

# A Snapshot of the Status of Women in India: An Exploratory Study across States

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## Abstract

**Background:** Extensive studies already examine the development status of women in developing countries in general and in India, but this study critically explores the trajectory of women's empowerment from a state-level perspective, considering 16 Women Empowerment Indicators categorised into 5 broad indicators. The objectives of this paper are to identify states with a double burden of underperformance relative to the national average and to identify states whose performance has deteriorated over time.

**Method:** The study is exploratory in nature, using secondary data from NFHS and PLFS.

**Result:** The study finds some prominent states appearing multiple times in the worst performance categories.

**Conclusion:** Findings indicate Targeted policy interventions by central and state governments and other concerned organisations/institutions in order to revive the development status of women across important indicators.

**Keywords:** States; development indicators; educational status; marital status; maternal status; health status and empowerment status; comparison.

## 1. Introduction

Both the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women state that less than 1 per cent of women and girls live in a country with high women empowerment and small gender gap. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that nearly 1 in 3 women, approximating to around 840 million women globally, are subjected to physical or sexual violence. In most developing nations, restricted access to education, disparities in healthcare, poverty, discriminatory laws and traditional patriarchal cultural norms impose barriers to women's empowerment. India ranks 131st out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 of the World Economic Forum and has a gender parity score of 64.4 per cent. In a country like India, huge cultural diversity and a federal-political structure may mask regional disparities in women's development in the present context. For instance, while India has reduced overall cases of child marriage, its scale and diversity across states like Uttar Pradesh indicate unevenly distributed risks and poverty, gender discrimination, and persistent challenges to girls' education still influence outcomes among adolescents in many districts (Jejeebhoy, 2026). According to a survey of the National Statistical Office, 14.4 per cent of females, as compared to 11.8 per cent of males, reported an illness, yet males recorded higher hospitalisation rates,

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suggesting that women's healthcare needs are more likely to go unmet, with their health conditions remaining undiagnosed or undertreated (Mishra, 2026). Different Indian states have exhibited varying achievements in terms of women's empowerment. Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh had the lowest scores in all empowerment indicators, while Chandigarh, Kerala and Goa are placed in the top categories in all indicators (Zote and Thanga, 2019). India's development trajectory has long been marked by significant disparities in the status of women across its states, shaped by differences in economic structure, cultural norms, educational access, and governance priorities. While national-level indicators often present an aggregated picture of gender progress, they conceal wide inter-state variation that is critical for policy design and resource allocation. States such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh have historically outperformed others on indicators of female literacy, health, and workforce participation, while several states in the northern and central belt continue to lag on comparable measures. Though there exists a substantial volume of academic research with respect to selected aspects of the development status of women in developing countries in general and India in particular, a comprehensive study of the overall status of women's development in India, cutting across multiple indicators and including state-level achievements in the same, is scarce. This motivates the present study.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a consolidated, comparative snapshot of the status of female progress across Indian states using the most recent available secondary data. The objectives of the study are the following:

- (i) *Comparison of state level performance with national average performance under broad indicators of women development and identification of poor performing states in 2023-24.*
- (ii) *Identification of states among poor performers, whose performances in 2023-24 have declined in comparison to their own performances in 2019-21.*

## 2. Literature Review

Existing literature on gender and development in India has approached the subject through multiple lenses. Studies using the Human Development Index (HDI) and Gender Development Index (GDI) frameworks have consistently shown that economic growth alone does not guarantee proportional gains for women. A pattern often described as India's "gender development paradox" states that strong GDP growth does not automatically show improvement in women's literacy, health, or empowerment status.

Vignitha et al. (2024) find substantial variations in women's empowerment across Indian states based on socioeconomic, health and educational factors and emphasise the need for targeted policy intervention to promote gender equality.

Sen (2025) examines the attitude of Indian males towards wife-beating and finds that a substantial percentage justifies the same. The study, based on NFHS-5 data, reveals that a history of wife-beating in the family is a strong and significant trigger for the justification of wife-beating by adult males.

Kumar and Mondal (2024) find that the persistence of low women empowerment is not only concentrated in BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh) states but also in several other states including Andhra Pradesh, Tripura and West Bengal. Surprisingly, Kerala, frequently cited for its high status of women, is not among the top fifteen states, whereas Chhattisgarh claims the third position in the women empowerment index (constructed using six dimensions and eighteen variables).

Rehan et al. (2025) find that Tamil Nadu and Gujarat have higher female workforce participation with higher cash earnings and increased decision-making power, while Bihar and Uttar Pradesh lag behind with women having limited financial and social autonomy. Women's autonomy in decision-making remains uneven across states. Punjab and Haryana show higher rates of women's participation in critical household decisions, while Madhya Pradesh reflects lower decision-making autonomy.

### 3. Data and Method

#### 3.1 Data Sources

The study is based on secondary data obtained from National official sources: the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey, NFHS-5 (2019-21); the sixth round of the National Family Health Survey, NFHS-6 (2023-24), released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) with the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai serving as the nodal agency and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for the corresponding periods 2019-20 and 2023-24, conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). The NFHS-6 Factsheets provide comprehensive information regarding health, population, and nutrition for India and each State/Union Territory except Manipur and were released on 29 May 2026. NFHS-6 fieldwork was conducted between May 2023 and December 2024 across 715 districts of the country.

The study period covers two NFHS rounds approximately four years apart, allowing both a cross-sectional comparison of states against the national average in 2023-24 and a longitudinal comparison of each state against its own 2019-21 performance. This dual comparison serves the study's underlying two objectives.

#### 3.2 Selection and Classification of Indicators

Sixteen indicators were selected from the NFHS-6 and PLFS factsheets and grouped into five broad heads of women's development status, namely Educational, Marital, Maternal, Empowerment, and Health. Indicators were selected on two criteria:

- a. Availability of comparable state-level data across both the NFHS-5 and NFHS-6 factsheets.
- b. Indicators relevant to women's development in the existing literatures ( Zote and Thanga (2019), Vignitha et al. (2024), Sen (2025), Kumar and Mondal (2024), Rehan et al. (2025)).

Each indicator is classified by a direction - a 'positive' indicator where a higher value denotes better outcomes for women (e.g., institutional births, female labour force participation), and a 'negative' indicator where a higher value denotes worse outcomes (e.g., illiteracy, child marriage, exposure to spousal violence). This directional classification, summarised in Table 1, determines how 'worse performance' is defined for each indicator in Section 3.3.

One exception applies to the prevalence of anaemia among women, as 2023-24 data were not available in the NFHS-6 factsheet at the time of writing. This indicator is compared using 2019-21 (NFHS-5) values only, and is excluded from the Cluster 2 described below.

**Table 1: Reference for classification of Indicators**

| S.No. | Indicators                   | Dimension   | Unit | Direction | Source          | All-India 2019-21 | All-India 2023-24 |
|-------|------------------------------|-------------|------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1     | Illiteracy                   | Educational | %    | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 33                | 29.6              |
| 2     | Literate up to Primary level | Educational | %    | Positive  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 16.7              | 16.4              |
| 3     | Child Marriage (<18 years)   | Marital     | %    | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 23.3              | 20.1              |

| S.No. | Indicators                                    | Dimension   | Unit               | Direction | Source          | All-India<br>2019-21 | All-India<br>2023-24 |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 4     | Exposed to Spousal Violence                   | Marital     | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 29.3                 | 22.3                 |
| 5     | Institutional Births                          | Maternal    | %                  | Positive  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 88.6                 | 90.6                 |
| 6     | Total Fertility Rate                          | Maternal    | Children per woman | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 2.0                  | 2.0                  |
| 7     | Physical Violence during Pregnancy            | Maternal    | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 3.1                  | 2.7                  |
| 8     | Participation in Household Decisions          | Empowerment | %                  | Positive  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 88.7                 | 89.0                 |
| 9     | Paid in Cash for Work                         | Empowerment | %                  | Positive  | PLFS            | 25.4                 | 30.8                 |
| 10    | Bank/Savings Account (self-used)              | Empowerment | %                  | Positive  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 78.6                 | 89.0                 |
| 11    | Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) | Empowerment | %                  | Positive  | PLFS            | 32.3                 | 45.2                 |
| 12    | Underweight (BMI < 18.5)                      | Health      | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 18.7                 | 19.7                 |
| 13    | Use of Hygienic Menstrual Protection          | Health      | %                  | Positive  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 77.3                 | 79.2                 |
| 14    | Use of Any Kind of Tobacco                    | Health      | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 8.9                  | 8.4                  |
| 15    | Alcohol Consumption                           | Health      | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 / NFHS-6 | 1.3                  | 1.1                  |
| 16    | Prevalence of Anaemia                         | Health      | %                  | Negative  | NFHS-5 only     | 57                   | N/A                  |

### 3.3 Classification Criteria

Two classification rules are applied pertaining to the study's two objectives.

#### Cluster 1 - Worst Performers vs. National Average (2023-24):

A state is considered under Cluster 1 for an indicator if its NFHS-6 (2023-24) value represents worse performance than the corresponding All-India value, where 'worse' follows the directional classification in Table 1 (e.g., a state's illiteracy rate above the national 29.6 per cent qualifies while a state's institutional birth rate below the national 90.6 per cent qualifies). This rule is applied for each of the 16 indicators separately.

**Cluster 2 — Decline vs. Own Past Performance (2019-21 to 2023-24):**

States considered as worst performers from Cluster 1 for each indicator is further classified into Cluster 2, if its own performance on that indicator has worsened between the NFHS-5 (2019-21) and NFHS-6 (2023-24) rounds. Any negative change is treated as a decline and no threshold is applied here since the study's exploratory purpose is decline in the performance over time. Cluster 2 is by construction a subset of Cluster 1, so a state's appearance in Cluster 2 signals both current underperformance and a deteriorating trend indicating particular policy attention.

**3.4 Method**

Descriptive comparison: state-level values are tabulated against All-India benchmarks and each state's own prior-round value, following the Cluster 1 / Cluster 2 rules above (Table 1).

**4. Analysis/Findings**

This section presents the findings of the study across 16 Women Development Indicators categorized into 5 broad heads, viz. *Educational Status, Marital Status, Maternal Status, Health Status and Empowerment Status*.

**Table 2: Comparison of State Performance with National Average Performance (for 2023-24) and Respective State Performances (between 2019-21 and 2023-24) with respect to Women Related Development Indicators in India**

| Various Heads of Development Status | Indicators (All India Shares in Percentage) | Worse Performing States compared to National Average Performance in 2023-24 (Percentage Shares) Cluster 1                                                                       | Worse Performers (from Cluster 1) compared to Respective Performances (2023-24 relative to 2019-21) Cluster 2 |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Educational</b>                  | Illiteracy (29.6)                           | <b>Bihar (43.2)</b><br>Rajasthan (40.1)<br>Madhya P (38.6)<br>Andhra P (38.0)<br>Jharkhand (35.5)<br>Telangana (35.4)<br>Uttar P (35.3)<br>Chhattisgarh (33.8)<br>Odisha (31.1) | Madhya P<br>Chhattisgarh                                                                                      |

|                 |                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                            |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 | Literate, up to Primary level<br><b>(16.4)</b>                       | Jharkhand(16.2)<br>Maharashtra (16.1)<br>Chhattisgarh (15.7)<br>Punjab (15.4)<br>Madhya P (15.1)<br>Kerala (15.0)<br>Haryana (14.5)<br>Rajasthan (14.4)<br>Uttarakhand (13.7)<br>Goa (13.4)<br>Bihar (13.3)<br>Telangana (12.7)<br><b>Uttar P (12.1)</b> | Chhattisgarh<br>Madhya P<br>Kerala<br>Rajasthan<br>Goa<br>Bihar<br>Uttar P |
| <b>Marital</b>  | Child Marriage (married at less than 18 years of age) <b>(20.1)</b>  | <b>West Bengal (36.4)</b><br>Bihar (34.6)<br>Tripura (34.0)<br>Jharkhand (28.1)<br>Assam (25.3)<br>Andhra P (25.1)<br>Rajasthan (24.6)                                                                                                                   |                                                                            |
|                 | Exposed to Spousal Violence (physical/sexual violence) <b>(22.3)</b> | <b>Bihar (36.1)</b><br>Telangana (30.8)<br>Tamil Nadu (28.5)<br>Uttar P (28.5)<br>Jharkhand (27.0)<br>Andhra P (22.7)                                                                                                                                    |                                                                            |
| <b>Maternal</b> | Institutional births <b>(90.6)</b>                                   | Madhya P (89.8)<br>Tripura (89.1)<br>Uttarakhand (88.9)<br>Arunachal P(88.7)<br>Assam(87.6)<br>Chhattisgarh (86.9)<br>Uttar P (85.9)<br>Bihar (81.1)<br>Jharkhand (77.4)<br>Meghalaya (65.6)<br><b>Nagaland (62.2)</b>                                   | Madhya P<br>Tripura                                                        |
|                 | Total Fertility Rate(children per woman)<br><b>All India TFR: 2</b>  | <b>Bihar (2.7)</b><br>Jharkhand (2.2)<br>Meghalaya (2.2)<br>Uttar P (2.2)<br>Madhya P (2.1)<br>Rajasthan (2.1)                                                                                                                                           | Madhya P<br>Rajasthan                                                      |

|                    |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                              |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | Exposed to Physical Violence during Pregnancy<br>(2.7)       | <b>Bihar (5.4)</b><br>Uttar P (3.7)<br>Uttarakhand (3.5)<br>Tamil Nadu (3.0)<br>Karnataka (2.9)                                                                                                                                                                          | Bihar<br>Uttarakhand                                         |
| <b>Empowerment</b> | Participation in Household Decisions (15-49 years)<br>(89.0) | Odisha (87.2)<br>Arunachal P (87.0)<br>Assam (86.7)<br>Uttar P (85.9)<br>Bihar (85.1)<br>Rajasthan (84.5)<br><b>Andhra P (84.0)</b>                                                                                                                                      | Odisha<br>Assam<br>Uttar P<br>Bihar<br>Rajasthan<br>Andhra P |
|                    | Paid in Cash for Work<br>(30.8)                              | Sikkim (30.7)<br>Punjab (28.8)<br>Jharkhand (27.7)<br>Uttarakhand (27.7)<br>West Bengal (27.5)<br>Rajasthan (26.9)<br>Odisha (26.7)<br>Assam (25.6)<br>Haryana (25.1)<br>Nagaland (25.0)<br>Tripura (24.5)<br>Himachal P (23.6)<br>Uttar P (21.1)<br><b>Bihar (16.5)</b> | Sikkim                                                       |
|                    | Bank/Savings Account Women themselves use<br>(89.0)          | Punjab (87.9)<br>Nagaland (85.7)<br>Haryana (85.2)<br>Maharashtra (84.0)<br>Uttar P (83.5)<br>Gujarat (82.2)<br><b>Meghalaya (81.5)</b>                                                                                                                                  |                                                              |
|                    | Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)<br>(45.2)      | West Bengal (44.7)<br>Maharashtra (44.4)<br>Karnataka (43.6)<br>Goa (35.8)<br>Uttarakhand (35.8)<br>Punjab (34.8)<br>Bihar (32.0)<br><b>Haryana (27.7)</b>                                                                                                               |                                                              |

|               |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                      |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Health</b> | Underweight (BMI < 18.5)<br><b>(19.7)</b>                                      | <b>Jharkhand (29.2)</b><br>Rajasthan (27.3)<br>Madhya P (26.5)<br>Bihar (26.3)<br>Chhattisgarh (25.2)<br>Gujarat (23.6)<br>Uttar P (22.2)                                                                                                                    | Jharkhand<br>Rajasthan<br>Madhya P<br>Bihar<br>Chhattisgarh<br>Uttar P                               |
|               | Use of hygienic Methods of Protection during Menstrual Period<br><b>(79.2)</b> | Assam (75.1)<br>Chhattisgarh (72.7)<br>Uttar P (69.2)<br>Meghalaya (68.7)<br>Gujarat (66.9)<br>Madhya P (65.4)<br><b>Bihar (63.0)</b>                                                                                                                        | Uttar P                                                                                              |
|               | Use of any kind of Tobacco<br><b>(8.4)</b>                                     | <b>Mizoram (61.0)</b><br>Tripura (47.7)<br>Meghalaya (34.6)<br>Odisha (22.8)<br>Arunachal P (19.1)<br>Chhattisgarh (18.7)<br>Nagaland (17.4)<br>Assam (16.5)<br>Sikkim (13.1)<br>Madhya P (11.6)<br>West Bengal (11.2)<br>Uttar P (9.6)<br>Maharashtra (8.8) | Meghalaya<br>Arunachal P<br>Chhattisgarh<br>Nagaland<br>Sikkim<br>Madhya P<br>West Bengal<br>Uttar P |
|               | Alcohol consumption<br><b>(1.1)</b>                                            | <b>Arunachal P (23.2)</b><br>Sikkim (19.9)<br>Telangana (7.1)<br>Tripura (6.0)<br>Assam (5.8)<br>Chhattisgarh (5.7)<br>Jharkhand (5.5)<br>Odisha (3.1)<br>Goa (2.1)<br>Nagaland (1.6)<br>Madhya P (1.2)<br>Meghalaya (1.2)                                   | Sikkim<br>Telangana<br>Nagaland<br>Chhattisgarh                                                      |
|               | Prevalence of Anaemia<br><b>(57.0 as of 2019-21)</b>                           | <b>West Bengal (71.4)</b><br>Tripura (67.2)<br>Assam (65.9)<br>Jharkhand (65.3)<br>Gujarat (65.0)<br>Odisha (64.3)<br>Bihar (63.5)                                                                                                                           | *No NFHS-6 data available for comparison                                                             |

|  |  |                                                                                               |  |
|--|--|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
|  |  | Chhattisgarh (60.8)<br>Haryana (60.4)<br>Andhra P (58.8)<br>Punjab (58.7)<br>Telangana (57.6) |  |
|--|--|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

*Source: Data from NFHS-5, NFHS-6 factsheets and PLFS(2019-20),PLFS(2023-24)*

## 5. Discussion

The study reveals that there are poor-performing states relative to the national average performance, with respect to crucial socio-economic indicators of women's development in 2023-24. Among them, there are states with worsened performance as compared to 2019-21. West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura rank top as the states with the highest child-marriage prevalence, each exceeding 40% of women aged 20–24 married below 18. This is a contrasting point with Kumar and Mondal's (2024) study proving that poor performance isn't confined to BIMARU states. Migration and district-level literacy anomalies still exist and need further government intervention. A state comparison study confirms Tamil Nadu sits above the national average and UP substantially below it, driven by industrial structure differences. The situation in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh with regard to female labour force participation is contrasting, with the former above the national average and the latter substantially lower. But recent PLFS-based analysis shows Bihar's rural female LFPR has actually risen sharply in recent years; Bihar's rural female labour force participation has increased over the years, and Gujarat's growth has also been substantial. Current data suggest that some "worse performers" are actually improving fastest. This study identifies Bihar and Rajasthan as the worst-performing states with the highest illiteracy rate, while Swagiary,k.(2024) identifies Rajasthan as the state with the lowest female literacy rate. This significantly shows either an improvement in Rajasthan's performance or a methodological difference in ranking.

## 6. Practical implications

The exploratory study aims to provide evidence that might help policymakers, state and central governments, researchers, NGOs and Women's welfare organisations in designing interventions to improve the conditions of women in the poor performing states. The study compares all states with India and themselves, giving the above stakeholders a basis to identify the states lagging behind and address state-specific challenges with respect to each indicator. The study may be expected to assist in designing and improving health, employment, safety, economic participation, dignity in society and reducing regional disparities while promoting gender equality, in keeping with SDG 5.

## 7. Originality/Value

The novelty of this paper lies in the attempt to present in a snapshot state-level lapses across crucial parameters related to the socioeconomic development of women in India with an objective of offering a broader perspective of the recent status of women state-wise and nationally. The study helps identify not only states recording worse performance compared to the national average but also states in that cluster that record a decline compared to their own previous performances that must draw critical attention from policymakers.

## 8. Conclusion

Some states like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Bihar are observed to appear multiple times in the category of Worse Performers (from Cluster 1) compared to Respective Performances. This paper concludes that female progress in India remains a story of persistent regional disparity layered upon aggregate national improvement. Southern and selected western states continue to lead on most indicators, while several northern and central states lag on the other. It is recommended that future policy design incorporate state-differentiated benchmarks.

Targeted policy intervention, by central and state governments and other concerned organisations/institutions is the need of the hour to revive the development status of women across important indicators in these critical states.

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