

What does NHFS-5 tell us about women's status, safety, and economic positioning in India?

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Progress on gender equality has lapsed considerably under the Covid-19 pandemic, with women and girls facing disproportionate burdens of job and education losses and increased unpaid care responsibilities. Women in India may be particularly vulnerable, as women's progress was already in relative stagnation prior to the pandemic. The most recent round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), conducted from 2019-2021 offers important insights into this, and what we find is a very mixed message on women's situations across India, brought into sharper relief due to Covid-19.

Women's Secondary Education Levels Improved, Particularly for Urban Women

Education is nearly universally recognized as one of the most critical foundations of women's empowerment, and for the first time, over half of urban women report completion of secondary education. The percentage of both men and women in India with at least 10 years of schooling increased between 2015-16 and 2019-21, and indeed increased more for women (5 percentage points) than for men (1 percentage point). The greatest increases in schooling for women in this time were seen in Jammu and Kashmir (14 percentage points) and Goa (13 percentage points). However, there remains a 9-percentage point gender gap in levels of 10+ years of schooling, and rural women are still being left furthest behind, with only 34% nationally receiving 10 or more years of school, compared to 56% of urban women (and to 62% of urban men).

Women's Household Decision-Making Control Increased

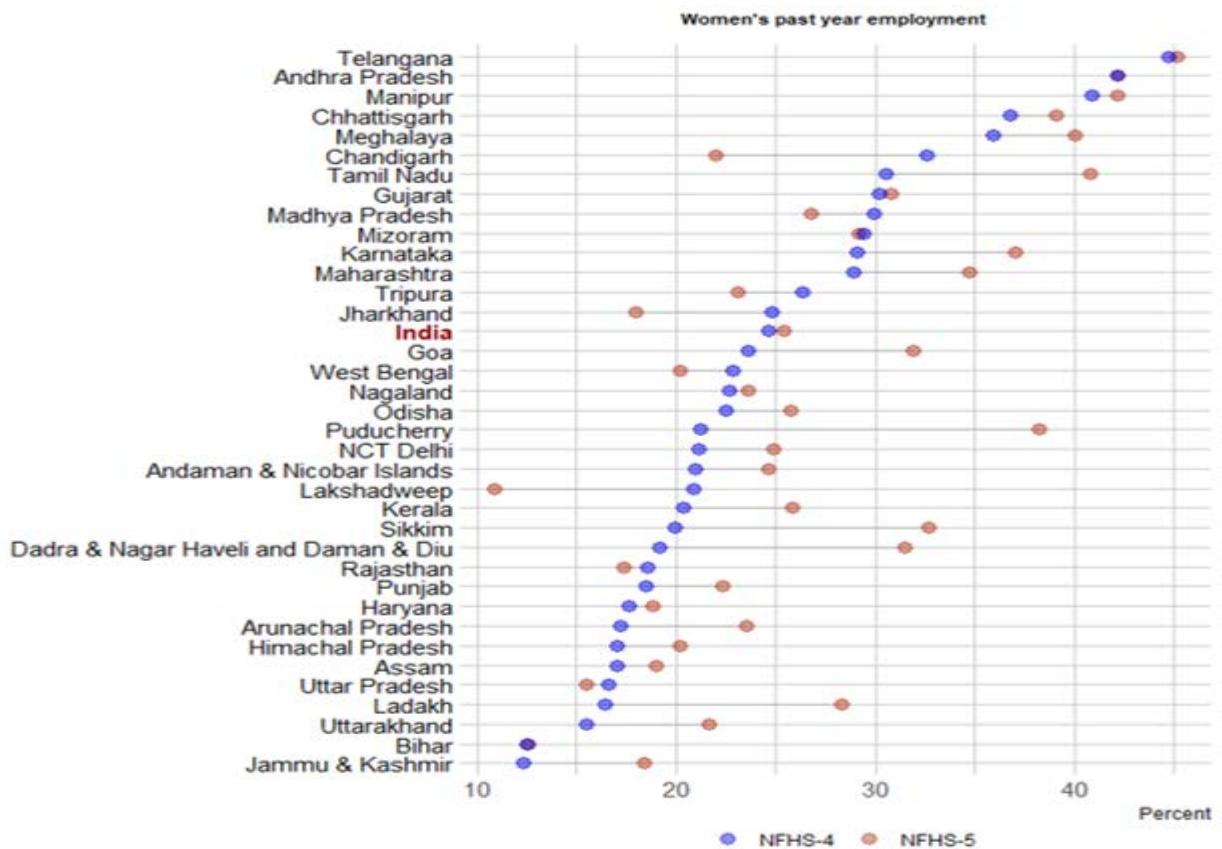
Married women's household decision-making related to health care, household purchases, and visits to family continue to increase overall, up four percentage points from 2015-16 to nearly 89%. States/UTs with the largest increases from 2015-16 to 2019-21 included Delhi (18 percentage point increase), Puducherry (nearly 13 percentage point increase) and Bihar (11 percentage point increase). Interestingly, the majority of states/UTs in which married women's decision-making involvement declined were collected data prior to the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown (seven of nine states/UTs). While this is potentially promising, as women's involvement in decision-making can contribute to a more holistic, gender-intentional crisis response, decision-making involvement remains a very complex proxy for women's autonomy and empowerment that merits more in-depth analysis. Engagement in household decision-making is not necessarily indicative of final control over these decisions.

Previous Declines in Marital Violence and Early Marriage of Girls are Stagnating

The prior round of the NFHS, conducted in 2015-2016 (NFHS-4), showed sharp declines in both marital violence against women and early marriage of girls (i.e., marriage prior to age 18 years) as compared with the NFHS-3, conducted in 2006-2007. Unfortunately, little decline was seen on these issues from the NFHS-4 to the NFHS-5. In 2006-2007 (NFHS-3), 37% of married women reported marital violence, compared to 31% in 2015-2016 (NFHS-4) and 29% in 2019-2021 (NFHS-5). Similarly, early marriage of girls as reported by 20-24-year-olds was at 47% in the NFHS-3, 27% in the NFHS-4, and 23% in the NFHS-5. Of great concern are the observed increases in marital violence seen in eight states/UTs, most notably in Karnataka (24 percentage points), Ladakh (10 percentage points) and Sikkim (10 percentage points). These data align with widespread reports of a shadow pandemic of violence against women as Covid-19 related shutdowns isolated women and girls with abusive partners and family. As NFHS-5 fact sheets estimates are representative of women's lifetime experiences, a more granular understanding of where Covid-precipitated marital violence in India must wait for the forthcoming full NFHS-5 data release.

Women’s Employment Remains Low, Hampered Further by the Pandemic

Women’s employment remains low across India, with only one in four women (25%) working for cash in 2019-2021. This represents no change in rates of paid employment for women since the prior round of the NFHS, conducted in 2015-16. Further, NFHS-5 data indicate a decline in women’s employment under the pandemic. Among states/UTs where data collection was completed prior to the March 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, 18% of states noted decreases in women’s employment relative to 2015-16 estimates. In contrast, 36% of states/UTs with data collection spanning the Covid-19 lockdown had decreases in women’s employment levels. The largest increases in women’s employment were seen in Puducherry (17 percentage points) and Sikkim (13 percentage points), and the largest decreases were seen in Chandigarh (11 percentage points) and Lakshadweep (10 percentage points), indicating much state level variation in prevalence of women’s employment.



Women's House/Land Ownership Remains Low, Diminishing Further in Some States/UTs

Just over two in five women in India (43%) own a house and/or land. While this is an increase of nearly five percentage points from 2015-16, levels of women's house/land ownership decreased in 16 of 36 states/UTs (44%). The largest decreases were seen in Tripura (40%) and Odisha (20%), and the largest increases were seen in Punjab (31%) and Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (32%). Interestingly, this is the one indicator of women's empowerment where rural women fare better than do urban women, 46% of rural women reporting home/land ownership compared to 38% of urban women. Though equal rights to ownership are integral components of the Sustainable Development Goals, important indicators of women's status, and a pathway to increased financial security, ownership levels remain disparate across India. This is particularly reflective of older women, as NFHS-5 data do not include women over the age of 49, thus excluding women who may inherit land in later life.

What does this mean?

These mixed findings on progress towards improving the status, safety and well-being of women and girls across India convey several key messages.

1. While improvements exist in some indicators, such as education and decision-making, rural/urban disparities persist, and gender equality remains unachieved.
2. Improvements in marital safety in terms of marriage in adulthood and freedom from marital violence are stagnating, and the pandemic may accelerate this trend.
3. Economic security for women remains grossly inadequate, as indicated by data on both income generation and asset ownership, and the pandemic have only compromised these further.

To achieve the vision of Indian self-reliance outlined in the government of India's Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan Covid-19 response program, women must be secure in their status, safety, and economic positioning, all of which have been compromised under the pandemic and remain grossly inadequate to support post-pandemic rebuilding. It will take gender-intentional research, normative shifts in gender roles, and gender-

focused policy responses to ensure that the next generation of Indian women do not lose some of the rights and opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers fought for and gained.

Gender Project – The GENDER (Gender Equity and Demography Research) Project is a collaborative research initiative between the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) in Mumbai and the UCSD Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) in San Diego.