DATA FOR DEVELOPMENT

India Human Development Survey Forum | March 2026

A monthly update of socio-economic developments in India by the IHDS research community

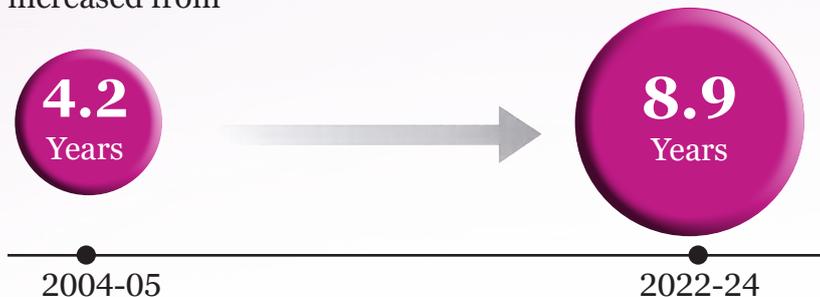## International Women's Month Special Issue

On the occasion of Women's History Month, it is an opportune moment to reflect on how data can illuminate the changing lives of women in India. Findings from IHDS over the past two decades reveal a complex story of gender transformation in India. Women's education has expanded rapidly, family norms are shifting, and everyday life has become somewhat easier with improved infrastructure. Yet progress remains uneven: while women are gaining education and greater voice within families, these changes have not fully translated into equality within households or stronger participation in the labour market.

The most powerful driver of gender change

Women's education has risen rapidly over the past two decades, with especially increasing gains in rural areas.

Mean years of schooling among rural women has increased from

4.2 Years

8.9 Years

2004-05 → 2022-24

Gender Gap in Educational Attainment has reduced sharply, especially in Rural Areas

Rural

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	7.1	7.9	10.0
Females	4.2	5.6	8.9

Urban

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	9.4	10.1	11.0
Females	8.1	9.1	10.8

━●━ Males ━●━ Females

Mean years of schooling completed among ages 25-29

Access to education has expanded through growing participation in private schools and private tuition. As a result, the overall gender gap in schooling has narrowed considerably.
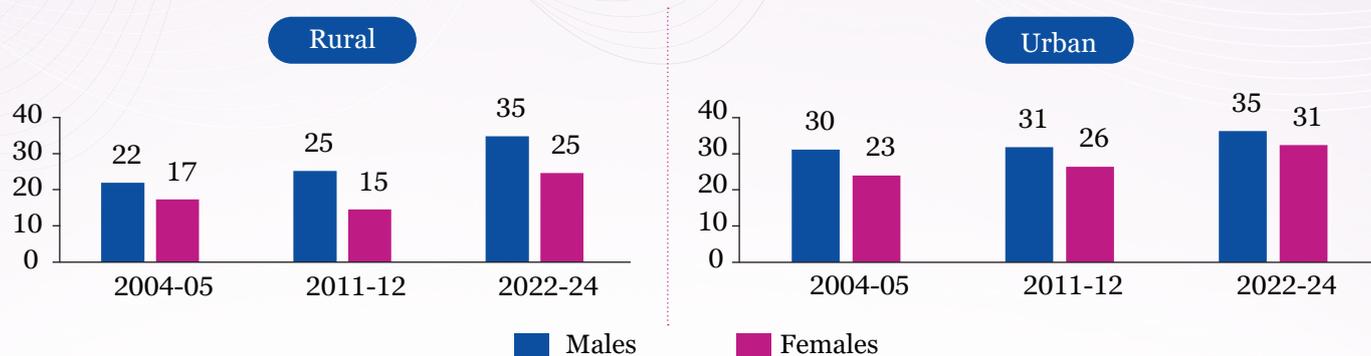
Private school enrolment among ages 6-14 (%)

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	32	42	42
Females	28	34	36

Private tuition uptake among ages 6-14 (%)

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	18	28	36
Females	17	24	34

■ Males ■ Females

Patterns within higher education remain uneven: The gender gap in STEM fields has narrowed in urban areas and widened in rural India, suggesting that educational progress has not been uniform across fields of study or geographic contexts.

STEM enrolment among ages 18-25 (%)

Rural

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	22	25	35
Females	17	15	25

Urban

	2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
Males	30	31	35
Females	23	26	31

■ Males　■ Females

Beyond improving educational attainment, these changes are also reshaping family norms and aspirations.
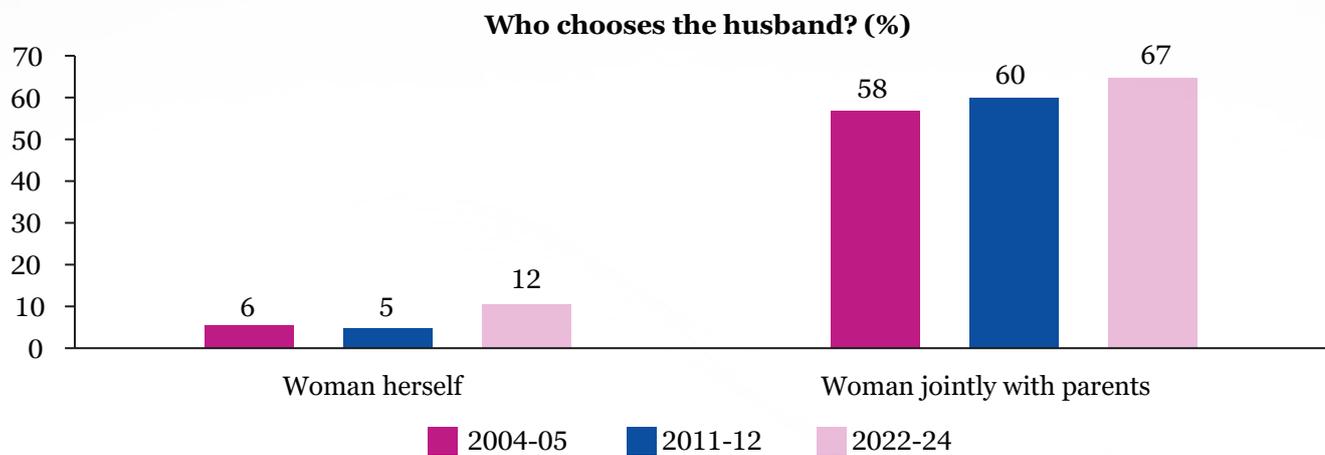
Changing Family Norms

Rising levels of education is closely linked to shifts in family norms and marital aspirations.

Early marriage has declined significantly over time. The share of women marrying as teenagers fell from

14%

2004–05

7%

2022–24

While families play an important role in selecting partners, there is increased agency of on the part of females. Nearly 80% of women aged 25-29 years in 2022-24 reported having a role in choosing their spouse.

Who chooses the husband? (%)

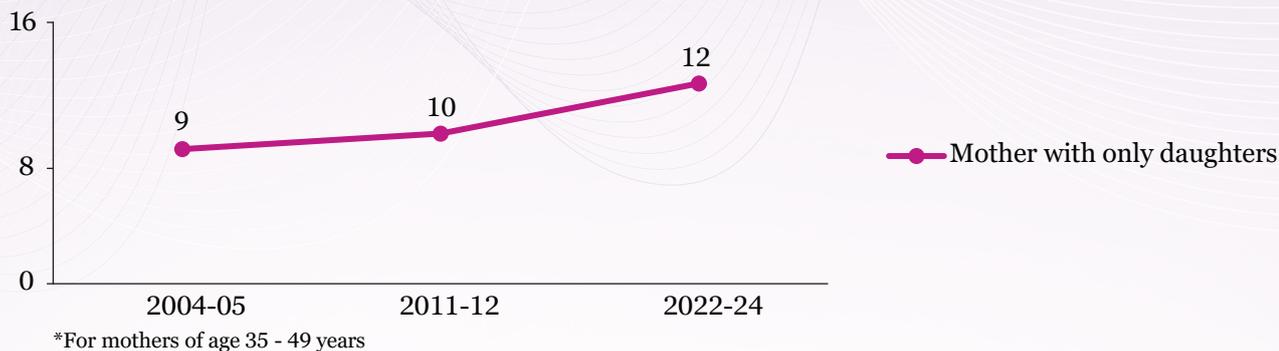|	Woman herself	Woman jointly with parents
2004-05	6	58
2011-12	5	60
2022-24	12	67

Legend: ■ 2004-05 ■ 2011-12 ■ 2022-24

The long-standing norm of educational hypergamy, where women marry men who are more educated than them, is weakening, with a growing number of women now having higher levels of education than their husbands.

Women married to less educated men (%)

2004-05	2011-12	2022-24
13	16	27
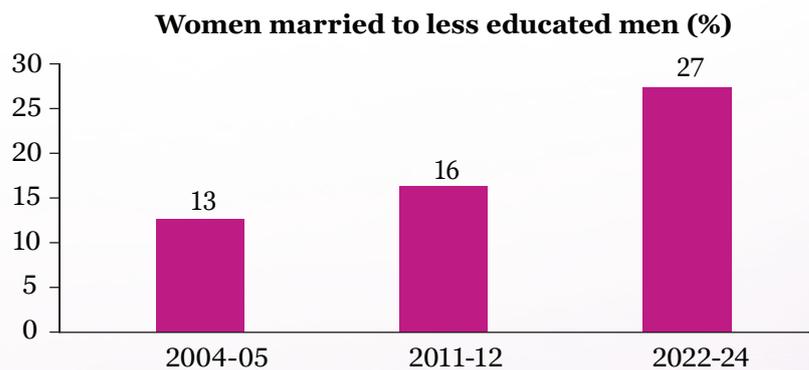
Family size is shrinking as well: The proportion of mothers aged 35–49 with only one child increased from

7%

2004–05

11%

2022–24
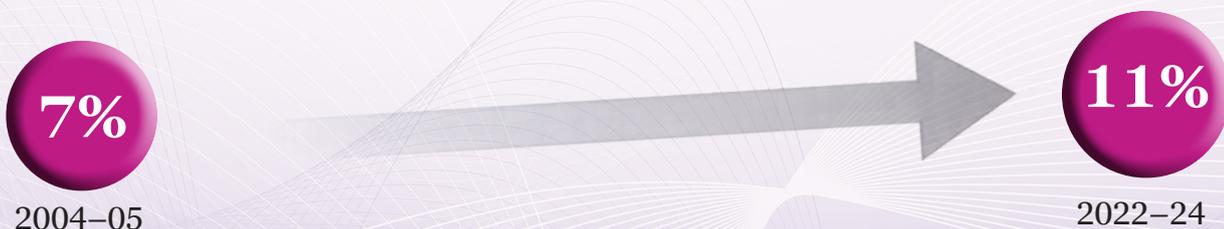
Alongside this shift, there is a rise in daughter-only families which reflects changing attitudes towards daughters, who are increasingly seen as potential sources of emotional and financial support in old age.

16

12

9

10

8

—●— Mother with only daughters

0

2004-05   2011-12   2022-24

*For mothers of age 35 - 49 years

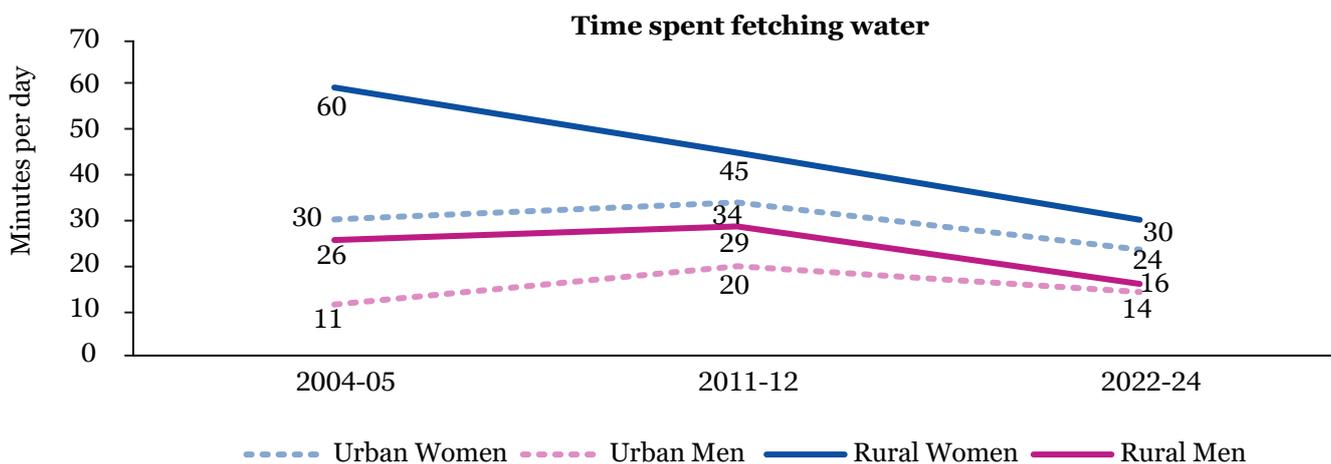These changes in family norms are part of a broader transformation in women's everyday lives.

Progress with Persistent Inequality

Improvements in infrastructure and living conditions have made everyday life somewhat easier for women.

Greater access to piped water and other household amenities has reduced some aspects of household drudgery.

Women's physical mobility has improved over time.

Time spent fetching water

Minutes per day

70

60   60

50

45

40   34

30   30   29

26   20

20

11   10

0

2004-05   2011-12   2022-24

······ Urban Women   ······ Urban Men   —— Rural Women   —— Rural Men

30

24

16

14

Gender inequalities within the household remain deeply entrenched.
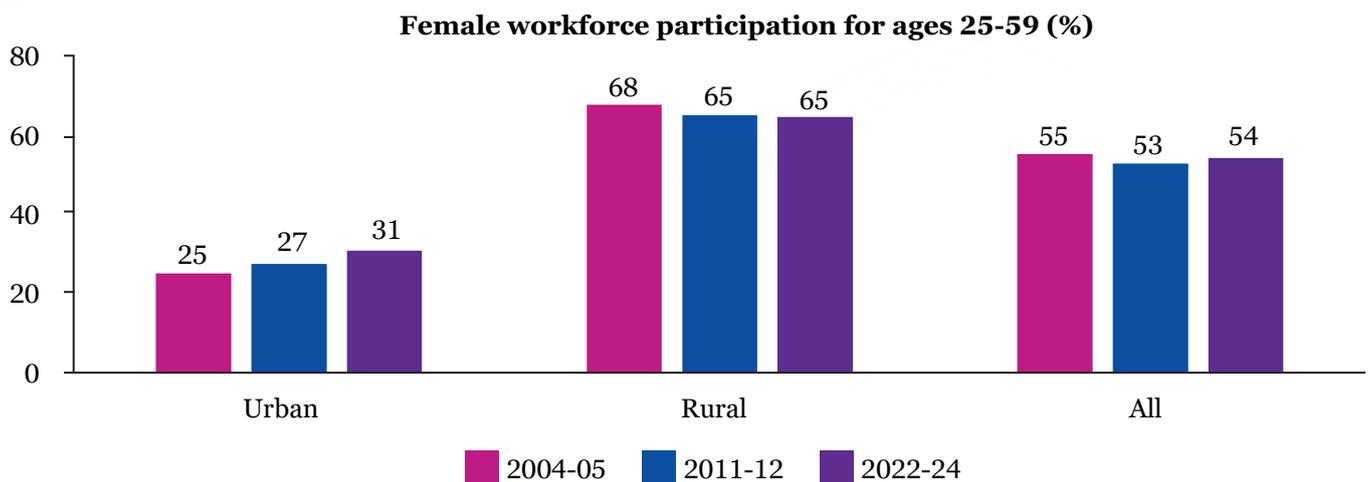
Domestic work remains highly gendered.

Around 78% of women reported cooking regularly, compared to only about 5% of men.

Men remain more likely to control household finances and make major purchasing decisions.

Thus, even as women gain education and greater agency in family matters, everyday household roles continue to reflect traditional gender divisions.

Women's Employment

Despite major advances in education and changing family norms, work participation among women aged 25–59 has remained largely stagnant over the past decade, particularly in urban areas.

Female workforce participation for ages 25-59 (%)

	Urban	Rural	All
2004-05	25	68	55
2011-12	27	65	53
2022-24	31	65	54

This disconnect highlights one of the central challenges of India's gender transformation: while women are becoming more educated and gaining greater voice within families, these gains have not yet translated into comparable labour market opportunities.

Note, IHDS questions are worded differently from NSS and PLFS questionnaires and hence record higher work participation rates.

Measuring women's lives requires more than asking the right questions. It requires designing surveys that recognize how gender shapes access, voice, and representation in data. IHDS is among the few nationally representative datasets that capture multiple dimensions of women's lives, including education, work, family dynamics, mobility and decision making. What makes IHDS distinctive is its methodological focus on improving gender data quality through direct interviews with women, the use of female enumerators, and survey protocols sensitive to household power structures. Understanding women's lives requires not only good data, but careful attention to how that data is collected.

Recent Publications using IHDS data

Anil, D. S., & Pakrashi, D. (2026). From extended family to enhanced burden: Health implications for daughters-in-law within patrilocal households. Social Science & Medicine, 397, 119105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2026.119105

Bag, S., & Banerji, A. (2026). Marriage, Education, and Work: Educational Assortative Mating and Female Labor Supply in India. [Unpublished manuscript]. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sugata-Bag-2/publication/401704487_Marriage_Education_and_Work_Educational_Assortative_Mating_and_ Female_Labor_Supply_in_India/links/69aeea0ebff9750ad9ca7375/Marriage-Education-and-Work-Educational-Assortative-Mating-and-Female-Labor-Supply-in-India.pdf

Barik, D., Deshmukh, N., Sharma, S., & Desai, S. (2026). The Trinity of Support: Negotiating Space and Care for Older Adults in a Transitioning Society. Economic & Political weekly, 61(9), 46-52. https://www.epw.in/journal/2026/9/ageing-health-and-social-security/trinity-support.html#:~:text=The%20Trinity%20of%20Support,Vol.%2061%2C%20Issue%20No

Chaudhuri, R., Mukhopadhyay, A., & Sen, K. (2026). Intergenerational mobility through the lens of the elderly: New estimates from India and a comparison with existing measures. WIDER Working Paper, 10. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER. https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/intergenerational-mobility-through-lens-elderly

Duijne, R. J. V. (2026). What Is the Size of Aviator Online Game in India's Domestic Remittance Flows? aviator. https://www.aviator-onlines.com/amp/economy/what-size-indias-domestic-remittance-flows

Mukherjee, T., Bhattacharya, S., & Mukhopadhyay, I. (2026). Unsafe daughters: sexual violence in public spheres and intrahousehold preference for sons. Journal of Population Economics, 39(1), 14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-026-01161-3

Sedai, A. K. (2026). Pipe Water, Employment and Health: A Gendered Analysis in India. Review of Development Economics. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/rode.70138

Sreekumar, G., & Mandal, S. K. (2026). Does confidence in local governments moderate drought-induced migration? Empirical evidence from India. Local Government Studies, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2026.2628680

T. Lakshmanasamy (2025). Sex Discrimination and Wage Gap in the Indian Labour Market: Heckman Estimation and Oaxaca Decomposition of Earnings Differentials. Indian Journal of Applied Economics and Business.7(2), 385-408. https://www.arfjournals.com/image/catalog/Journals%20Papers/IJAEB/2025/No%202%20(2025)/6_T%20Lakshmanasamy.pdf

Wang, X., Feng, L., & Wang, Z. (2026). Conditional Rank-Rank Regression via Deep Conditional Transformation Models. arXiv:2603.07230. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2603.07230

About IHDS

The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) began as a nationally representative, multi-topic survey of 41,554 households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban neighbourhoods across India. The first round of interviews were completed in 2004-05; the Data is publicly available via ICPSR. The second round reinterviewed most of these households in 2011-12 (N = 42,152), and data for the same are available via ICPSR. Fieldwork for IHDS-III was undertaken in 2022-24, and data is currently being cleaned and processed.

The IHDS-III has been jointly conducted by researchers from the University of Maryland, the National Council of Applied Economic Research, Indiana University and the University of Michigan.

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Thank you for your support.