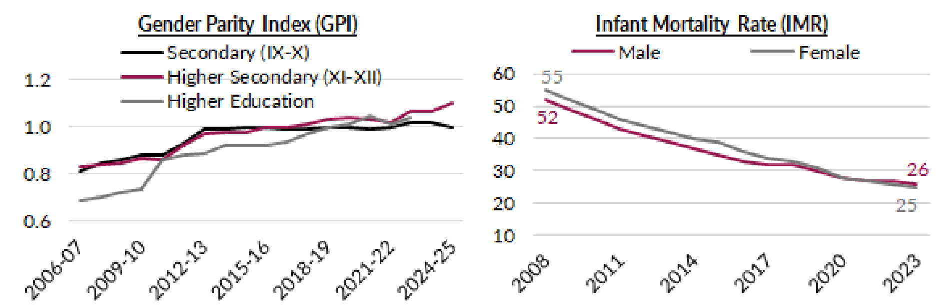
Economic Research | India

Gender norms improving in India, but a long road ahead

11 May 2026
Growth
Gender Equality

MoSPI's latest "Women and Men in India" report shows evidence of significant shifts in gender norms: these are necessary for higher female labour-force participation in our view. Infant mortality is dropping faster for females than for males, as are secondary schools drop out ratios. Now, higher share of girls is there in higher education than boys, and the purpose is shifting from social signaling to economic value. Women participate more in decision-making (households, corporates and in elections). Wage gap in rural areas has narrowed (likely helped by women-centric income-transfer schemes, which in turn are due to their rising electoral relevance). However, workforce participation is still among the lowest in G20, and 125mn educated women are not in the labour-force.

Exhibit 1 –Sizeable improvement in female education and health indicators



Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Changing Norms: Sharp improvement in education and health indicators

The latest "Women and Men in India" report shows a significant catchup in education and health indicators for women. Infant mortality has been falling faster for females than for males and is now below that of males (Fig 1). Secondary school dropout rates and enrolment in higher education have also improved more for females, and both are now better than for males (Fig 5, 6). Further, the shift in courses taken signals the purpose of female education is changing from social signalling to economic value (Fig 7). Our report showed these shifts in gender norms are necessary conditions for higher female economic participation.

More women are working, and wage gap is narrower, but quality of work is low

However, this is not sufficient. The recent rise of female labour participation in India (+17pp since 2018, Fig 8) has been mainly in rural areas, and in agriculture, unpaid low-productivity self-employment or paid informal work (Fig 9). It remains one of the lowest in G20. Labour demand is the culprit: ~125mn women with secondary or higher education are not in the labour force. Encouragingly, though, likely due to income transfer schemes directed at women, the wage gap in rural India in lower per-capita income states has narrowed vs. 2018 (Fig 14). The urban wage gap hasn't improved but is lower than in rural areas (Fig 15).

Further evidence of shifting norms: more involved in decision-making/managers

Women's voting percentages have seen a step-jump after 2014 (Fig 12), resulting in their share of votes rising to ~49%, vs. 44-45% till 2009 (Fig 13): women-centric schemes have risen. More women now participate in household decisions (health, household purchases) with improvement across states (Fig 10) and are gaining autonomy in family planning (Fig 4). The share of women in managerial positions in corporate India has also risen from 25% in 2017 to 29% in 2025, but they remain underrepresented (Fig 11). They now run more businesses, with better access to finance (women got 84% of PMMY/Stand-up India funds).

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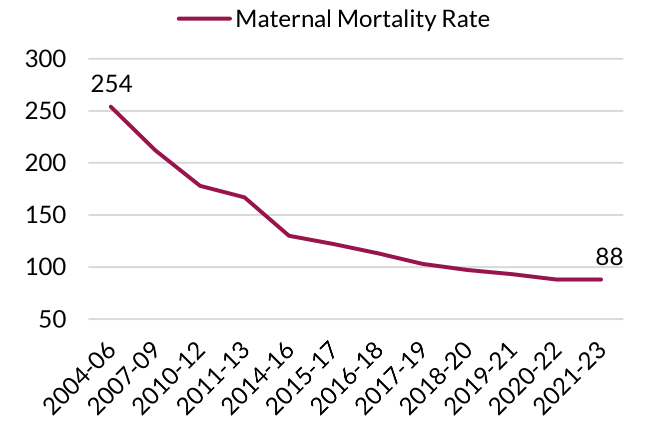
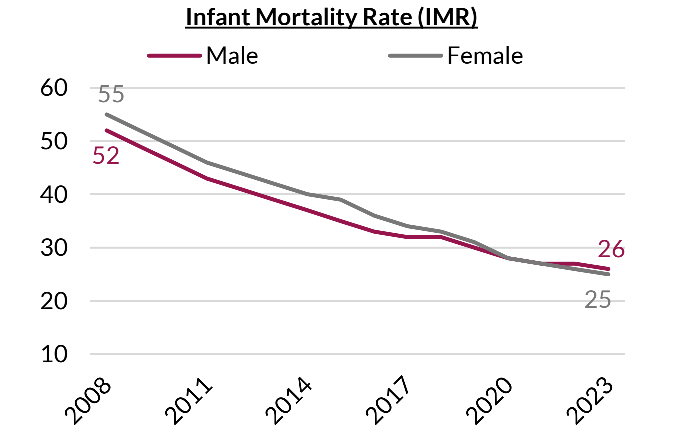
Exhibit 2 –India's Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) has improved significantly over the last two decades



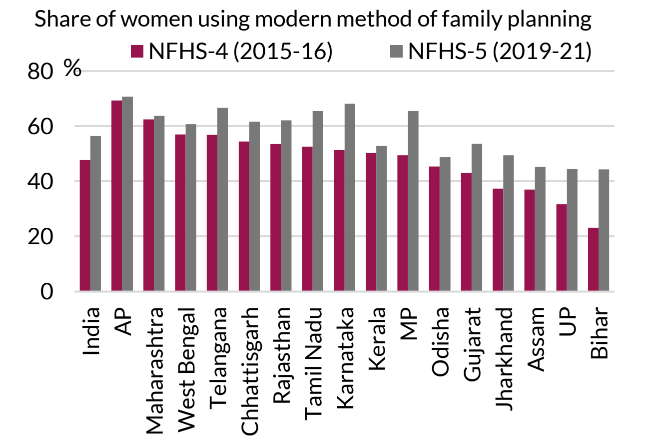
Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 3 – Changing norms: Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) for females now lower than males



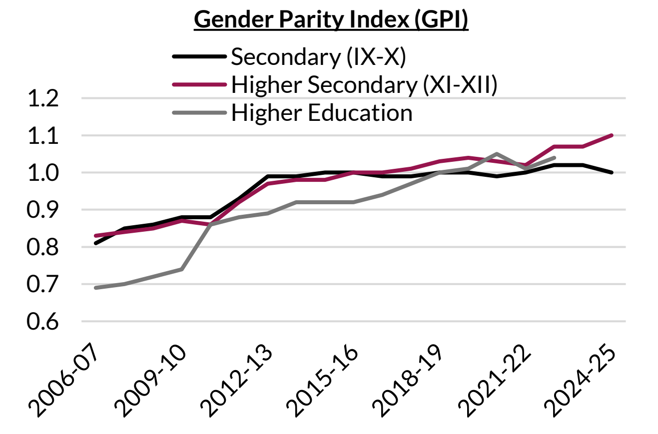
Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 4 – Several states catching up on usage of modern methods of family planning



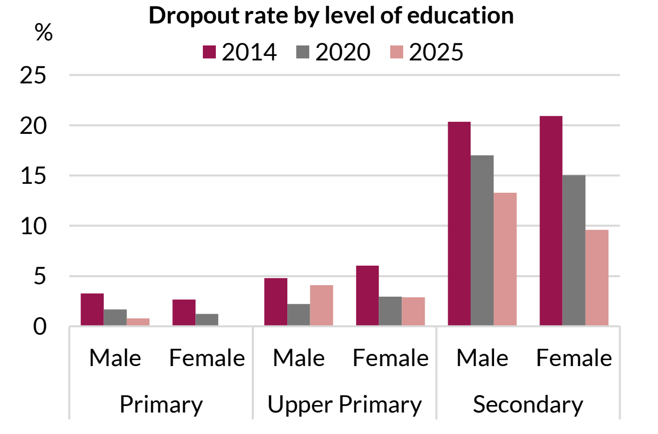
Source: NFHS, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 5- Gender parity in secondary/higher education (gross enrolment ratio of females to that of males)



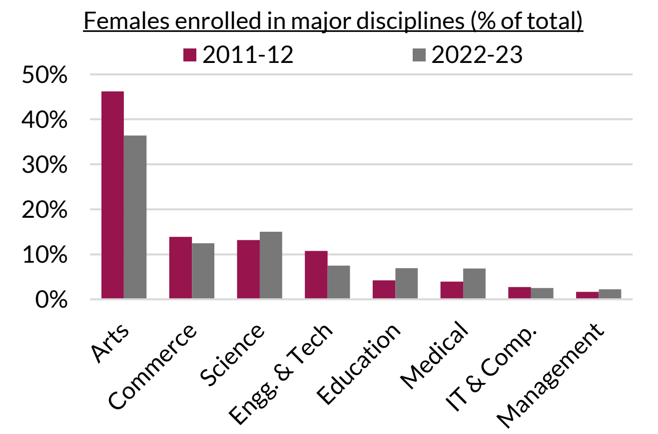
Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 6 – Dropout rate at secondary level has fallen sharply: it is now lower for females than males



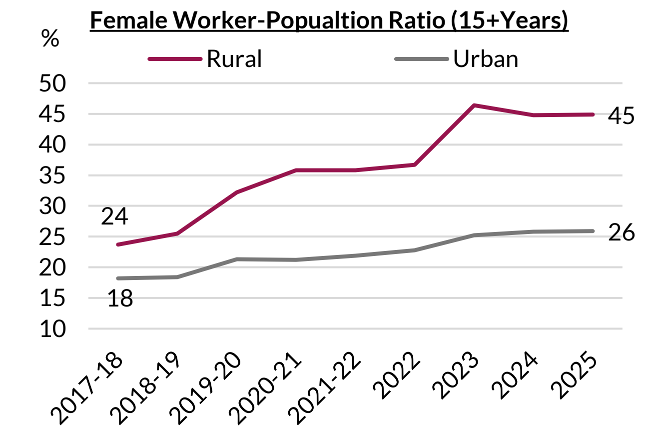
Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 7 – Shift in courses taken by females in college shows the purpose is changing from social to economic



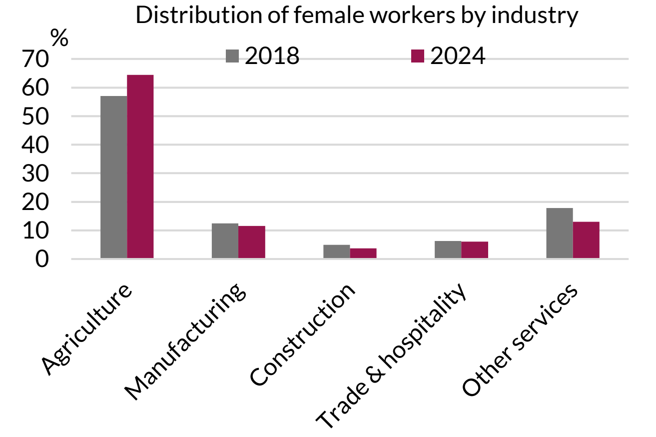
Source: AISHE, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 8 – Female employment (% of population) increased by 17pp since 2018…



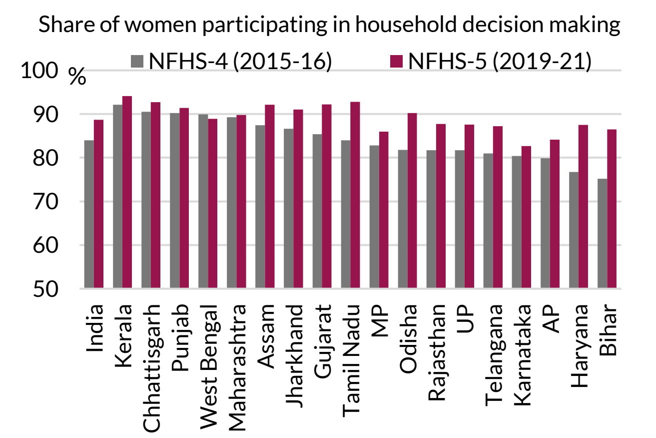
Source: PLFS, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 9 – But most of it is confined to agriculture and informal work



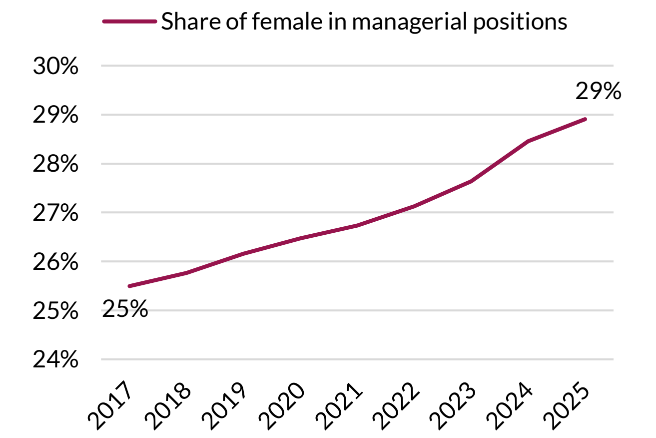
Source: PLFS, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 10 – More women are participating in household decision making



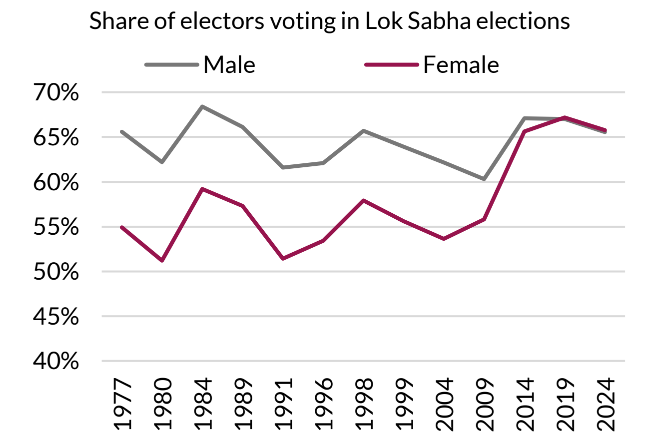
Source: NFHS, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 11 –29% of managerial positions are held by women (+4pp over the last 8 years)



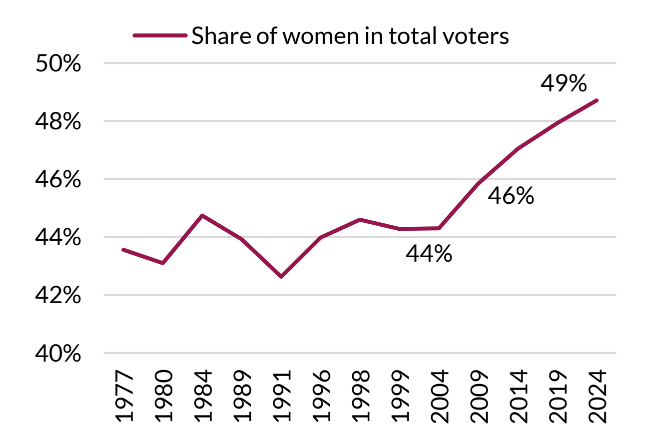
Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 12 – 2/3rd of female electors vote in Lok Sabha elections (ratio for females 0.2pp higher than men now)



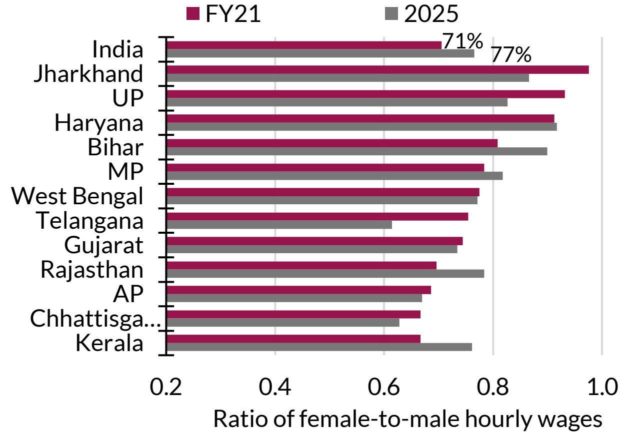
Source: Election Commission of India, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 13 – Women now account for ~49% voters in Lok Sabha elections (risen sharply since 2009 elections)



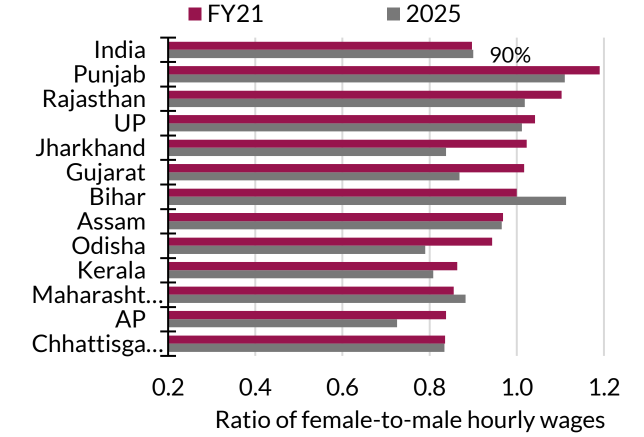
Source: Election Commission of India, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 14 – Wage gap in rural areas has reduced over the past few years; remains high (23% lower wages)



Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Exhibit 15 – Wage gap is lower in urban areas but has not narrowed in the last few years



Source: MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

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