Survey [NFHS-4 and NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Figure 5: Maternal Mortality Rate



Source: Sample Registration System (SRS), Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner.

Some indicators have not seen the same improvement:

- Percentage of women aged 15–49 who are anaemic has increased from 53.1% in NFHS-4 to 57% in NFHS-5. Similarly, pregnant women who are anaemic has increased from 50.4% to 52.2%.
- Under-5 mortality, expressed as deaths per 1,000 live births, for girls (33) remains higher than for boys (31) (SRS). In some States, the difference is more stark, like Assam (38, 43), Chhattisgarh (37, 45), Rajasthan (37, 43). For some States, the under 5 mortality is higher for boys: Kerala (12, 4), Himachal Pradesh (28, 19).
- IMR is 28 for both boys and girls, but it is adverse in many States like Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Odisha, Rajasthan, Punjab, Telangana, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh (SRS).

The focus on maternal health interventions was necessary to reduce morbidity and mortality for women and children. The

last SRS report on “Cause of Deaths” 2017–2019, has registered that 6.6% of deaths in females in the 15–29 age group and 2.2% in the 30–44 age group are due to maternal conditions. This entails a substantial reduction from 11.3% and 4.1% respectively in 2007–2009, but it is still significant.

The major cause of death for both men and women is non-communicable disease (NCD) (58.3% for males and 52.7% for females), with cardiovascular disease (30.8% and 26.2%, respectively) topping the list, followed by communicable, maternal, perinatal, and nutrition as the next major causes of death at 19.4% and 24.3% for men and women, respectively (Office of Registrar General, Medical Certification of Cause of Death). Injuries constitute the third largest group (12.7% and 7.5%) (source: SRS 2017–2019). The focus on maternal health, while essential, is no longer adequate to address the issues relating to women’s health. The National Plan of Action 1976, which followed the Report of the Commission on Status of Women, also pointed out that “the health of women who are not pregnant or nursing is an area which has received inadequate attention so far” (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-4 and NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Addressing women’s health requires addressing a host of issues related to the ecosystem which affect women’s health. The social determinants of health (SDH), that is, the social and economic circumstances, significantly influence health outcomes and are a major factor in health inequities.

Biological, socio-economic, and cultural situations and circumstances all affect health outcomes. Since these are different for men and women, their vulnerability is also different. Gender, therefore, is a major factor in health care and until the health system, from policy-makers to grassroots workers, understands and analyses these differences and responds with interventions that are specific to the situation of women, it may not be possible to realise desirable outcomes. Myriad factors limit access of women to health services. These

include family reasons, such as a lack of decision-making power and economic constraints, fuelled by a lower priority given to women's health. This affects not only access to health care but also adherence to treatment. Health facilities also limit access of women. These are often geographically distant and manned by staff who are not sensitised. Moreover, many facilities in rural areas are located in isolated places that women may be hesitant to visit. The availability of public or personal transport also influences access, as do safety concerns and social norms that prevent women from travelling alone. Major vulnerabilities of women include:

1. The opportunity cost of visiting health-care facilities is also high, even when health care is free. This includes loss of wages and lack of support systems that can allow women to leave children and other responsibilities to avail health care, whether in an institutional form like crèches or within the family or community, can also inhibit access to health care.
2. Education and Information: Women have lower access to information and education, which is crucial for health-seeking behaviour, especially in the context of NCDs and epidemics like COVID-19 and HIV, since lifestyle and behaviour change is the key to prevention and control. Men have greater access to information not only because they are likely to have greater interactions outside the home, but also due to greater access to Internet and mobile phones (NFHS-5).
3. Poverty: Economic issues are key to the management of health, as poverty is often a causal factor, limiting access to information and education, leading to migration, etc. Poverty also limits treatment and access to necessary interventions like adequate nutrition. Poverty affects both men and women, but power dynamics within the family, and greater poverty affecting women headed households, put women at a greater disadvantage.
4. Migration: Migration is often an outcome of poverty. Migration usually increases vulnerability of women. Men

who migrate without families, often indulge in high-risk behaviour and can bring back infections when they re-establish sexual relations.

5. Female/family migration leading to sexual exploitation: poverty can be a major reason for women's movement, forcing them to travel to find other work. Being dispossessed of land and other means of production at home, and without enough formal skills to participate in economic activities, affects the vulnerability of women. Lack of economic resources can force women to stay in situations where their physical and emotional wellbeing is at risk. Poverty limits women's choices, and in turn, their ability to protect themselves.
6. Violence against women: Women are subjected to a variety of gender-based violence including in abusive marriages, rape, incest, or assault by family members or friends, trafficking, and violence at the workplace (formal and informal). Violence against women is a major public health issue that affects both the physical and mental health of women.
7. Marriage and negotiating power constitutes a separate category of vulnerability for women, especially young women and girls. In India, more than 23% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, as per NFHS-5. Often young women are married to older men who have been sexually active for longer and who are more likely to have acquired sexually transmitted infections. In marriages, abstinence and condom use are usually not available options even where husbands are indulging in high-risk behaviour. Prevalent notions of masculinity and femininity generally mean that women have little control or negotiating power in sexual relationships, including marriage.
8. Inhalation of smoke from cooking: The supply of subsidised LPG cylinders and cook stoves to families under the Ujjwala scheme has increased the number of households that use clean cooking fuel. However, more than 40% women still do

not use clean cooking fuel. Smoke from such cooking remains a risk factor for women's health since they bear most of the burden for cooking within the household.

9. Other issues affecting women to a greater degree include the burden of care and support for persons who are unwell, both within the family and also as care workers. Breast cancer and cervical cancer predominantly constitute a risk for women.
10. Sex-based susceptibility to disease in the Indian context is also an area where greater surveillance and research are required to enable treatments to be more focused.

Although data availability is scarce, there are some indicators that suggest unequal access:

- Share of male deaths in medically certified deaths is 64%, while that of females is 36%. The report mentions that it appears more males availed themselves of medical facilities during the time of terminal illness as compared to females (source: Report on Medical Certification of Cause of Death 2020, Office of Registrar General, India).

Table 1: Average Expenditure Per Spell of Ailment for Non-hospitalised Treatment During 15-Day Period (in ₹)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Rural</i>	621	567
<i>Urban</i>	711	710
<i>All</i>	655	621

Source: NSSO.

Table 2: Average Expenditure on Immunisation (in ₹)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Rural</i>	42	29
<i>Urban</i>	243	260

Source: NSSO.

Towards the end of the Eleventh Five Year Plan, the newly created Department of Health Research had proposed a pilot programme on Gender and Health, with a proposed financial outlay for 2 years of ₹10 crores. The aim of the programmes was to conduct a gender-based analysis on a continuing basis on issues like vulnerability to disease, access to testing and health services, mobility, care and support, testing, adherence to treatment, expenditure on treatment, differences in biological vulnerability, and socio-cultural factors like education and access to information, mobility, care, and support services, and to respond with public health interventions that are specific to the situation of women. Unfortunately, the scheme was not accorded necessary approvals.

Going forward, it is essential that while designing any health programme, it is scrutinised from the gender perspective at all levels, including prevention programmes, communication campaigns and messages, treatment programmes, gender sensitisation of personnel, access to treatment, provision of an adequate earmarked budget, issues of stigma, and discrimination, especially in case of STIs and HIV-AIDS.

Monitoring that health facilities are located in a building that is “safe” for women (not geographically distant, not isolated, well connected through safe public transport, provision for stay, provision for children, manned by staff that is sensitised). Ensuring adequate women are on the staff of these facilities and conducting of patient feedback surveys among women.

Ensuring that all data collected is disaggregated by gender and that it is reviewed from the gender perspective to see if there are any gender gaps.

A concerted gender focus that can integrate a gender perspective in project design and its implementation has generally been lacking. This has also meant that surveillance, data collection, monitoring, and audit lack the necessary focus that could ensure that men and women benefit equally from health programmes.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women remains a major human rights and public health issue both globally and in India. Given the magnitude of the issue, for the purpose of this paper, this is being taken up independently from the health section. The United Nation defines violence against women as *any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life* (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993).

The World Health Organization has estimated that 1 in 3 women worldwide have been subjected to physical or sexual violence (World Health Organization, no date). The last National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) in India found that 29.3% of ever-married women in the 18–49 age group have experienced spousal violence, while 6% of women in the 18–49 age group reported experiencing sexual violence (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-4 and NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in its publication “Crime in India 2022” presented the following status of crimes against women (National Crime Record Bureau, 2022):

<i>S. no.</i>	<i>Crime</i>	<i>Rate (per 100,000 population)</i>
1	Murder with rape/gang rape	0
2	Dowry death	1
3	Abetment to suicide	0.7
4	Acid attack	0
5	Cruelty by husband / family members (Section 498A)	20.9
6	Kidnapping and abduction	12.7
7	Human trafficking	0.1
8	Selling of minor girls	0
9	Rape	4.7
10	Attempt to commit rape	0.5
11	Assault with intent to outrage modesty	12.4
12	Insult to modesty of women	1.3
13	Dowry Prohibition Act	2
14	Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (women victim cases)	0.1
15	Protection of women from domestic violence cases	0.1
16	Cyber crimes	0.4
17	POSCO	9.3

One striking feature of violence against women is that it often takes place within the family or with persons known to the family (NCRB and NFHS-5). The extent of violence against women is likely to remain under reported and difficult to assess due to power equations within the family and because issues of “honour” prevent reporting sexual violence.

Violence against women is prevalent throughout the lives of women and is manifested in various forms:

- Pre-birth: It is seen in the sex-selective foeticide to ensure the birth of boys. India remains one of the few countries with an adverse sex ratio, indicating high levels of foeticide.
- During childhood: Female infanticide, as well as preference for son, results in neglect within families due to nutrition, medical attention, schooling and other opportunities, child marriage, trafficking of children, and violence against the girl child.
- Adolescence and adulthood: Restrictions on movement; denial of schooling; early marriage; sexual harassment; trafficking; prostitution; social systems like devdasis, jogini, etc.; acid attacks; dowry harassment and murder; isolation; and mistreatment in marital home. With the advent of Information technology, cybercrimes like publishing or transmitting of sexually explicit material, blackmailing and defamation, morphing, etc. have also proliferated.
- Old age: Abandonment of old women and usurping of property. Many such widows can be seen in the religious centres of Mathura and Vrindavan, where families often abandon these women.

The government has responded with the enactment of three acts to specifically target such violence. These include the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act in 1994 to stop female foeticide and arrest the declining sex ratio. Although the sex ratio is improving, it remains adverse. Reports of female infanticide, which were prevalent at one time, have since declined.

Apart from the PCPNDT Act, two other Acts have been made to deal with some of these issues, namely the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. New sections in the Indian Penal Code like 498A in 1983 to address cruelty by husband and his family and 304B in 1986 to tackle dowry deaths were added to deal with some of

these issues. The Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) was further passed in 2012. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act had earlier been enacted in 1956. Other Acts of significance to target specific forms of violence include the Tamil Nadu Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act 1947 and the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987.

With the enactment of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA), civil protection was afforded to victims of domestic violence. The PWDVA provides a definition of domestic violence that is comprehensive and includes all forms of physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic violence, and covers both actual acts of such violence and threats of violence.

Primarily meant to provide protection from domestic violence for wives and female live-in partners at the hands of husbands and male live-in partners or their relatives, the PWDVA has been extended to also protect women living in a household, such as sisters, widows, or mothers.

Although a legal framework has been established to address some forms of violence, the implementation of the Acts has not always had the desired impact. Evidence of such violence can be seen in the following data.

Evidence of foeticide can be seen in the Sex Ratio at Birth which improved by 3 points to 907 in 2018–2020 from 904 in 2017–2019. This does not capture the geographical differences; Uttarakhand had a child sex ratio of 844 (*Sample Registration System Statistical Report 2020*, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner). The NFHS-5 (2019–2021) reported an adverse sex ratio at birth of 929 (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-4 and NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Dowry continues to be a reality across the country. The rate of dowry deaths under Section 304B (1 per lakh), cases under the Dowry Act (2 per lakh), and cruelty under Section 498A (20.9 per lakh) bear testimony to the extent of the problem (National Crime Record Bureau, 2022).

NCRB data shows a rate of 0.1 per lakh cases under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. However, in the last NFHS-5 survey in India 29.3% of ever-married women in the 18–49 age group reported experiencing spousal violence. One-fourth of ever-married women aged 18–49 who have experienced spousal physical or sexual violence report having physical injuries, but only 14% of women who experienced violence sought help to stop the violence. The difficulty in tackling this issue can be seen from the fact that 45% of women and 44% of men interviewed believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife in at least one of seven specified circumstances, such as showing disrespect for in-laws or refusal to have sex (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-4 and NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

The government has taken some additional steps, apart from legislative action, that require mention. One of these is the establishment of short-stay homes for women victims. This commenced in the 1950s, initially under the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), which also introduced the scheme of Family counselling Centres. This is currently being implemented as the Swadhar Greh Scheme by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The scheme provides shelter, food, clothing, and health as well as economic and social security for women. Counselling and cells in police stations are also being operated.

The incidence of gang rape and murder in December 2012, generally referred to as the Nirbhaya incident, proved to be a catalyst for government action on violence against women. In the wake of this incident, the government appointed a committee headed by Justice J. S. Verma to look into possible amendments in the criminal laws related to sexual violence against women, which submitted its report in January 2013. It made recommendations on laws related to rape; sexual harassment; trafficking; child sexual abuse; medical examination of victims; and police, electoral and educational

reforms. Intensive adoption and follow-up of the recommendations of the committee could help ameliorate the situation, but only a handful of States like Karnataka have made an effort to introduce such reforms.

The Indian Council for Medical Research had earlier constituted an expert group with experts from the health sector (including mental health and forensic), legal sector, NGOs, and police to draft comprehensive guidelines on the health sector's response to violence against women, which was subsequently drafted and placed in the public domain for comments. Many of the recommendations of this paper found a place in the Justice Verma Committee.

Following the December 2012 incident, the government also set up a dedicated fund—Nirbhaya Fund—which can be utilised for projects specifically designed to improve the safety and security of women, like one-stop centres, helplines, etc. It is a non-lapsable corpus fund, being administered by the Ministry of Finance. The pace of utilisation of funds has been questioned, but the initiative was much required.

Although a legal framework has been put in place on issues regarding violence against women, the need for better and more sensitised implementation structures, intensive monitoring, and follow-up could increase the impact on this issue.

Economic Participation and Empowerment

Economic inclusion is widely recognised as a fundamental prerequisite to improving the status of women. Any discussion on gender inclusion is incomplete without reference to economic empowerment. While economic growth is the accepted goal for all nations, there is now a realisation that all sections of the population have not benefited equally or adequately from economic growth. Underserved communities, like women, have traditionally been excluded in different

degrees from the benefits of economic growth that is essential for sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and improvement in living standards.

The National Development Plans have given importance to the issue of women in economic development and its facets to different degrees. Initially, this was confined to vocational training for self-employment and some efforts to provide home-based work to women.

It was not until 1980 that the need for a special focus on women was acknowledged in the Sixth Five Year Plan document which stated, “The low status of women in large segments of Indian society cannot be raised without opening up of opportunities of independent employment and income for them” (Sixth Plan Document, Planning Commission). Since then, the issue of Women’s work has entered the arena of public discourse. A number of initiatives have been taken up to address basic issues like skill upgradation and provision of credit. Such measures have had mixed outcomes, demonstrating the efficacy of various initiatives.

Economic Situation of Women

Indian society remains highly differentiated, with many women achieving a high degree of success in all fields and breaking barriers to enter new areas of work that have traditionally been the preserve of men. However, when we examine the macro data, the following situation emerges.

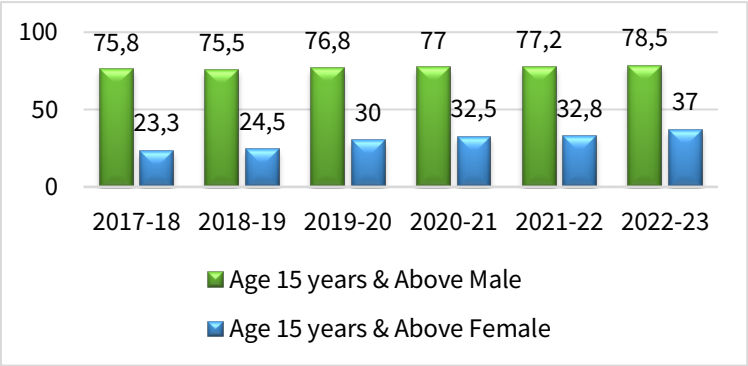
Labour Force Participation

India has one of the highest gender gaps in labour force participation rates (LFPR). The global labour force participation rate for women aged 15 and above is low at 45.6% compared to men (69.2%) (*World Employment and Social Outlook, May 2024 Update*; International Labour Organization, 2024), but this is still

considerably higher than India's rates. The last Annual Report for the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (July 2022 to June 2023) shows that the labour force participation rates in the country, in the 15 and above age group for males was 78.5% compared to a rate of 37% for females. The gender gap in labour participation rates in the country is 41.5% (NSSO, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023). The global gap is 23.6%. The data presented by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), for 2022–2023 pegs the female labour force participation rate at 8.8%, which is considerably lower.

This disparity is further accentuated in many regions. Only eight States (Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh) had a female LFPR above 50%, while six States (Lakshadweep, Delhi, Bihar, Assam, Haryana, and Chandigarh) had a female LFPR below 25% (NSSO, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023.). The encouraging trend is that although the gender gap remains substantial, it has decreased over the last few years.

Figure 6: Labour Force Participation Rate According to Usual Status



Source: Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023, NSSO.

Quality of Work Available for Women

Women workers in India are normally forced to undertake more arduous, low-paying jobs that are casual and intermittent. Among women workers, the proportion of “main workers” remains consistently low. As a percentage of total main workers, women constituted only 25% in 2011, but as a percentage of “marginal workers,” women constituted 51% of total workers (Census 2011).

Table 3: Quality of Work Available to Women

Category of workers	Percentage of total workers		Percentage of population	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Main workers	75%	25%	44%	15%
Marginal workers	49%	51%	9%	10%

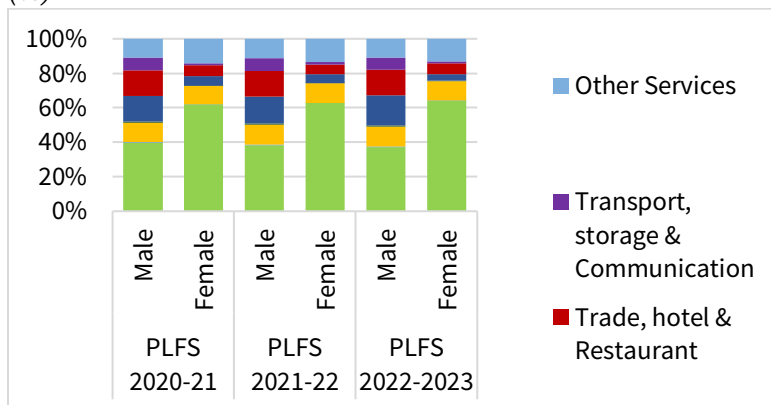
Source: Census 2011.

This is corroborated by the PLFS data, which shows significantly lower number of hours of work and pay for women.

Where Women Work?

Women predominantly work in the agriculture sector. In earlier decades, both men and women worked predominantly in the Agriculture sector. However, male migration from rural areas has led to what has been termed as the “Feminisation of Agriculture.” Balkanisation of agriculture lands, has led to small, fragmented, uneconomic holdings, and the average size of operational holdings has declined (Agriculture Census 2015–2016). This has made agriculture increasingly unremunerative for the large number of marginal farmers and unable to support families, forcing family members to migrate to seek opportunities in non-agricultural sectors. With this transition, work in agriculture has been taken over by women. The sector also continues to have differentiated work responsibilities, with women undertaking more arduous, lower-paying tasks.

Figure 7: Distribution of Workers by Broad Industry Classification (%)



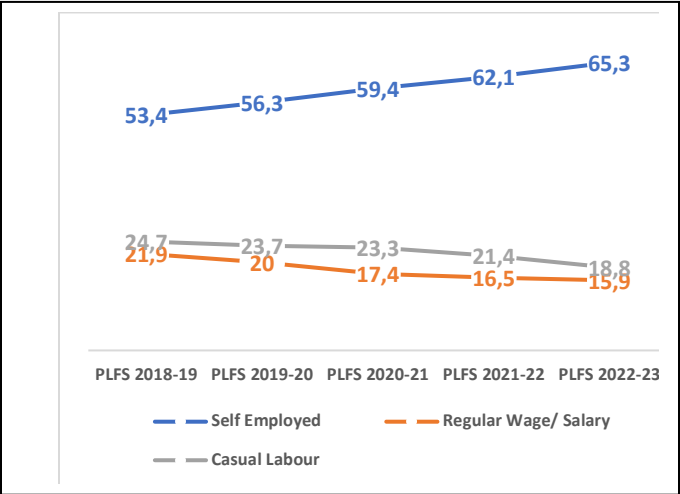
Source: Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023, NSSO.

Agriculture is the only sector where the percentage of women far out numbers that of men. The manufacturing sector employs a comparable percentage of men and women, and men far outnumber women in all other sectors (NSSO, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023).

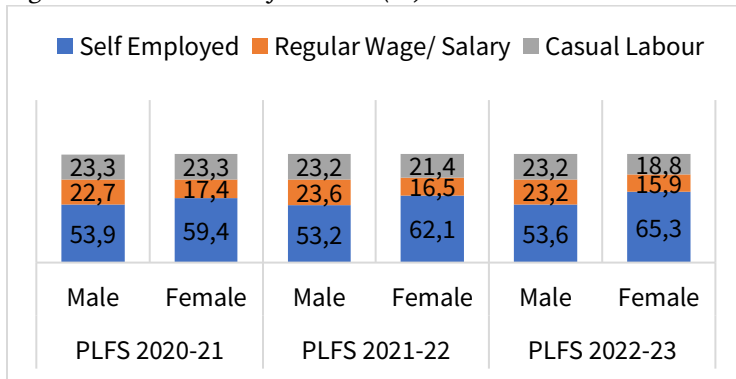
Status of Women’s Employment

A majority of women workers are self-employed (65.3%), more than 10 percentage points in excess of men, and this percentage continues to see an increasing trend. Among other categories of women workers, 18.8% work as casual labour, and only 15.9% have a regular wage/salary. Both these categories are seeing a decreasing trend for women workers.

Figure 8: Percent Distribution of Women Workers



Source: Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023 NSSO.

Figure 9: Distribution of Workers (%)

Source: Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023 NSSO.

Gender disparities are visible not only in the percentage of women who are self-employed but also in ownership patterns. Self-employment remains the largest category for men as well; the gender disparity in this category can also be seen in the table below. Men account predominantly for own account workers/employers, while a significantly larger proportion of women work as helpers in household enterprises. The gender gap in earnings of self-employed workers is also significant (NSSO, Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS], 2022–2023).

Figure 10: Average gross earnings in Rs during the last 30 days from self employment work in current weekly status

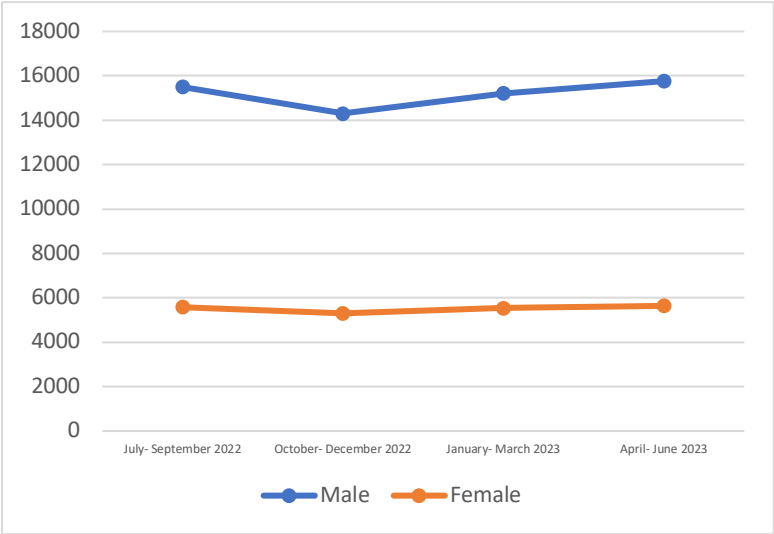
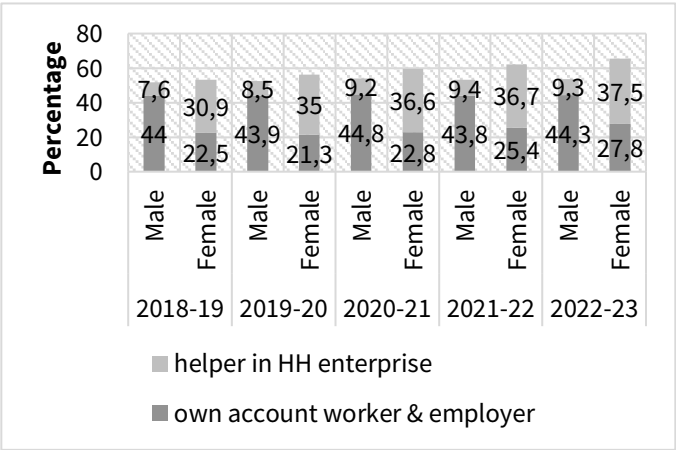


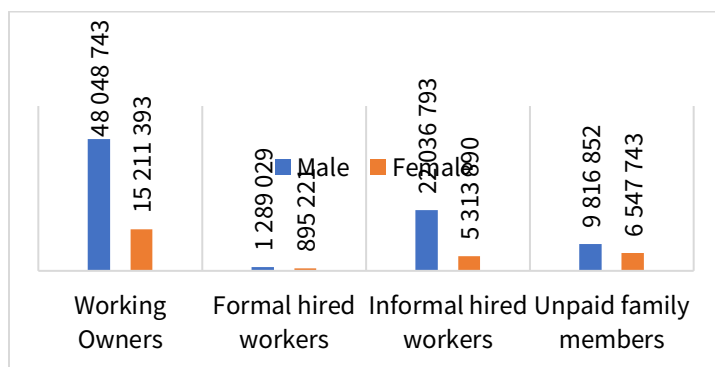
Figure 11: Status of Self Employed Workers



Source: Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–2023 NSSO.

Of the 6.5 crore enterprises belonging to the unincorporated sector, 24.18% are headed by women. Of these 6.5 crore enterprises, 5.53 crores are own account establishments, while 97 lakhs are hired worker establishments; 27% enterprises are in the manufacturing sector, while 34.71% and 37.88% are in the trade and other service categories, respectively. Of the women-headed proprietary establishments, the share of manufacturing, trade, and other services is 54.73%, 12.41%, and 11.12%, respectively, and 25.63% of total workers in this sector are women. This number rises to 43% in manufacturing (source: Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) 2022–2023, NSSO, MOSPI). The breakup is shown in the figure:

Figure 12: Workers in Unincorporated Sector Enterprises by Category



Education and Employment

Among main workers who are females, the largest proportion is of illiterate women. As the level of education rises, the proportion of women workers decreases, with the exception of women with a technical degree or diploma equal to a degree or post-graduate degree. For marginal workers, the lowest proportion of women in the workforce is in the category of technical diploma or certificate not equal to a degree (Census 2011, Registrar General and Census Commissioner). This data

also impacts the emphasis on skill development and vocational training for increasing employment.

Barriers to Economic Inclusion of Women

The decision and ability of women to participate in the labour force depend on a number of economic and social factors. ILO evidence suggests that this gap mainly stems from family responsibilities (marriage and parenthood), indicating that women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work plays a major role in shaping gender employment gaps globally (International Labour Organization, 2024).

However, actual participation is also hindered by multiple barriers. The barriers to work for women not only relate to cultural and societal norms which restrict female employment, such as restrictions on mobility, but to an entire ecosystem that creates barriers for women. These include:

- Limited access to employment near one's residence and an inability to travel long distances for work, hindered by both social norms and safety issues, as well as limitations for self-employment such as knowledge, availability of credit, raw materials, marketing linkages, and other inputs.
- Discrimination and exploitation at the workplace include issues of working conditions, low wages, harassment, and exploitative practices. Safety issues such as the location of workplaces, safety features like adequate lighting and exits, etc. at the availability of adequate and safe transport are also concerns.

This is accentuated by issues like sexual harassment and exploitation, and the non-availability of infrastructure like washrooms, restrooms, and crèches. The expansion of the proportion of contractual workers has affected working conditions and job safety for all workers, but especially for women. Moreover, recruitment processes and equal

opportunities for hiring often include inbuilt biases against women (World Value Surveys in South Asia).

Balancing the competing burdens of work and family responsibilities is a significant challenge. Women have the dual burden of household responsibilities and child and elderly care. On average, women spend more than 7 hours daily on unpaid domestic services for household members and unpaid caregiving for household members (NSSO, report on time use in India 2019). There is a lack of support systems within families, especially when women migrate after marriage. Institutional support services like childcare, and safe public transportation are grossly inadequate. Some of these issues are discussed below.

Access to Resources

A larger proportion of women are self-employed; however, their access to resources is generally lower than that of men. This reflects adversely on their ability to work and on their earnings.

Access to Credit

The share of female borrowers in the banking system accounted for 33.6% of loan accounts and 23.4% of the amount of bank loans to individuals in March 2024 (RBI, BRS II.). Outstanding credit to Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) for women entrepreneurs constitutes only 7% of the total outstanding credit in comparison to their ownership of around 24%. Inability to show collateral for lending remains the biggest barrier for women accessing credit, although issues like bias against women borrowers and the lower number of applications for formal loans by women, inhibited by both a lack of knowledge and confidence in approaching the banking system, also play a role.

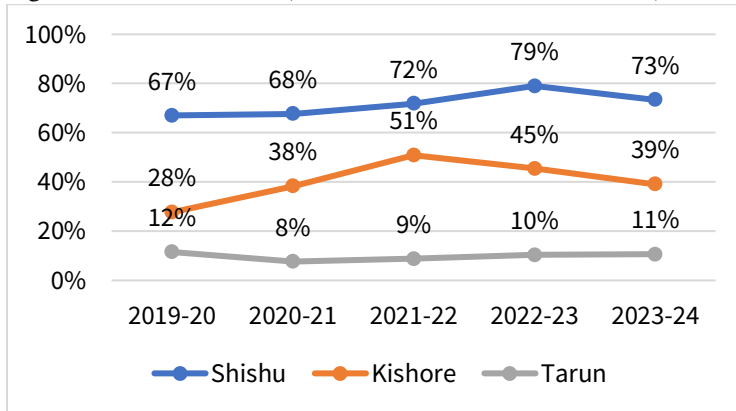
Since the 1980s, a number of initiatives have been taken by the government to channel credit to women. The Government of India established the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (National Credit Fund for Women) in 1993 under the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), with a corpus fund specifically for this purpose. Other schemes launched by DWCD include STEP, Swashakti, and Swalamban schemes for providing credit, training, and other support for livelihoods. Many small credit schemes by other Departments like KVIC also targeted women. Many small credit schemes through establishment of special agencies for credit for self-employed and home-based workers also targeted women, as did Women Development Corporations at the State level. Women beneficiaries were targeted in most poverty alleviation schemes like Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDP) and Swarnjayanti Swarojgar Yojana (SRY), where they were provided credit and subsidy for income-generating activities. One of the earliest schemes provided support to self-employed women like street vendors, petty shopkeepers, and weavers. Even earlier, socio-economic programmes were channelled to Mahila Mandals and voluntary agencies through CSWB for wages and self-employment. Some of these schemes were exclusively for women, while some had quotas determined for women.

The Stand-Up India scheme mandates lending to at least one woman entrepreneur by each branch of scheduled commercial banks. So far almost 2 lakh women entrepreneurs have received credit under this scheme.

One of the success stories in terms of credit to women can be seen in the case of Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) loans, a scheme launched in 2015 for providing loans up to ₹10 lakh (recently enhanced to ₹20 lakh) to non-corporate, non-farm small/micro enterprises. Three types of loans were provided under the scheme: Shishu (loans up to ₹50,000), Kishore (loans from ₹50,000 to ₹5 lakh), and Tarun (loans from ₹5 lakh to 10 lakh). Around 65% of loans under this scheme have been sanctioned to women, although these are largely in the lowest

category of loans less than ₹50,000 (MUDRA, Ministry of Finance).

Figure 13: Mudra Loans (% amount sanctioned to Women)



Source: MUDRA website.

One reason for the success of the scheme can be attributed to the fact that no collateral is required for availing loans under the scheme. The learnings from this success could inform other programmes. Micro credit through SHGs has been showcased as a preferred method to ensure credit to women, especially in lower-income groups and to reduce dependence on informal sources like moneylenders. Many initiatives have been taken by the government. The Self-Help Group (SHG)–Bank Linkage was introduced by NABARD in February 1992, as a pilot project with policy back-up from the RBI in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. A number of non-government players like PRADHAN, MYRADA, DHAN, and SEWA also promoted this model in the 1990s.

The Government of India (Ministry of Rural Development) pioneered the programme Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) in 1982–1983 as part of IRDP. Under DWCRA, groups of 15–20 women from poor households at the village level were formed to obtain access to services like skill training, credit, cash, and infrastructural support for self-

employment. By the end of the Ninth Plan, 1 million SHGs had been established. Carrying this process forward, the government is implementing the scheme: Aajeevika-Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM). The scheme aims to reach out to poor households by mobilising rural women into SHGs and their federations and collectives at different levels. The programme has mobilised 8.64 crore women members into 80 lakh SHGs and more than ₹5.83 lakh crore has been provided as bank credit to the SHGs (source: DAY-NRLM website; NSSO, 2024).

The Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) 2022-2023 has recorded that 3.7% of such enterprises are through SHGs (NSSO, 2024). The NFHS-5 study has reported that the use of microcredit programmes by women has increased from 8% to 11% from NFHS-4 to NFHS-5. Knowledge of microcredit programmes has also increased. These numbers would need to be increased further to maximise impact from this approach.

Ownership of Assets

Ownership of assets for women has historically been lower compared to Men. This not only impacts economic security for women but also limits their access to credit. Inheritance laws and practices have led to the devolving of family assets largely to male family members. For example, women workers predominate in the agriculture sector; however, the last agriculture Census held in 2015-2016 found that the share of female operational holders remained low, increasing from 12.79% in 2010-2011 to 13.96% in 2015-2016 with corresponding figures of 10.36% and 11.72% in operated area. In 2015-2016, participation of female operational holders was highest under the marginal category (72%) followed by small (17%) and semi-medium (8.1%) (All India Report on Agriculture Census 2015-2016; Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare).

The government has taken some positive steps to improve the situation. For land allotment schemes to poor households, most States started a practice to allot land in the joint name of the husband and wife where possible. In the 1980s, the Central government also mandated such transfers. Of the 146.45 million agricultural holdings in the 2015–2016 agriculture census, 2.025 million were joint holdings with women as co-holders (All India Report on Agriculture Census 2015–2016; Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare). NFHS-5 indicates that among women and men aged 15–49, 42% of women and 60% of men own a house, and 32% of women and 42% of men own land either alone or jointly with someone else (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Similarly, for house allotment under Indira Awas Yojana, houses were allotted in the joint name of the husband and wife. Subsequently, it was allotted preferably in the name of the woman. Currently, under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, houses are allotted preferably in the name of the woman of the household. In 2005, an amendment was made to the Hindu Succession Act 1956 to give daughters an equal right in inheritance in a joint Hindu family.

Skill Development and Vocational Training

The government has initiated a number of schemes since the First Five Year Plan to impart vocational skills for self-employment. Subsequently, special institutes were established exclusively for women, or women wings were opened in institutions like Industrial Training Institutes. Census 2011 also showed that while there were fewer female workers, the percentage was better only for women with a technical degree or diploma equivalent to a degree or post-graduate degree (Census 2011).

Financial Inclusion

The move for financial inclusion can be said to have started in the 1960s, but it was after the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana in 2014 to provide access to financial services like credit, insurance, and pension that financial inclusion came centre stage. Around 460 million bank accounts were opened under this scheme, of which 56% were owned by women (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana [PMJDY]).

One constraint seems to be the number of inactive accounts. Moreover, access to other services envisaged under the programme, namely credit, insurance, and pension has remained lower. The percentage of women who have a bank or savings account that they themselves use has substantially increased from 53% in 2014–2015 to 79% in 2019–2020. Over half (51%) of women in India say that they have some money that they alone can decide how to use (NFHS-5).

Control over Income

For women who are in the workforce and earn in cash, control over their income is not guaranteed. According to NFHS-5 only 18% of women reported making their own decisions about the use of money. Another 67% reported making the decision jointly with their husband. For 14% of women, the husband is the sole decision-maker regarding the use of women's earnings (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Mobility and Freedom of Movement

Women's mobility is restricted partly due to lower access to transport and also due to social norms that restrict their

movement. Fewer women than men own personal transport. The availability of public transport is restricted outside of metro cities. Safety in public transport, especially at odd hours, is also a constraint. NFHS-5 reported freedom of movement based on whether women are usually allowed to go alone to the market, the health facility, and to places outside the village or community. Overall, only 42% of women are allowed to go alone to all three places, and 5% are not allowed to go alone to any of the three places. Such restrictions on mobility add another layer of disadvantage to women's work (International Institute for Population Sciences; National Family Health Survey [NFHS-5], 2019–2021).

Participation in Decision-Making

Indian industry has a share of 20% women in top and middle management, lagging behind the global average of 33% in 2019 (National Council of Applied Economic Research [NCAER]; Srivastava et al., 2024). The Companies Act 2013 mandates every listed company or public company with a paid-up capital of ₹100 crore or a turnover of ₹300 crore to have at least one woman on the Board. In 2018 SEBI made it compulsory for the Boards of top 1000 companies to have at least one independent woman director by April 2020. However, Women Directors are paid nearly 40% less on average than men (*Business Standard*, 2024, July 4).

Implementation of Labour Laws Relating to Women

There have been a number of significant legislations for working women. Some of these have been enacted specifically for women, while others include sections to benefit women. Some of the major legislations are mentioned below. The Maternity Benefit Act 1961 offers 6 months of paid maternity

leave to all women employees, regardless of the nature of their employment. Regular workers, contractual workers, daily wagers, temporary employees, and part-time workers are all eligible for maternity leave. Many organisations exhibit some form of bias against women taking maternity breaks. One major reason is the lack of replacements during maternity breaks. Anecdotal evidence suggests that contractual workers and regular workers without formal contracts are asked to resign once they are known to be pregnant. The document *Shram Shakti* also captured this practice (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 1988). The Maternity Benefit Act also acts as a disincentive for hiring women workers. Statistics show that 2 years after the enactment of the United Provinces Maternity Benefit Act in 1938, the number of women hired in factories across United Provinces decreased significantly.

A policy that allows a break in service post-maternity benefit, with or without pay and promotion benefits, with provisions for reskilling or a lateral entry system for qualified women post-maternity breaks with age relaxations, could be considered. Resolution of concerns of new mothers decreases their attrition rate and enables productive participation. Giving employers benefits for implementing the Act could go a long way to help improve implementation of these provisions.

Income and Wage Disparity

Globally, women receive a lower share of labour incomes as compared to men. ILO's "World Employment and Social Outlook, May 2024" has also noted that "even when women are employed, they receive sizeably lower labour income than men—especially in the developing world. In high-income countries, employed women earn 73 cents to the dollar compared to employed men. In low-income countries, women earn just 44 cents to the dollar (International Labour Organization, 2024). Article 39 of the Constitution directed equal

pay for equal work for both men and women. In 1976, India enacted the Equal Remuneration Act, which mandated equal pay for men and women. Despite this legal guarantee, the goal of equal pay remains to be actualised, especially for contractual and outsourced workers. As per the 2022–2023 PLFS report, the average wage/salary for regular wage/salaried female employees in CWS status is 73–81% of the wages/salary received by men, and the average earnings per day by casual labour (female) engaged in works other than public works in CWS is 60–67% of the average earnings of male workers. This disparity is also visible in the agriculture sector (NSSO, Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS], 2022–2023). Minimum Wages Act 1948 enables the fixation of minimum wages for different categories of (scheduled) employment. One issue raised by key frontline female workers like ASHA, AWW, and AWH is low pay. Many such functionaries are not covered under the scheduled employments under the Minimum Wages Act, and work hours are not fixed.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was enacted in 2013. More than a decade after the enactment, most women feel that the Act is not implemented in either letter or spirit in most organisations. The situation for unorganised labour is worse.

Child Care Facilities: A number of Labour laws have made provisions for child care facilities. The Maternity Benefit Act mandates the establishment of crèches. Apart from the Maternity Benefit Act, a number of Labour Acts establishment of crèches based on the number of workers. This includes The Factories Act 1948; Plantations Labour Act, 1951; The Mines Act, 1952; The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions Of Employment) Act, 1966; Building and other construction workers (regulation of employment and conditions of services) Act, 1996; and The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, also mandates crèches.

Most of these Acts are to be consolidated in the Labour Codes, which raises the number of workers required for establishment

of crèches as provided in the three previous Acts (Beedi and Cigar from 30 to 50; Factories Act from 30 to 50; and Contract labour from 20 to 50). Moreover, The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code 2020 replaced the word “shall” with “may,” thereby making this provision discretionary.

Setting up crèches under these statutory provisions so far has been limited. This can be partly attributed to the design of the Acts, since crèches are to be established in workplaces with 20 or more workers (variable across acts) and less than 20% of workers are employed in workplaces with more than 20 workers (PLFS), most workplaces remain outside the purview of crèche facilities, and partly to a lack of monitoring of these provisions.

Two central initiatives were commenced for the provision of crèches; however, the numbers have now dwindled substantially. These include the National Creche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers under MWCD and the Scheme for Assistance to Creches for Working and Ailing Mothers through CSWB, which at one time supported close to 4 lakh crèches.

The World Bank’s report *Women, business and the law 2022* highlighted the minimal state involvement in childcare provision in South Asia, in comparison to other regions. The low availability and high cost of child care remains a critical impediment for women’s work in India, pushing mothers to stay at home or adopt informal arrangements (World Bank, 2022).

A landmark for understanding the issues relating to women’s work in India remains the report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector submitted in 1988, entitled *Shramshakti* which can still serve as a template for the economic inclusion of women.

Box 6: Shramshakti: Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, 1988

Recognised:

- The Labour market is not neutral to men and women, with gender inequalities in most sectors including education and vocational skills, division of labour with women mainly doing more arduous lower paying jobs
- More women in the unorganised sector doing intermittent jobs at low wages or own work, characterised by lack of job security and social security
- Obstacles for women to access credit, raw materials, and marketing
- Women headed households suffer higher incidence of poverty
- Migration adversely affecting both women left behind and those migrating
- There is a lack of childcare facilities
- Weak implementation machinery for legislation

Recommended:

- Enhance ownership and control over productive assets by women
- Ensure percentage of allocation of resources in investment to women
- Need for holistic approach to women's issues ensuring fuel, fodder, and water
- Strengthening employment through support in areas of skill, training, credit, and marketing
- Protecting women from casualisation and contractualisation
- Provide supportive services like housing, toilets, and childcare
- Proper and effective implementation of industrial and protective legislation
- Adequate resource allocation and orientation of programmes for women producers in agriculture
- Identification of industries in small scale sector which can help women to become self employed
- Commence contribution of contractors to a welfare fund in construction
- Devise suitable insurance against maternity, illness, and old age

Political Empowerment and Participation

Opportunity for women to influence the course and direction of development is directly related to their participation and representation in the politics and the executive. A full and equal representation could signify the space for voicing views and taking up issues of concern regarding women and influencing development policy and implementation. In the political sphere, this entails participation both as voters and as members of Parliament, State legislatures and local bodies. In the executive, this entails representation in the Cabinet, judiciary, and administration. Each of these are discussed in brief below.

Women's Vote in India

In India, elections to the House of the People (Lok Sabha) and to the Legislative Assembly of each State on the basis of universal adult suffrage was a right gained with independence and guaranteed by the Constitution (Article 326, Constitution of India).

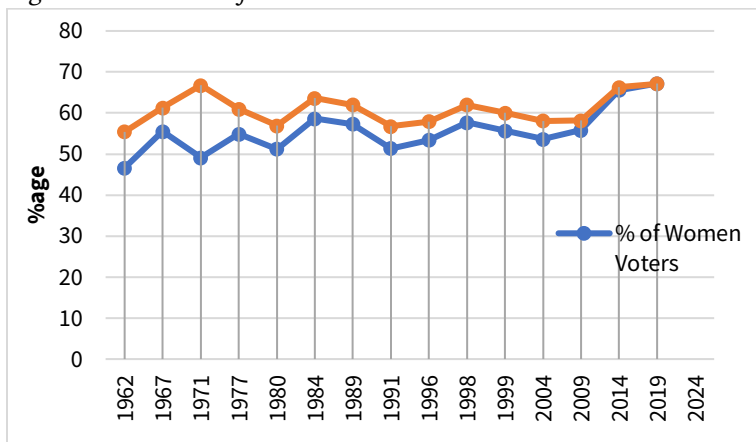
In fact, from the year 1919, a limited number of women had been granted the right to vote, first by certain Provincial Governments and Princely States, and after the enactment of the Government of India Act 1935—a centrally mandated right—albeit in a limited manner, and based solely on their identity as a wife or mother of persons eligible to vote (Government of India Act, 1935, Sixth Schedule: Additional Qualifications for Women). In the run-up to the first General Election in 1951–1952, there were some hiccups in the preparation of the voter lists, especially in the “States of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Bharat, Rajasthan and Vindhya Pradesh.” About 94% of adult women were registered in the electoral rolls after the first revision of electoral rolls after they agreed to disclose their proper names

(*Report of the First General Elections in India, 1951–1952*, Election Commission of India).

Although the voting percentage of women was comparatively lower in the first few general elections, the mobilisation of women in large numbers during the Independence Movement, where they participated in movements like the Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement, and the Quit India Movement, had already brought women into the public sphere. Many women played significant roles in the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi, especially, was instrumental in the mobilisation of women on a large scale.

An encouraging trend has been the increasing women voter turnout over subsequent elections. While the percentage of women voters compared to men was traditionally lower, in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the percentage of women voters surpassed that of male voters, although by a narrow margin (source: Election Commission of India).

Figure 14: Turnout of Women Voters in Lok Sabha Elections



Source: Election Commission of India.

The increased turnout of women to vote can be attributed to both Political parties acknowledging the importance of and

targeting women voters with schemes, especially closer to elections, and to greater awareness among women voters. Efforts made by the Election authorities to encourage voters have also influenced turnout.

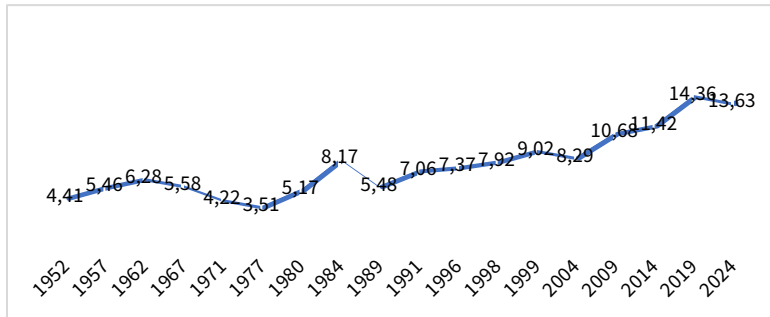
Representation of Women in Parliament and State Assemblies

Although the percentage of women voters has surpassed that of Men, women's representation in Parliament and Assemblies remains low. Globally also, representation of women in the political sphere has been low (UN Women, 2024).

India's experience in this context has been mixed. Women gained the right to stand for elections in different degrees from 1919. The first woman in the State legislature was Muthulakshmi Reddy, who was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1926, where she played a pioneering role in raising the age of consent for marriage. She also proposed the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act bill to the Madras Legislative Council in 1930, although it was finally passed in 1947.

Post-Independence, in the first Lok Sabha elections held in 1952, only 22 women were elected, less than 5%. In the Lok Sabha, the maximum number of women who have been elected was in 2019, when 78 women were elected in a house with a strength of 543, slightly over 14%. In the last Lok Sabha elections held in 2024, the number of women contestants was the highest at 794, but the number of women elected came down from 2019 to 74 (source: Election Commission of India).

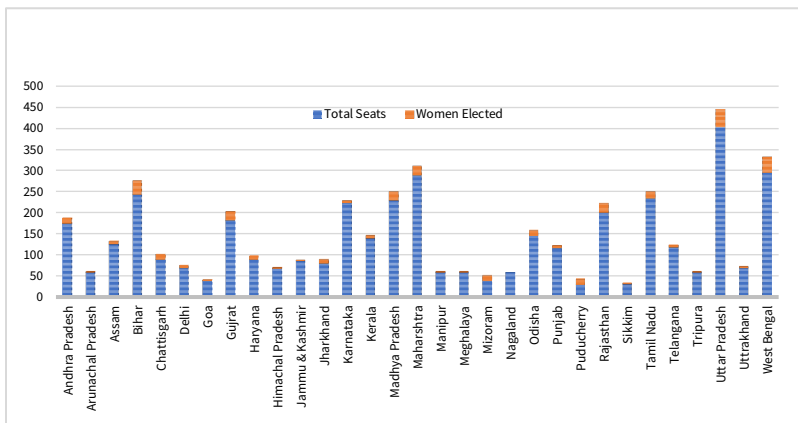
Figure 15: Percentage of women Members of Parliament in Lok Sabha



Source: Election Commission of India.

The percentage of women elected to State Legislative Assemblies is lower than that of the Parliament, at around 11% (source: *Women and Men in India 2020*, Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation).

Figure 16: Women Elected to State Legislatures



Source: *Women and Men in India 2020*; Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

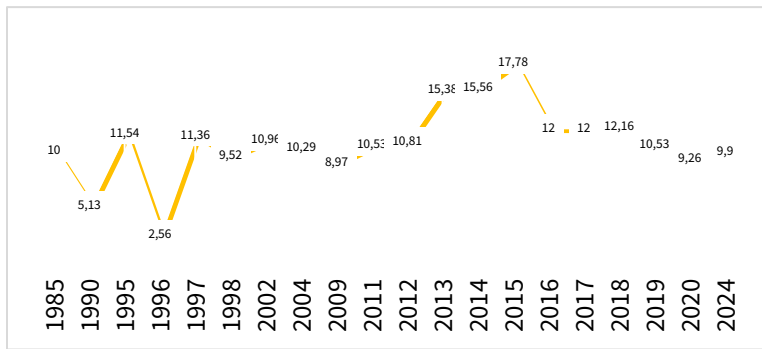
A major reason for low representation of women has been the reluctance of Political Parties to nominate women for elections. The All India Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) stands out as a party which nominates a large number of women, resulting in a larger percentage of its MPs being women. In percentage terms, of the three parties with double-digit women Members of Parliament in Lok Sabha, TMC with 37.93% has the maximum representation of women, followed by Congress at 13.13% and Bharatiya Janata Party at 12.92%.

Representation in Government

As of January 1, 2024, there were 27 countries led by women and 23.3% of Cabinet members heading Ministries globally (UN Women Global Data on Women Political Leaders 2024). This document ranks India at 171 among 190 countries (UN Women, 2024). Currently, India has 2 women in the Cabinet among 31 members (6.5%). There are 71 members, including Ministers of State, of whom 7 are women. This includes 2 Cabinet Ministers and 5 Ministers of State (just under 10%).

The first Union Cabinet formed in 1950 had 15 members, of whom only 1, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the Minister for Health, was a woman. The second Cabinet, formed after the first general elections in 1952 retained Rajkumari Amrit Kaur as the only woman in a Cabinet which had 25 members, including the Prime Minister. None of the 18 Ministers of State were women.

Figure 17: Percentage of Women in Union Cabinet of Ministers



Source: Women and Men in India 2020. Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

Indira Gandhi remains the only woman Prime Minister of India. There have, however, been two Presidents who have been women: Srimati Pratibha Patil (2007–2012) and the current President Shrimati Draupadi Murmu who took charge in 2022. At the State level, however, there have been a number of women Chief Ministers, starting with Sucheta Kriplani in Uttar Pradesh in 1963, followed by Nandini Satpathy, Sashikala Kakodkar, Syeda Anwara Taimur, Janaki Ramchandran, J. Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Rajinder Kaur Bhattal, Rabri Devi, Sushma Swaraj, Sheila Dixit, Uma Bharti, Vasundhara Raje, Anandiben Patel, Mehbooba Mufti, and Mamata Banerjee, who is currently the only female Chief Minister.

Reservation of Seats for Women in Parliament, State Legislatures, and Local Bodies

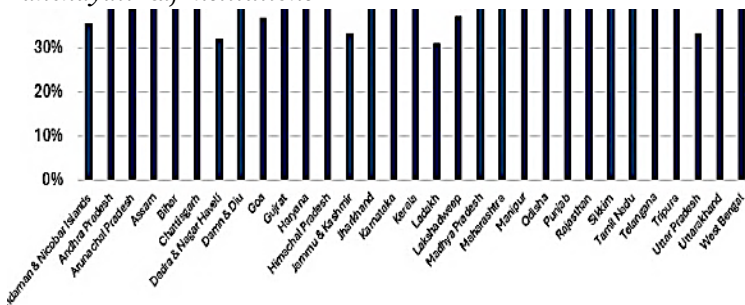
In view of the low representation of women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, there have been recurring demands both for Political parties to enhance the number of tickets given

Women in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies

Representation of women in local bodies in the initial years remained low. Many committees like the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), the Committee on the Status of Women (1976), Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), recommended some form of reservation for women in such bodies, but opposition on this issue did not encourage reservation for many years. Although the Central government initially resisted the idea of reservations, some State governments like Karnataka (1985) and Andhra Pradesh (1986) initiated 20–25% reservations at the State level.

The year 1992, can be considered a watershed, when the Constitution's 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts approved 33% reservation in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies, respectively. Many States followed this by State Acts which raised the reservation to 50%. This includes the States of Andhra Pradesh; Assam; Bihar; Chhattisgarh; Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu; Gujarat; Haryana; Jharkhand; Karnataka; Kerala; Madhya Pradesh; Maharashtra; Odisha; Punjab; Rajasthan; Sikkim; Tamil Nadu; Telangana; Tripura; Uttarakhand; and West Bengal (22 States and UTs). The number of elected women representatives is now around 46% (Ministry of Panchayati Raj).

Figure 18: Percentage of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions



Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

Autonomy of Women's Vote

One of the questions that has arisen over successive elections has been the autonomy of women and the influence of family or spouse on their vote. The successive CSDS National Election Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to be guided before voting by family members. It is, however, significant that the number of women voting autonomously has increased over successive elections. Both anecdotal evidence and some recent studies show an increasing assertion of women in deciding whom to vote for, without direction from the family. Gender gap reduced from 37% in 1996 to 22% in 2014 (Sardesai and Attri, 2017).

Effectiveness of Elected Women Representatives in Local Bodies

An issue that has often arisen is that many elected women representatives (EWRs) have not proven to be effective administrators. Many EWRs have accepted that very often the male Panchayat members have condescending attitudes and would deliberately make functioning difficult for women representatives.

This is partly due to the socio-cultural environment which has not undergone much change, and many women are burdened by purdah and other such constraints. Functioning in a predominantly male environment can be challenging for many rural women. Such challenges can be further compounded by caste and economic considerations. The transformation that is required is liable to take time. However, there are also many encouraging trends visible.

Studies conducted in areas where the Mahila Samakhya Programme was implemented found that the systematic training given to MS members made them effective administrators and enabled them to overcome the patriarchal

attitudes that inhibited many EWRs from functioning effectively. Most States conduct training for Panchayat members. The centrally sponsored scheme of Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) has a major component for the training of Panchayati Raj members.

Progressive States like Kerala have demonstrated higher participation by women. This could also be a result of the higher levels of education in Kerala. Such examples have lessons for the effective functioning of EWRs in the future.

The Phenomenon of Proxy Candidates

One criticism of reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has been the incidence of proxy politics. Many women were introduced to the elections by their families, many of whom were previously wielding power in such bodies. Post-elections, they continued to usurp the powers of the EWR. Such power brokers have been called by different names like Pradhanpati or Mukhiyapati.

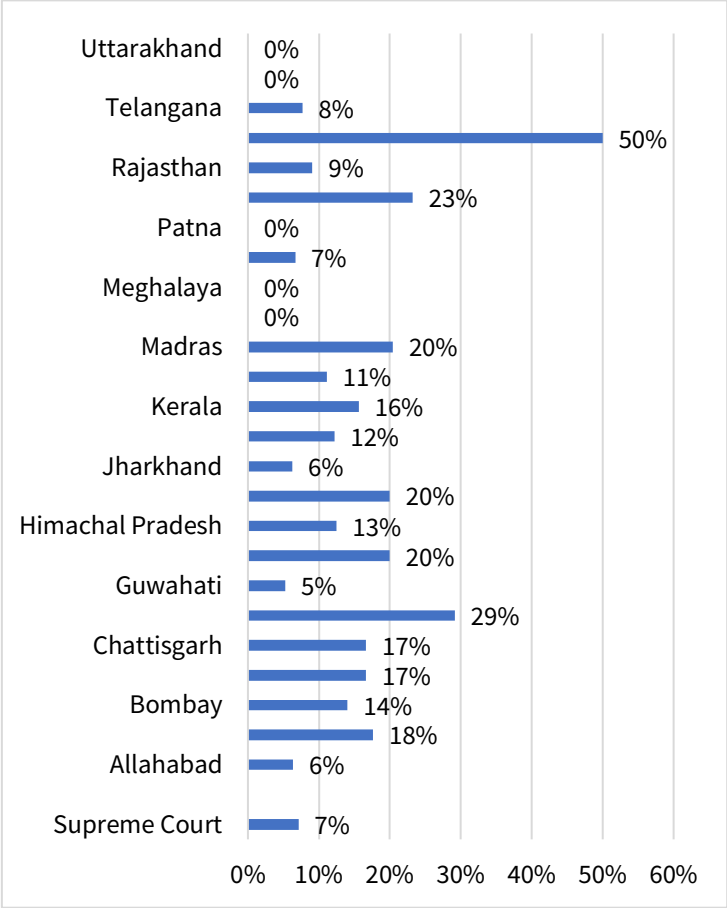
Discussions on proxy candidates ignore the fact that the incidence of proxy politics is common but not universal. There have been many other entry points for EWRs, apart from being proxy candidates. The social assessment study for the World Bank-aided ICDS programme in the State of Uttar Pradesh, for example, found that almost 25% of the EWRs elected in the first round of elections after the 73rd Amendment were from the ICDS system. Such women had already entered the public sphere before they entered the election fray. Moreover, as the EWRs enter a second term, many of them become more assertive.

Studies by institutions like National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) have highlighted the commendable work done by many EWRs, even amid all the challenges that they face. It may be said that while reservation may not be a quick-fix solution for the representation of women's voices, it is a

foundation that is likely to result in a greater voice for women in governance.

Representation of Women in Supreme Court and High Court

Figure 19: Percentage of Women Judges in Supreme Court and High Court



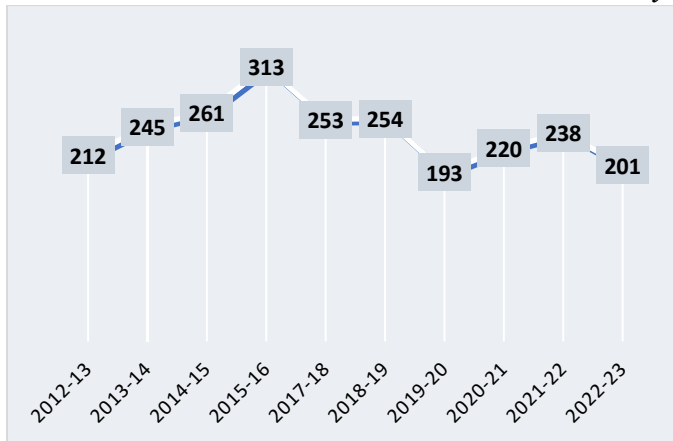
Source: Women and Men in India 2023, Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

There were 2 women judges in the Supreme Court (of a total of 30 judges) and 78 women judges in different high courts (against a total of 673) as of March 20, 2024.

Representation of Women in the Civil Services

In the year 2024, of the 1,016 candidates selected for the Civil Services, 352 were women, which is 34%. In 2020, of the 922 recommended candidates, 220 were women, which was around 24%. The corresponding figure for 2010 was 21% (UPSC, annual reports, multiple years).

Figure 20: Women Candidates recommended to Civil Services by Year



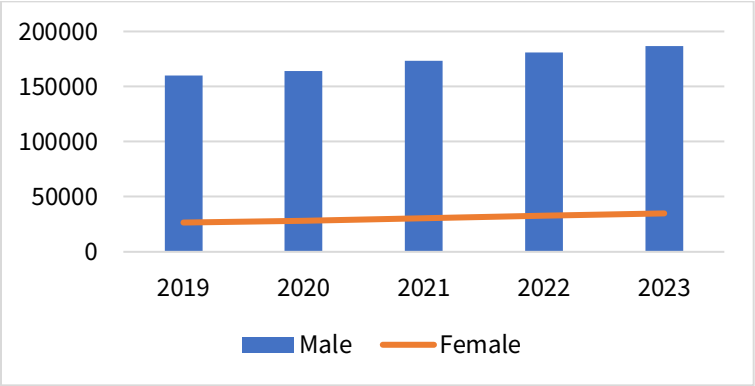
Source: UPSC, annual reports, multiple years.

Although there has been a steady increase in the number of women in the civil services, it still needs to improve to reach parity.

Representation in Industry

The 2024 NCAER study found that after the Companies Act 2014 mandated that every listed company or public company with a paid up capital of ₹100 crore or turnover of ₹300 crore to have at least one independent woman on the Board by April 2020, the number of woman on Boards has increased more than 9% to reach 17% by 2021. By 2023, the number increased to 28% (source: Women and Men in India 2023, Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation). However, women directors are paid nearly 40% less on average than men (Business Standard, July 4, 2024). Representation of women in middle and senior management did not go up and remained at 17% (Srivastava, 2024).

Figure 21: Persons in Senior Management Positions



Source: Women and Men in India 2023, Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

Conclusion

Social inclusion of women is an essential prerequisite for the development and progress of the country. Since the time of Independence, the government has taken a number of proactive initiatives to improve the status of women in the country, beyond mere rhetoric, in the form of legislation, policies, and programmes.

While there has been considerable progress in many areas, and many path-breaking policies and programmes have been introduced, major disparities still exist among men and women. The task of women's inclusion in the development process and improving the status of women in key areas remains an ongoing task. The journey so far has thrown up many lessons for the journey ahead. The task of policymakers is to assimilate such lessons so that they can fully inform future policy and programmes.

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