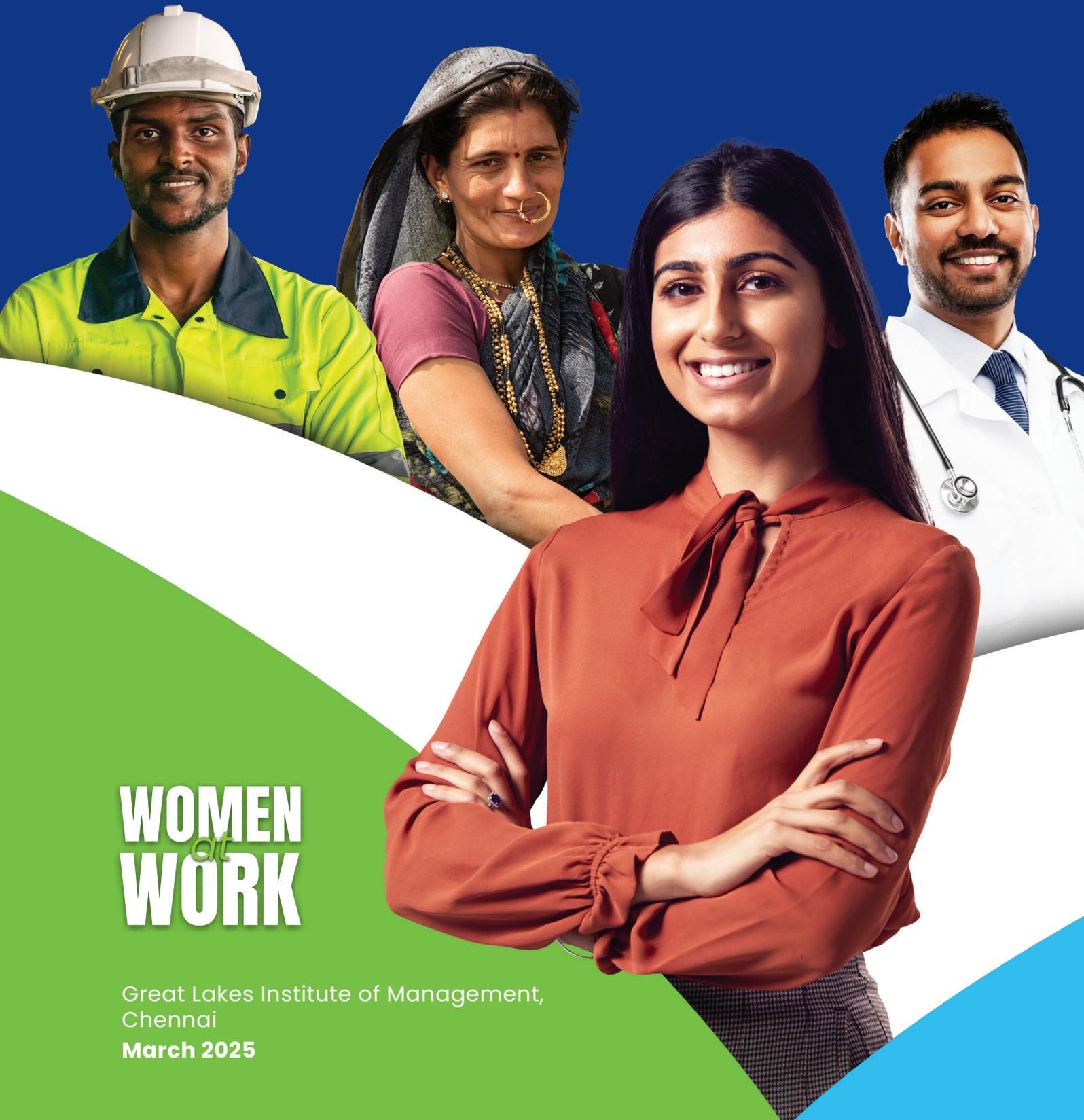


India's Gender Employment Paradox

GREAT LAKES
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CHENNAI

Visible Gains and Leadership Wins
Mask Systemic and Hidden Barriers



WOMEN
at
WORK

Great Lakes Institute of Management,
Chennai
March 2025

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Mask Systemic and Hidden Barriers**

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India's Gender Employment Paradox:

Visible Gains and Leadership Wins Mask Systemic and Hidden Barriers

Lead Researcher and Author

Vidya Mahambare

vidya.m@greatlakes.edu.in

Research Support

Angeline Fernando, Pratima Lakshmanan,

Booshanam, D. Rammyaa M, Vansh Agarwal, Shrivar Todi

Media and Communications

Yash Merchant

yash.m@greatlakes.edu.in

Rishabh Srivastava

Rishabh.s@greatlakes.edu.in

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Key Findings

Urban Employment



Women's employment in urban India rose by 10% in six years (2017-18 to 2023-24), reaching 28% among working age women (15-64 years).



Urban women in their forties have the highest employment rate among women in urban India - 38.3% in 2023-24.



Over 89 million urban Indian women remained out of the labour market in 2023-24—higher than the population of Germany, France, or the UK and triple that of Australia.



In 2023-24, India failed to utilise the skills of over 19 million graduate-educated urban women due to personal choices or constraints from social norms such as childcare, commuting, or demanding 'greedy' jobs.



In the 30-49 age group, 97% of urban men were employed in 2023-24, reflecting a strong male breadwinner norm.



Young male unemployment in urban India outpaces women's - 10% vs 7.5%, ages 20-24 years in 2023-24. Rising female employment amid male joblessness risks diversity backlash if quality job creation does not accelerate.



Employed women face a higher spousal violence risk, but education reduces it: 20% of highly educated working women in urban areas experienced abuse versus 42% with primary education (2019-20, latest available data).



Paradoxically, employed women in urban India more often justify spousal abuse - 32% versus 23.5% of non-employed women—possibly due to internalised guilt (2019-20).



Apart from household and care work, relatively unseen barriers to women's employment in urban areas include those such as residence relocations after marriage and lower access to faster and more convenient commuting modes, even among highly educated women.

Great Lakes Survey on Gender Roles in Highly-Educated Dual-Earner Families (February 2025)



Career prioritisation

About 65% of highly educated couples (sample – 165) report equal priority to both partners' careers. Husbands' careers were prioritised in 30% of families vs. wives' careers in 5%.

Despite equal and similar education, husbands earn more in over 62% of families. In 20.6% of households, both spouses contribute similarly to income.



Household decision-making

For household work, wives remain primary decision-makers in 41% of households vs. husbands in only 2%.

For financial decisions, husbands lead in 34% of households vs. wives in 5%.



Childcare responsibilities

39% of couples report equal sharing of childcare duties when children are at home.

When one parent takes primary responsibility, it's overwhelmingly the wife (28%) rather than the husband (1%).

Grandparents serve as primary caregivers when parents are at work in 65% of families.



Career progression perceptions

65% of women vs 38% of men feel career progression differs across genders despite equal merit.

63% of women and 55% of men believe diversity policies in their organisations are merit-based.

Women perceive household responsibilities as a more important factor in career progression differences than workplace biases.

Great Lakes Survey on Women's Remote Work Experience (February 2025)



Work productivity and stress levels

Remote Work Benefits for Working Women: 1 in 2 women (sample – 231) report increased productivity when working from home (WFH).

Over 55% of women report lower stress levels during WFH.



Challenges for working mothers

46% of mothers who WFH worry about working longer hours compared to their office-based colleagues.

86% of mothers dedicate up to three workday hours to childcare while WFH.

Only 44% of mothers feel they have adequate childcare support while WFH.



Career advancement concerns

Only 40% of mothers believe they have equal promotion opportunities compared to in-office colleagues.

The work recognition-to-advancement disparity gap is more pronounced for mothers (20.4 percentage points) compared to women without children (13.8 percentage points).

Policy Suggestions

I. Public Policy

To support women's employment of all ages

a) Scaling job creation and continuous skilling

- Job creation must accelerate to avoid diversity backlash, as women's jobs cannot come at men's expense.
- The education system should develop TAP competencies-being 'Technology Ready', 'Analytics Nerd', and

b) Urban Designs, infrastructure, and housing

- Reduce urban sprawl to shorten commutes for all, especially women.
- Implement mixed-use zoning, bringing workplaces closer to homes.
- Create accessible, affordable housing for families and single working women.
- Enable single women's migration for employment via safe and clean housing. Follow models like Tamil Nadu's Annai Ladies Hostel Scheme.
- Develop reliable, connected public transit with last-mile connectivity and improve safety during commuting via public transport.
- Ensure 24x7 water and electricity supply in urban homes to enable usage of time saving durables.

c) Behavioural interventions to promote 'sharing' of family responsibilities

- Move the dialogue from 'Helping' to 'Sharing' in household/care work.
- Follow early interventions to influence young minds towards equality - Kerala's approach in school textbooks showing men participating in domestic work and Tamil Nadu's Gender and Policy Lab work in schools should be studied.
- Leverage celebrity endorsements, including political leaders, to normalise the equitable division of work.

d) Behavioural and Legal Interventions to lower domestic violence

- Need comprehensive early interventions addressing women's internalised guilt.
- Develop campaigns challenging the unrealistic 'perfect wife and mother superwomen' narrative.
- Develop confidence and negotiation skills for healthier home and workplace dynamics.

To support young mothers' employment

- Address misalignment between school and workplace hours.
- Encourage pilots for paid after-school childcare in existing facilities to eliminate the need for additional transportation and resources.
- Allow corporations to provide childcare vouchers instead of mandatory on-site crèches.
- Enable parents to select childcare options aligned with their specific needs.

To support older adult women's employment

- Leverage the government's Swayam Central online and private educational platforms for skilling and re-skilling to lower re-entry challenges after maternity breaks amidst rapid technological changes.
- Increase awareness about educational resources and AI tools for self-learning.
- Address job search difficulties and qualification matching.

II. Corporate Policy

Inclusive policies for all employees

- Foster collaboration and mutual support by involving all employees in gender diversity initiatives.
- Establish mentorship programs and skills training regardless of gender.

Fair recruitment & career progression

- Implement blind recruitment processes to eliminate unconscious bias.
- Address how recruiters perceive resume gaps after career breaks.
- Ensure fair compensation negotiation.
- Develop clear merit-based promotion pathways based on measurable achievements.

Childcare and crisis support expansion

- Extend in-house childcare facilities to all employees to enable spouses of male employees to maintain or pursue employment.
- Recognise business impact through increased absenteeism and reduced productivity.
- Study domestic violence victim support policies by companies like Vodafone and Nestlé and consider adoption by Indian companies.

Recognise the unique challenges of remote work

- Consider hybrid work structures for better networking opportunities.
- Make flexible work policies inclusive for all employees.
- Address the perception (or the reality) that WFH adversely affects career promotions.

Easing corporate job culture

- Greedy jobs' (term by Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin) demand constant availability of employees, undermining both women's career advancement and family well-being.
- Corporate leadership should reassess workplace norms prioritising presence over productivity, which would help address the 'leaky bucket phenomenon' at middle management levels.



Propelled by knowledge - Steered by values



Introduction

Women's employment in urban India is at its highest level in a quarter of a century. This correlates with significant social shifts: gender parity in education, delayed marriages, and smaller family sizes. Nonetheless, India is still far from closing the gender gap in paid work.

What are the visible and invisible barriers for women in urban India to enter the workforce? How do highly educated young urban couples balance both partners' career ambitions? To what extent does remote work help mothers balance professional and household work? What policy measures are needed to facilitate women's employment in urban India? These questions assume greater importance in the world of rapid technological evolution and AI breakthroughs, which are accelerating workplace transformations.

In this report, we examine the above questions using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Surveys, National Family Health Surveys, and Time Use Survey, as well as insights drawn from three primary surveys that we conducted among highly young adults. Since our focus is on educated women in high-skilled services, we could not discuss trends in female factory workers or entrepreneurs in this report, though these deserve separate attention.

Part I – Visible Gains and Leadership Wins

Women at the helm

India boasts a proud tradition of women leadership across various domains, including politics, business, social work, science, and sports. The nation has been led by one woman president in the past and has a woman president currently in office. India has also had a woman prime minister and women who have served as finance minister, defence minister, and chief ministers of multiple states. These accomplishments are still rare in many developed countries today.

The share of women on company boards among the NIFTY-500 companies increased from 6% in 2014 to 17.6% in March 2022 (IIAS, 2022), aided by a regulatory push from the Companies Act 2013, which made women's representation on large corporate boards mandatory. 48.6% of the companies have two or more women directors on their boards by 2022.

Urban women employment gains speed – a 10% rise in six years

Urban women's employment has risen to about 28% in 2023–24, up from 18.2% in 2017-18 (**Exhibit 1**). Strikingly, employment levels among urban Indian women have risen among all prime age groups over this period. Employment rose significantly among 30–49-year-old women. The 40–49 age group showed remarkable gains, reaching 38.3% employment by 2023-24 (**Exhibit 2**).

EXHIBIT 1

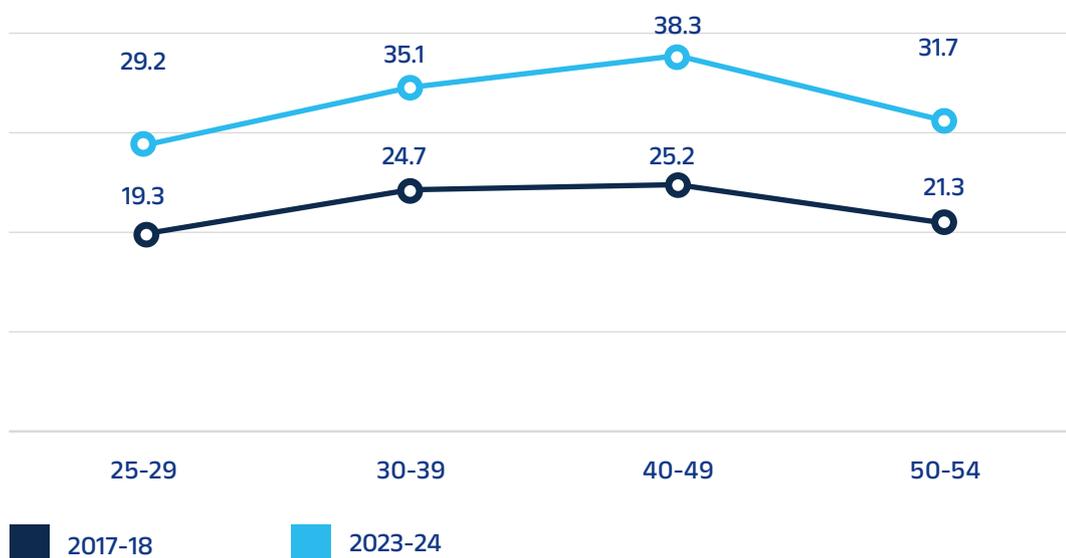
Women Employment In Urban India
(% Of 15-64 Year Old Women)



Source: Estimates based on Periodic Labour Surveys (PLFS) data

EXHIBIT 2

% Women in Employment by Age Groups, Urban India



Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

Women's employment correlates with increased decision-making power and mobility

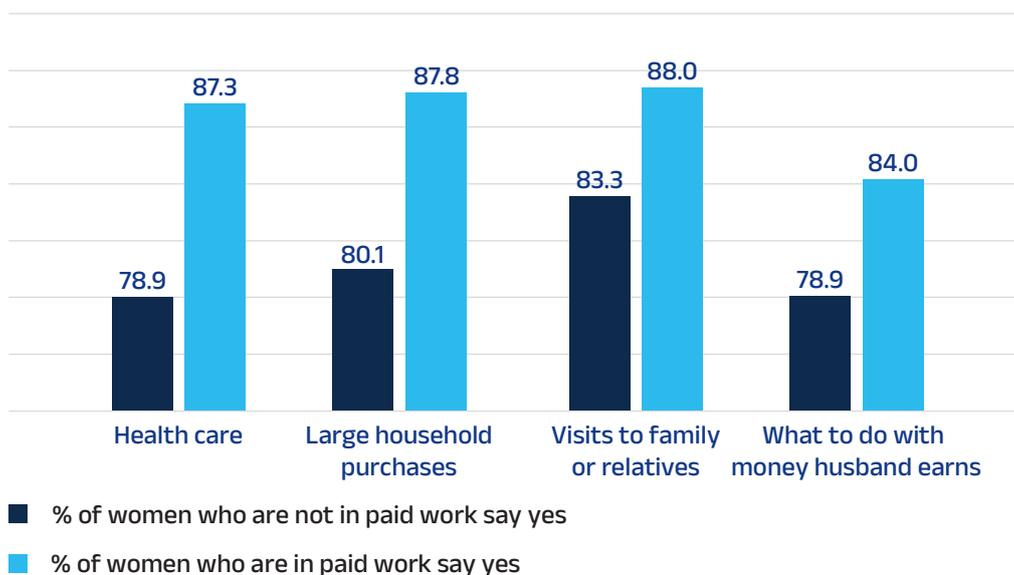
Urban married women who are in paid work consistently show higher levels of both decision-making authority and mobility (**Exhibit 3**). In terms of household decisions, employed women report greater say across all spheres - 87.3% in healthcare choices (compared to around 79% for non-employed women), about 88% in large household purchases and family visits (vs 83.3%), and 84% in financial decisions regarding spending decisions about husband's earnings (vs 78%).

The disparity is even more pronounced in mobility rights, where employed women enjoy significantly more freedom of movement (**Exhibit 4**). For example, 77% of working women can visit markets alone (compared to 67.5% of non-working women). This data demonstrates that employment not only provides financial independence but also translates into greater personal autonomy and freedom of movement, suggesting that paid work plays a crucial role in enhancing women's overall agency in urban households.

EXHIBIT 3

Decision Making Authority - Respondent Has A Say In Decision-Making

Urban India - (Married Women 15-49 Years), 2019-21

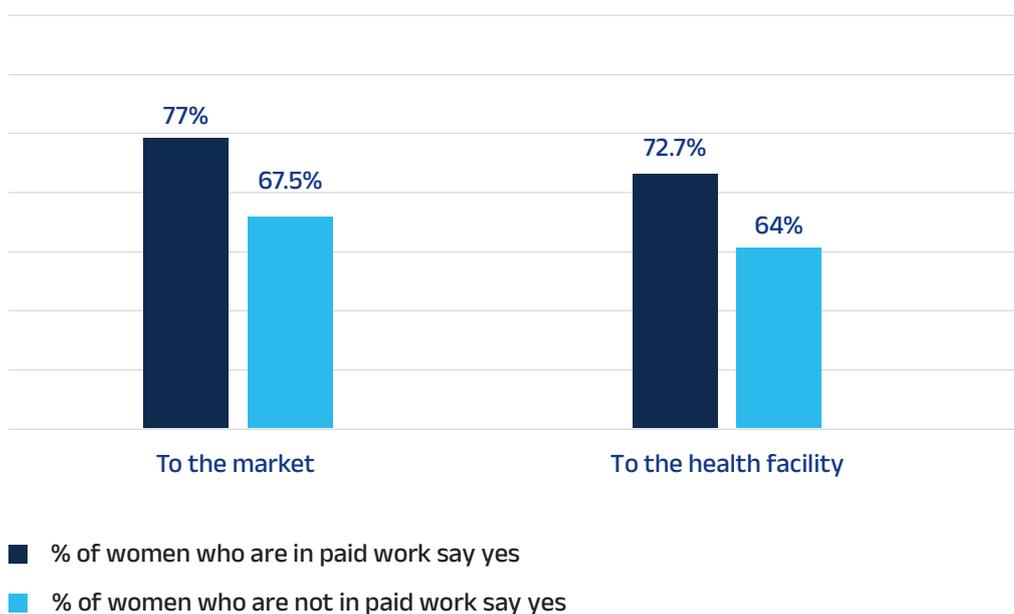


Source: Estimates based on National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, 2019-21

EXHIBIT 4

Mobility - Is A Woman Generally Allowed To Go Alone

Urban India - (Married Women 15-49 Years), 2019-21



Source: Estimates based on NFHS data, 2019-21

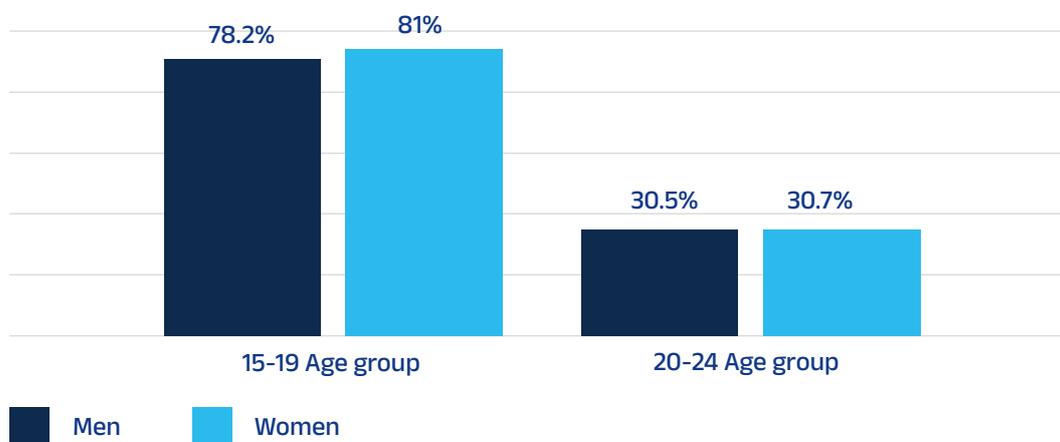
Gender parity in higher education

Educational enrollment in urban India has reached gender parity among today's youth, with young women slightly outpacing men. Our estimates show that in the 15-19 age group, 81% of girls were enrolled in education compared to 78.2% of boys in 2023-24 (**Exhibit 5**).

Similarly, in the 20-24 age bracket, women's educational participation (30.7%) is equal to men's (30.5%). Women now constitute 43% of the enrollment in the STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics & Medicine) stream at the higher education level (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2024).

EXHIBIT 5

% In Education By Age Groups, Urban India (2023-24)

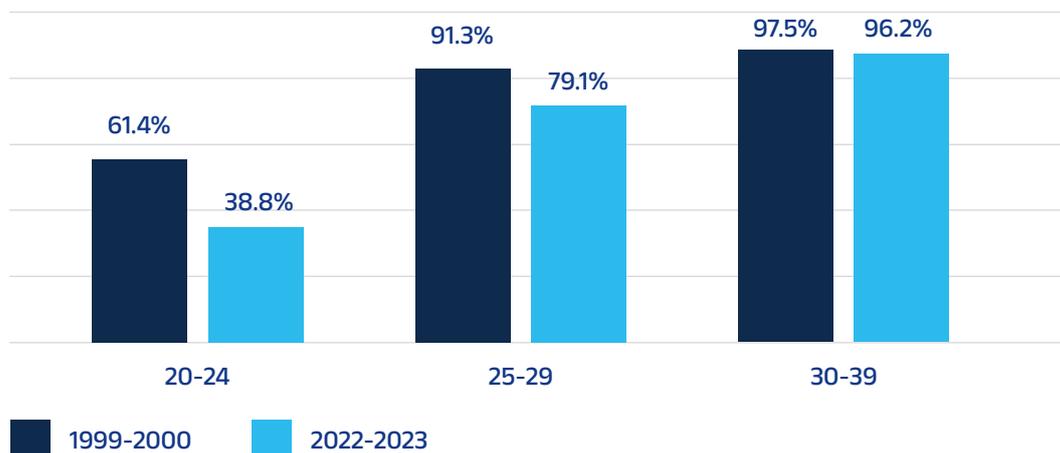


Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

With rising education levels, urban Indian women are getting married later in life. Although marriage remains a universal norm, there has been a dramatic decline in married women aged 20-24 in the last 25 years (**Exhibit 6**). Only about 39% of women in this age group were married as of 2022-23, down from over 61% in 1999-2000. Higher education, delayed marriages, and subsequent later motherhood create favourable conditions for women's employment.

EXHIBIT 6

% Married By Age Groups, Urban India Women



Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

Women's Voices

A leader's career story: The power of family and spousal support

Neha Plasterwala, a 36-year-old senior management professional with an MBA, excels in a high-skilled service industry with an underrepresentation of women. She and her architect husband, Abuzar, balance their demanding careers while raising their three-year-old daughter. After marriage, Abuzar made a conscious decision to transition to a less demanding job to ensure more time with the family.

They have established a division of responsibilities based on their strengths, with Neha handling the family's investments while Abuzar manages business investments. They believe their decision to rely on their grandparents to assist with their daughter's care has been instrumental in allowing Neha to continue her professional journey without compromising their child's well-being.

Neha's parents-in-law understand and respect her career decisions and help out with childcare. As a result, after a six-month maternity break, Neha could rejoin her job. This family support system and understanding demonstrate how women can overcome workplace challenges and excel in their careers.

- Neha Plasterwala



Part II Systemic Barriers

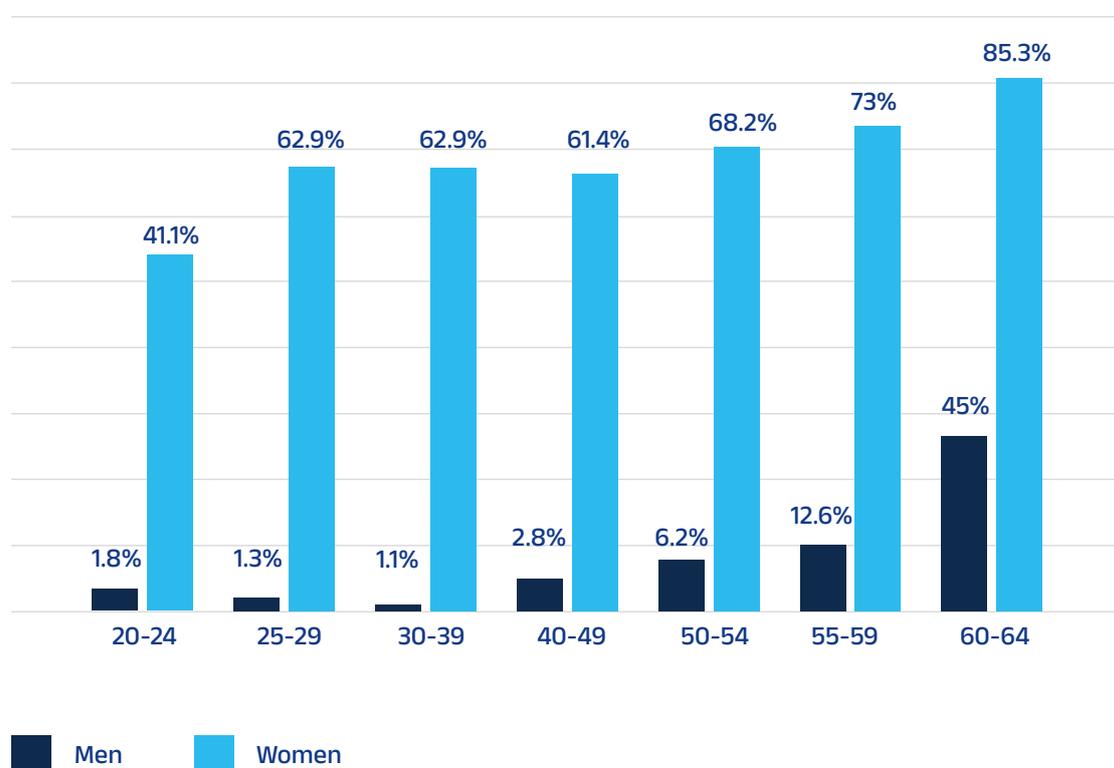
Gender norms for men

Gender norms cut both ways in India. There's a strong social expectation for men to work as family breadwinners. A mere 5.3% of working-age men were not looking for work in 2023-24, mainly due to ill health or disability (**Exhibit 7**). Men's employment remains near-universal in urban India (**Exhibit 8**). By age 30, virtually all men are employed in paid work.

In contrast, despite recent progress, 57% or over 89 million working-age women (15-64 years) in urban India in 2023-24 - more than the entire population of Germany, France, or the United Kingdom and more than three times that of Australia—remain outside the labour force, categorising themselves as 'not seeking work'. Among the women who are not looking for work are more than 19 million women with graduate-level education or higher, according to our estimates.

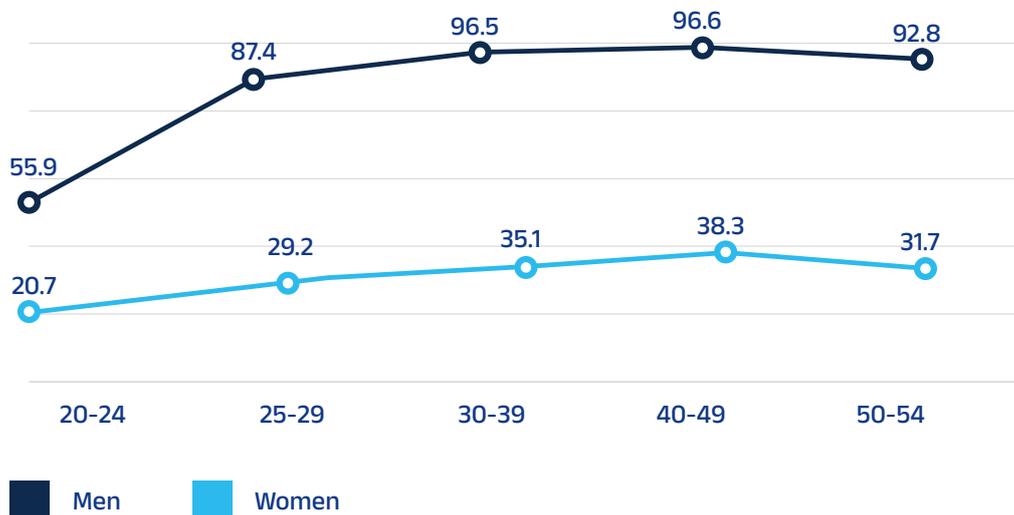
Among younger age groups where education levels are similar across genders, while 56% of men aged 20-24 are employed, only 20.7% of women in this cohort hold paid jobs. The gap widens further by age 25-29, with 87.4% of men employed versus 29.2% of women.

EXHIBIT 7
Out Of Labour Force (Not Looking For Work)
Urban India, 2023-24
(% Of 15-64 Year Old)



Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

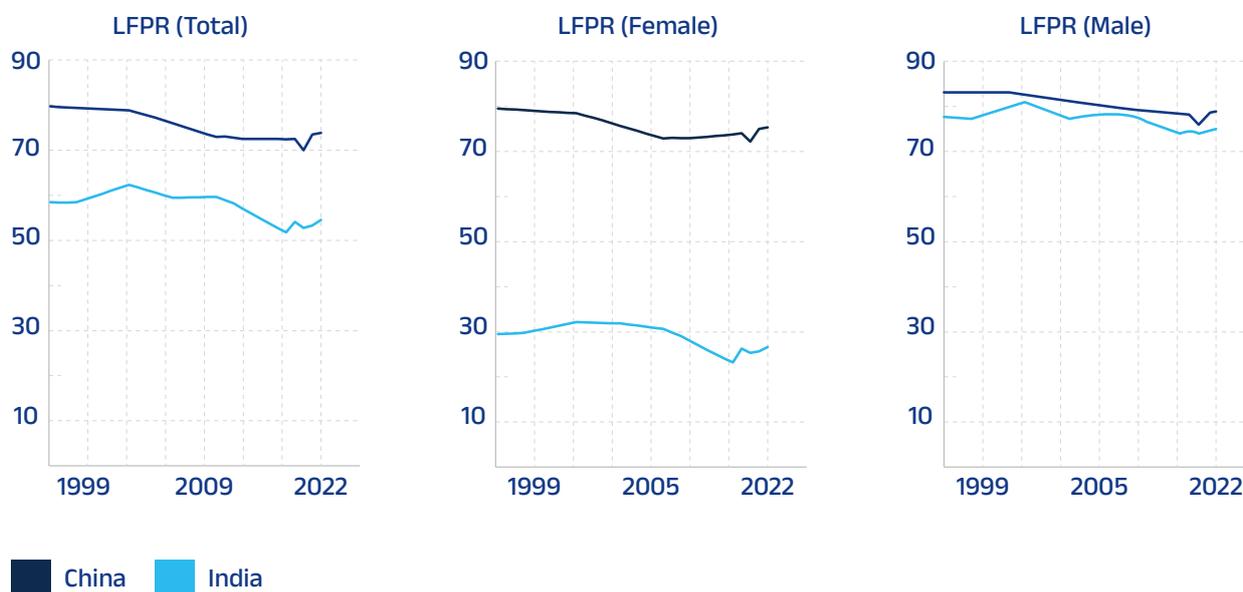
EXHIBIT 8
Employed Population, Urban India, 2023-24
% Of Age Group Population



Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

The stark gender gap in employment is in sharp contrast to China (**Exhibit 9**), which India recently surpassed as the world's most populous nation. While India is poised to have the world's largest working-age population, its significantly lower women's employment rate means China will maintain its overall workforce advantage in absolute terms for the foreseeable future (**Exhibit 10**).

EXHIBIT 9
Labour Force Participate Rate, 15-64 Age Group
% Employed Or Looking For Work To Total Population

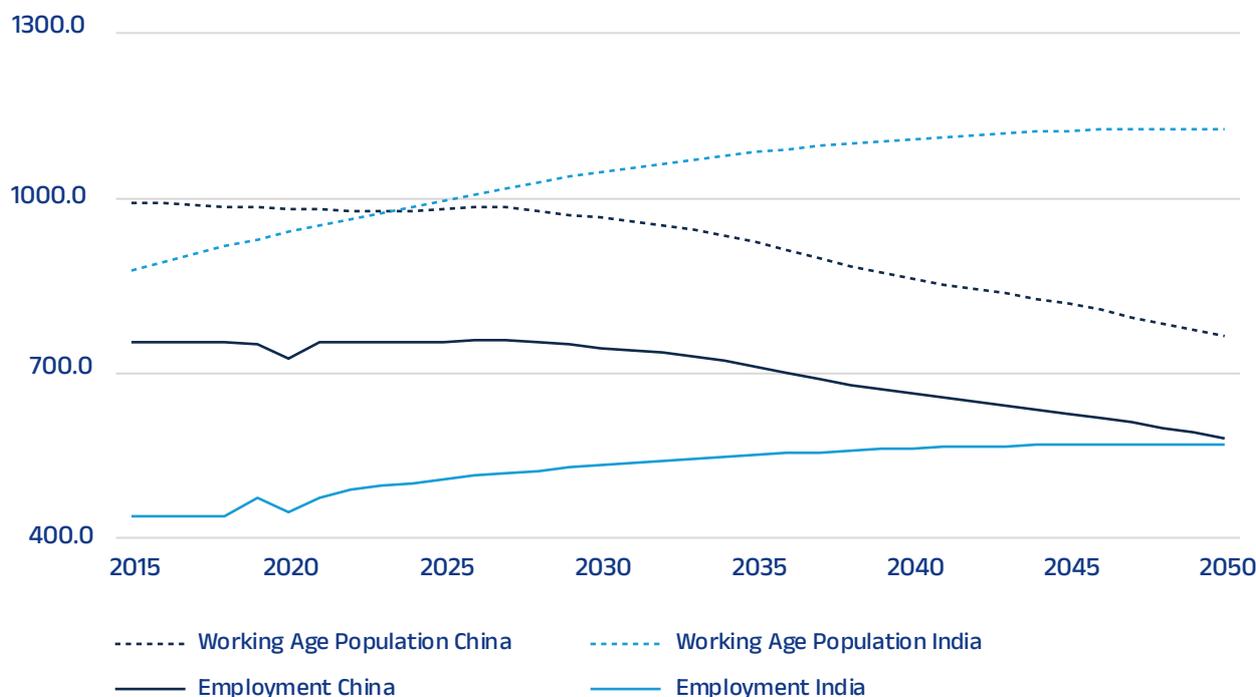


Source: World Bank Development Indicators, 2025

EXHIBIT 10

China and India: Comparison of Working Age Population and Employment

In Million



Note: Constant 2022 Labour Force Participation Rate assumed. Estimated figures from 2023 onwards

Despite recent gains in urban women's employment, a substantial gender gap in workforce participation ranks India 142nd out of 146 countries in the economic participation and opportunity subindex of the World Economic Forum's 2024 Gender Equality Index (WEF, 2024). This highlights India's continued poor performance in women's employment, particularly in urban areas, when compared to the rest of the world.

Marriage and motherhood

Marriage and motherhood drastically alter women's employment trajectories. By age 25–29, nearly 80% of urban women are married, and only 29.2% in this age group are employed. Domestic burdens intensify post-marriage as evidenced by the time-use patterns of employed women revealing stark differences based on marital status.

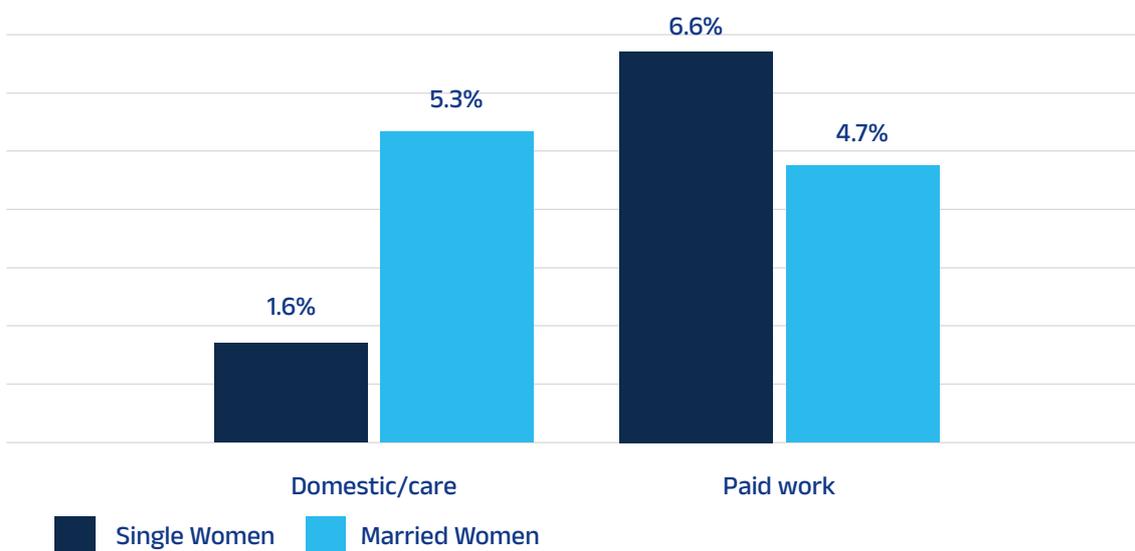
While young single women (20–29 years) who are employed (all-India) dedicate on an average 6.6 hours to paid work and only 1.6 hours to domestic duties, marriage dramatically alters this balance (**Exhibit 11**). Married women who are employed spend 5.3 hours per day on domestic and care work - more than three times that of their single counterparts and only 4.7 hours in paid work. In contrast, single men spend 25 minutes daily on household work, which increases marginally to 47 minutes after marriage. While time-use data for 2024 has been released recently, the breakdown by employment status and rural/urban location needs to be estimated from the unit-level data. Based on aggregate statistics (Government of India, 2025), gender-based time-use patterns likely remain largely unchanged from previous years.

This shift highlights the 'double burden' that married women face, as they must balance increased household responsibilities with professional work. The data suggests that marriage and associated domestic duties continue to constrain women's ability to participate fully in paid employment, even when they remain in the workforce.

EXHIBIT 11

Average Daily Time Spent By Employed Women By Martial Status, 2019-20

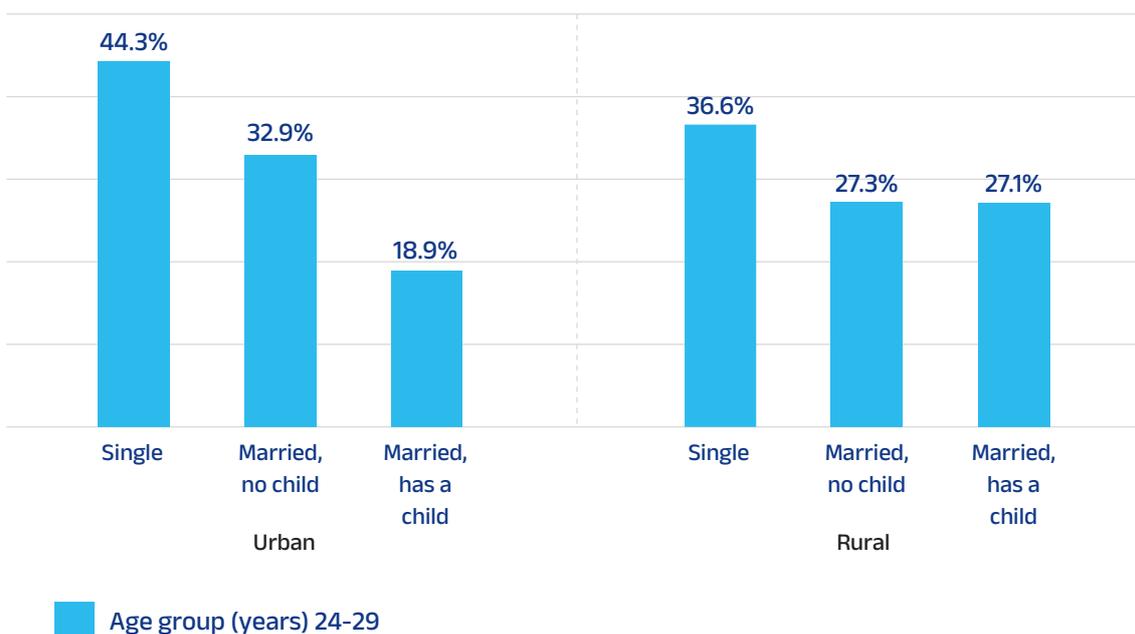
Time In Hours



Source: Based on Dhanaraj, Mahambare, and Chandra (2022)

EXHIBIT 12

% Employed Women To Age Group Population, 2019-20



Source: Mahambare, Dhanaraj, and Jadhav (2023)

The adverse impact of marriage, particularly motherhood, is significantly more pronounced in urban areas. Employment among women aged 24-29 drops dramatically from 44.3% for single women to 32.9% for married women without children (**Exhibit 12**). It plunges further to 18.9% for mothers.

Not only childcare, but women often play the primary role as caregivers to elderly family members, given that Indian families take care of their elderly within the home. There were 149 million persons aged 60 years and above in 2022 in India (IIPS and UNPF, 2023), and this is set to rise rapidly in the future, suggesting the demand for elderly care is set to rise.

Overall, despite rising higher education levels, maternal and care responsibilities create a particularly strong barrier to employment for women in urban areas. It especially points to possible challenges in balancing work with childcare in city environments. The higher 'motherhood penalty' appears more severe in urban settings, highlighting the need for supportive policies that could help women maintain workforce participation after having children.

Gender gap among 'singles' employment

While paid employment among young married women remains lower than among single women, a frequently overlooked reality is that fewer than half of unmarried young women in urban India participate in paid work (Mahambare, Dhanaraj, and Jadhav, 2023). This phenomenon stems partly from inadequate safe housing options for single women and restrictive social norms regarding women's migration for work. However, the challenges faced by single women in terms of employment remain under-studied.

Gender stereotyping at workplaces

Our survey of 140 MBA students in 2022 reveals the persistent gender biases and societal constraints women continue to face at home and in the workplace (**Exhibit 13**). At home, as women students' accounts show, traditional gender roles remain entrenched in some families, with women expected to handle domestic responsibilities like cleaning dishes while their male siblings enjoy greater freedom.

Women with higher education and prior employment experience report a feeling of discrimination in professional settings in multiple ways: women face wage disparities for equal work, encounter gender stereotypes in technical fields (particularly in software and coding), and experience different treatment from clients who tend to be 'more gentle' with female employees - a behaviour that while maybe seemingly polite, underscores underlying gender biases. These testimonials from educated, professional women demonstrate how gender stereotypes continue to shape expectations and opportunities, even among highly qualified individuals in urban, corporate settings.

EXHIBIT 13

Views Of Female Students



Women's Voices

The Necessity Of Earnings

Savita (name changed to protect privacy), a 45-year-old postgraduate professional, has successfully maintained her job while juggling family responsibilities. After her initial experience in financial services, she transitioned to the education sector thirteen years ago. Support from siblings in childcare allowed her to stay in the job and avoid career breaks beyond maternity leave and health reasons.

Though primarily responsible for household duties with occasional help from family and hired assistance, her continued employment has been driven by financial necessity rather than ambitious career goals. Based on her experience, Savita believes flexible work options could help retain more women in the workforce.

She suggests corporate insurance coverage should extend beyond the nuclear family to include dependent parents, freeing up financial resources to hire caretakers for elderly care rather than women having to leave their jobs. She has observed gender disparity in previous workplaces, noting that she believes men typically receive more opportunities and training due to assumptions about women's potential career being discontinuous for family reasons.

- Savita

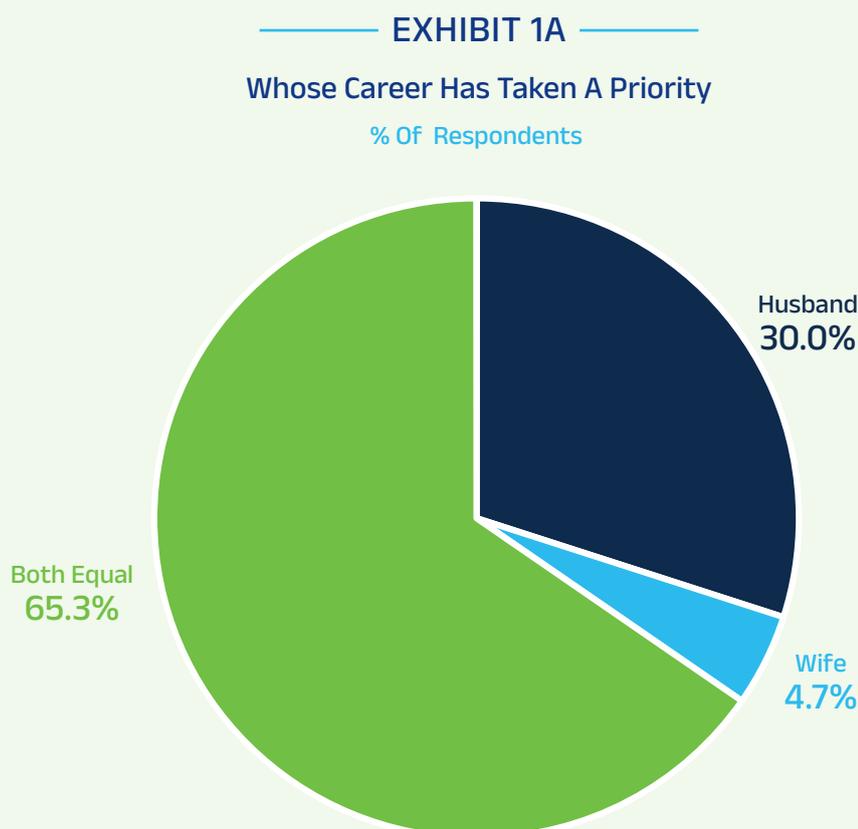
Box 1

Home-Career Dynamics: Highly Educated Young Couples

To examine how gender roles manifest in dual-earner families where both spouses are highly educated and to identify potential shifts in traditional norms, we conducted a primary survey of 165 Great Lakes alumni in February 2025.

The findings suggest an encouraging sign towards egalitarian career attitudes among dual-earning, highly educated couples. Over 65% of couples reported equal priority given to both partners' careers (**Exhibit 1A**). However, when career prioritisation is unequal, traditional patterns persist strongly—husbands' careers receive priority in 30% of marriages, while wives' careers are prioritized in only 4.67% of cases.

While all husbands in the survey were employed or were running a business, 10 wives were not in paid work, suggesting what is known as a 'leaky bucket phenomenon' where women exit the workforce despite their educational qualifications. Overall, when career compromises are necessary, even highly educated couples typically prioritise the husband's professional growth.

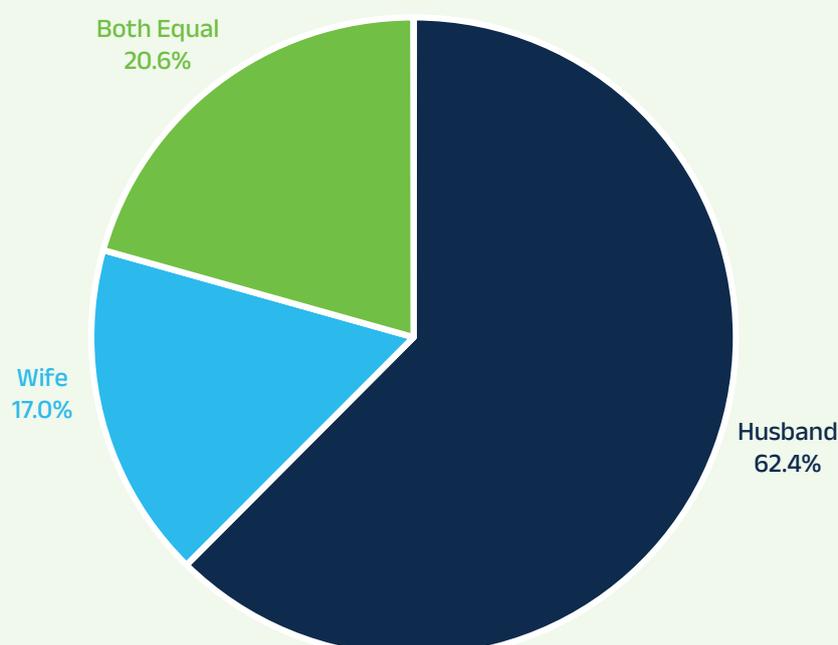


Source: The Home and Career Prioritisation Survey, February 2025

Despite a preference for equal career prioritization, in only about a fifth (20.6%) of households do both spouses contribute similarly to household income (**Exhibit 1B**). In nearly two-thirds of households (62.42%), husbands continue to be the primary earners. Despite the high educational qualifications of both partners, wives earn more than their husbands in just 17% of cases.

EXHIBIT 1B

Who Earns More
% Of Respondents



Source: The Home and Career Prioritisation Survey, February 2025
Note: 94% of families are dual earners

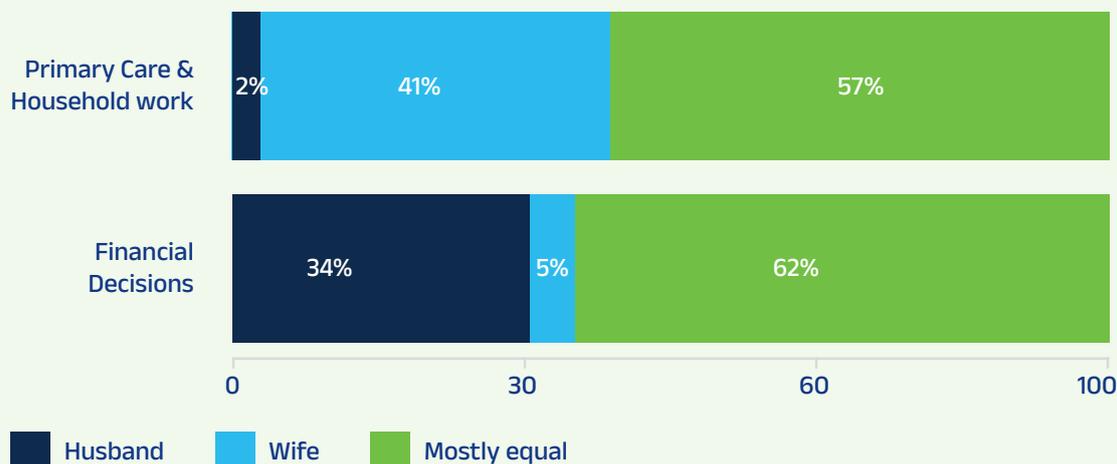
Our survey also finds that while the majority of couples report equal sharing of decision-making responsibility in household work and in making financial decisions, traditional gender roles emerge when responsibilities are not shared equally (**Exhibit 1C**).

In household work, wives remain the primary decision-makers in 41% of households, while husbands take primary responsibility in only 2% of cases. This pattern reverses for financial decisions, where husbands lead in 34% of households compared to 5% where wives are primary decision-makers. These patterns suggest that even in educated dual-career households that predominantly embrace equality, traditional gender roles continue to influence the distribution of responsibilities when tasks are not equally shared.

EXHIBIT 1C

Primarily Responsible For Taking Decisions About

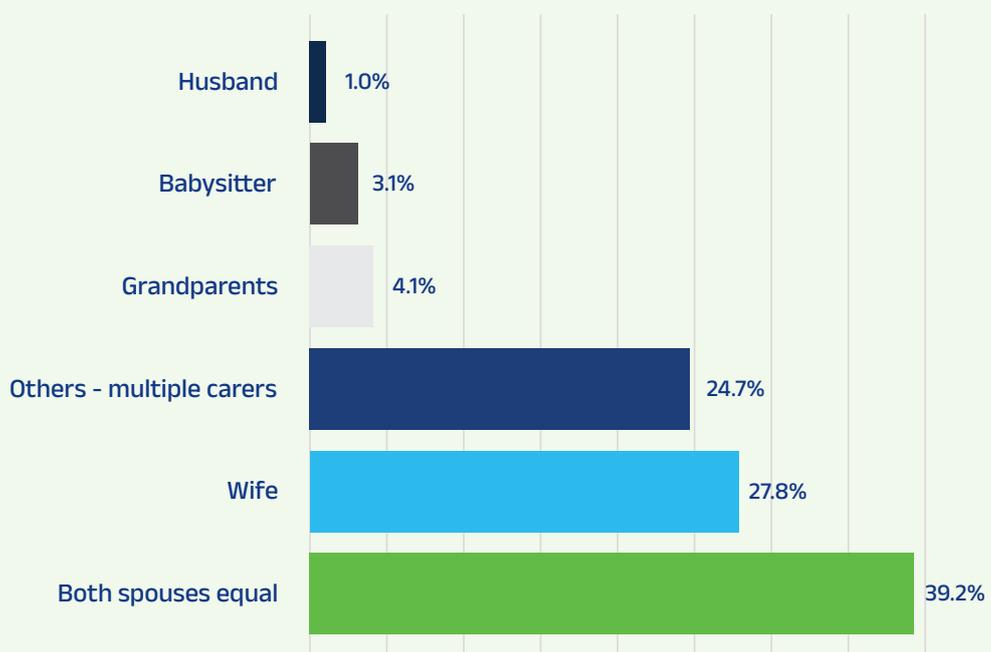
% Of Respondents



The distribution of childcare responsibilities in highly educated households reveals that when children are at home, 39% of couples report equal sharing of childcare duties (Exhibit 1D). However, in cases where one parent takes primary responsibility, it is overwhelmingly the wife (28%) rather than the husband (1%). Although grandparents are directly involved in only 4% of at-home child care, suggesting a predominantly nuclear family structure, grandparents step in as primary caregivers for grandchildren in 65% of families, highlighting the enduring importance of extended family support for young, working parents in contemporary society.

EXHIBIT 1D

Primary Childcare Responsibility At Home, %



Interestingly, while a significantly higher proportion of educated women (65%) compared to men (38%) feel that the career progression rate differs across genders despite equal merit (**Exhibit 1E**) when it comes to diversity policies, a higher proportion of women (63%) believe the policies are merit-based (**Exhibit 1F**). This suggests that women perceive their household responsibilities as a more important factor in career progression differences than workplace biases. The biggest challenge reported by our highly educated participants is the inability to spend sufficient time with families and time for themselves. (**Exhibit 1G**).

EXHIBIT 1E

Observed Different Career Progression Rate By Gender, Despite Equal Merit

% Of Respondents

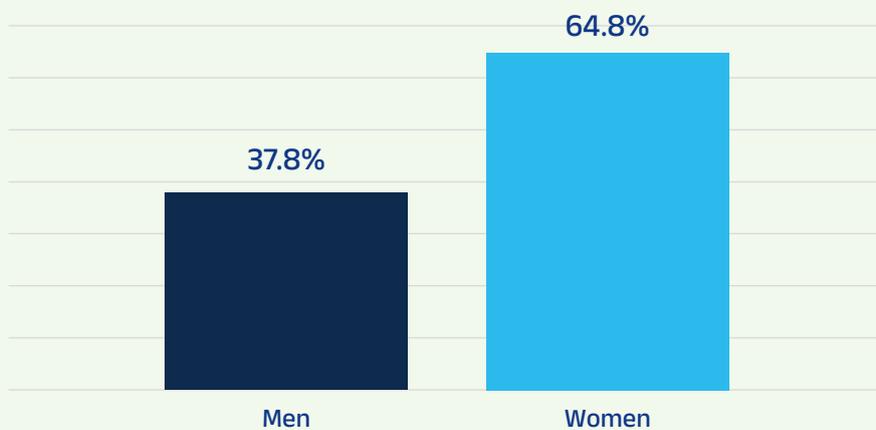
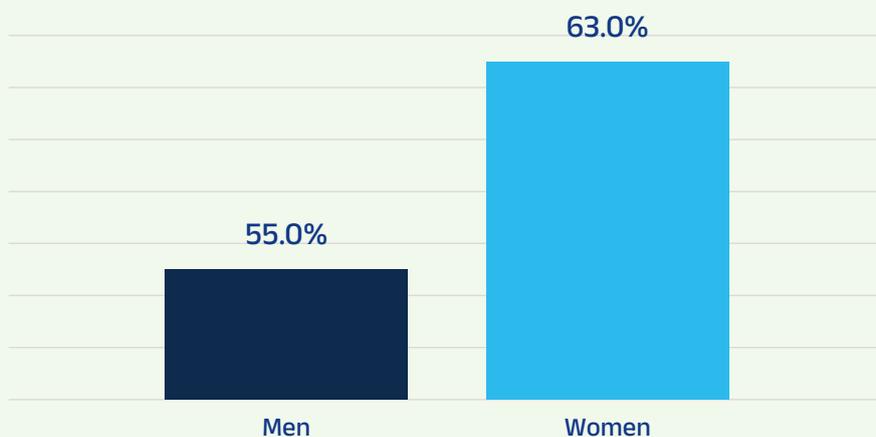


EXHIBIT 1F

Feel Promotion Policies Are Merit-Based At Their Workplace

% Of Respondents



Women's Voices

A mother's tips to thrive in the workplace

Sribala, an MBA with 11 years of experience across consulting, financial services, and fintech, took a three-year break to focus on parenting before returning to work again in 2020. She joined a well-known corporation where she initially thrived but later resigned in 2024 due to stress from leadership and culture changes.

While acknowledging that post-pandemic work-from-home arrangements offered flexibility and increased her productivity by eliminating commute time, Sribala observes that remote work also blurred work-life boundaries and affected career advancement. She notes a concerning shift from 'people-centric' to 'manager-centric' workplace cultures, making it particularly challenging for women to balance professional and personal responsibilities. She also highlights biases against women returning from maternity leave, including unfair performance evaluations.

Subjected to persistent micro-aggressions, Sribala felt she was systematically sidelined and denied high-visibility tasks. Challenging workplace bias triggered heightened scrutiny and leadership stereotyping. Sribala emphasises that women's career continuity depends significantly on family support and offers practical advice for young professionals: develop strong time management skills, assert workplace presence, and communicate career aspirations to avoid being overshadowed by male colleagues.

- **Sribala**

Box 2

The Double-Edged Sword Of Remote Work

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, remote (work-from-home or WFH) and hybrid work arrangements have become standard practice in skilled service sectors like information technology and for specific functional roles across various industries. In February 2025, we surveyed on LinkedIn to better understand the WFH experiences of employed women. Those who responded to the survey included two groups: 138 women who are either single or married without children and 93 women who have a child/children.

By comparing the experiences and perspectives of these two groups, we can better understand the unique challenges and benefits that woman encounter while working from home and how factors such as marital status and parental responsibilities may influence their experiences. Further analysis of the survey results may well reveal valuable insights that employers can use to create more supportive and inclusive remote work policies and practices.

EXHIBIT 2A

Reported Productivity While WFH Relative To Office-Based Work

% Of Respondents

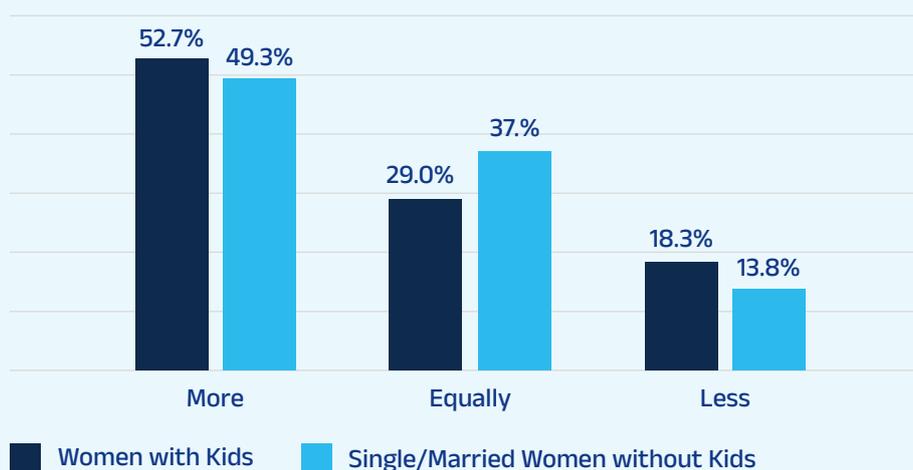
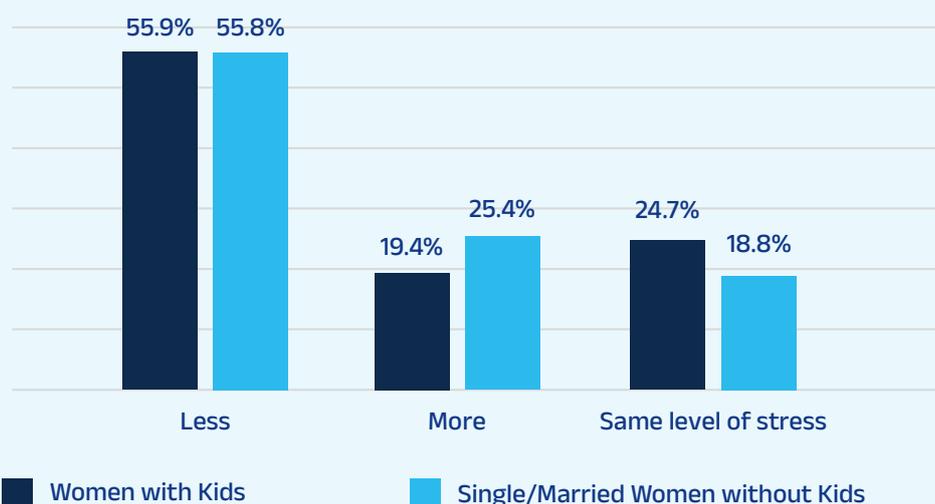


EXHIBIT 2B

Reported Stress Level While WFH Relative To Office-Based Work

% Of Respondents



We find that both groups of women reported higher productivity working from home compared to the office - 52.7% of women with kids felt more productive at home vs 49.3% of those without kids/single (**Exhibit 2A**).

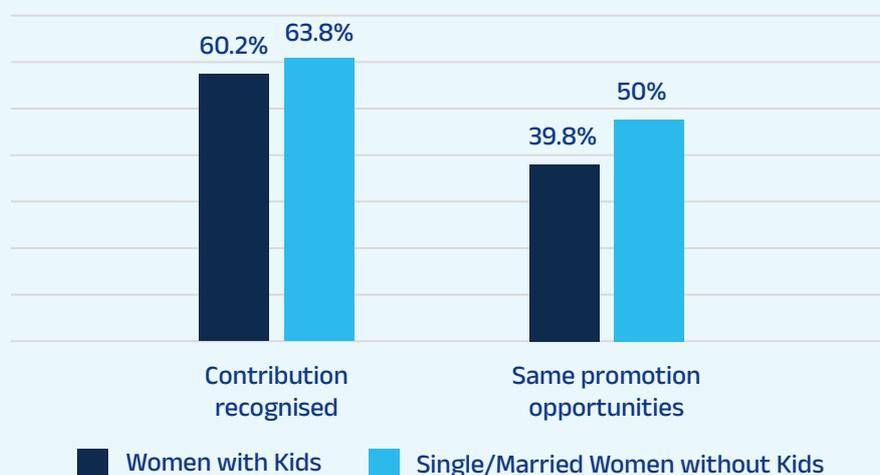
Similarly, stress levels during WFH were reported to be lower, with over 55% of both groups reporting less stress (**Exhibit 2B**). However, 1 in 4 women with kids reported higher levels of stress while working from home. The survey results, however, reveal that about 31% of mothers report spending 8 hours or more solely on office work during WFH, slightly higher than the 27% of women without children. 46% of mothers strongly or highly agree that they worry about working longer hours compared to their office-based colleagues.

Balancing work and personal responsibilities poses a significant challenge for mothers working remotely. 86% of mothers reported dedicating up to three hours of their workday to childcare duties, and a similar percentage reported spending an equal amount of time on household tasks during office hours.

Based on the survey data, only about 44% feel they have adequate childcare support, and half of the mothers strongly or highly agree that they would prefer after-school childcare facilities within the school premises. This suggests a gap in the childcare support working mothers have during WFH. It also indicates that women with children may often struggle to allocate uninterrupted time for work as they juggle multiple roles and responsibilities throughout the day.

EXHIBIT 2C

Strongly/Highly Agree
% Of Respondents



On the positive side, a majority of women, both with and without children, feel that their work is being properly acknowledged when working remotely (**Exhibit 2C**). However, when it comes to promotion opportunities, a lesser proportion of mothers (about 40%) believe they have the same chances for advancement as their office-based colleagues, while half of single/married, no kids, women strongly or highly agree that they have equal promotion prospects (**Exhibit 2C**).

Interestingly, for both groups, there is a significant gap between the percentage who feel their work is recognised and those who believe they have equal promotion opportunities compared to their in-office counterparts. This disparity is more pronounced among working mothers, with about a percentage point difference (60.2% vs 39.8%), compared to an about 14 percentage point gap for women without children (63.8% vs 50%).

In conclusion, this finding suggests that while WFH has been beneficial for many women in terms of reduced stress and increased productivity, a higher proportion of working mothers feel that their promotion prospects are hampered by it.

Part III – Hidden Barriers to Women's Employment

Residence Relocation

At the all-India level women's migration is mainly for marriage—87% of all migrant women moved their residence due to marriage, while only 0.7% migrated for work-related reasons in 2020-21 (Government of India, 2022). A study for the city of Chennai (**Exhibit 14**) done in 2018 also shows that post-marriage relocation among women is potentially another cause for a drop in women's employment.

EXHIBIT 14

Reasons Behind The Choice Of Residential Location	% Of Respondents, Chennai, 2018
Moved to husband's house after marriage	60.6
Nearer to workplace	21.2
Other	18.2
Total	100.0

Note: The survey was done in the Chennai Metropolitan Area

Source: Mahambare and Dhanaraj (2022b)

Commuting Woes for Women

Women face longer, costlier commutes due to limited access to personal vehicles; men are more likely to use private transport, while women rely on public transit (**Exhibit 15**). For example, in the city of Chennai, the commuting patterns in the IT sector reveal significant gender differences in transportation choices and costs.

While women travel slightly shorter distances, they incur notably higher commuting costs. This higher cost appears to be driven by lower access to personal vehicles and/or women's preference for cabs—about 40% of women rely on cab services compared to just 16.4% of men. Women are also twice as likely to use public transport. In contrast, men predominantly opt for personal vehicles. Given this, urban sprawl and restrictive zoning laws raise the opportunity cost of employment for women (Mahambare et al., 2025).

EXHIBIT 15

Gender-Wise Differences In Commuting, IT Sector, Chennai, 2018

	Female	Male
Average Distance, Kilometres	10.4	12.9
Average Time, Minutes	33.9	36.3
Average Cost, INR per month	2286	1861
Primary Mode of Transport		
% of Respondents		
Auto/Share auto	6.4	3.6
Bus/Train	12.8	6.3
Cab	40.4	16.4
Office provided Transport	6.4	2.7
Family member drops/Walk/Cycle	6.4	2.7
Car	8.4	20.9
Two Wheeler	19.1	47.3
Total	100	100

Source: Mahambare and Dhanaraj (2022b)

Employed Women in Urban India Face Higher Intimate Partner Violence, Except Among Educated

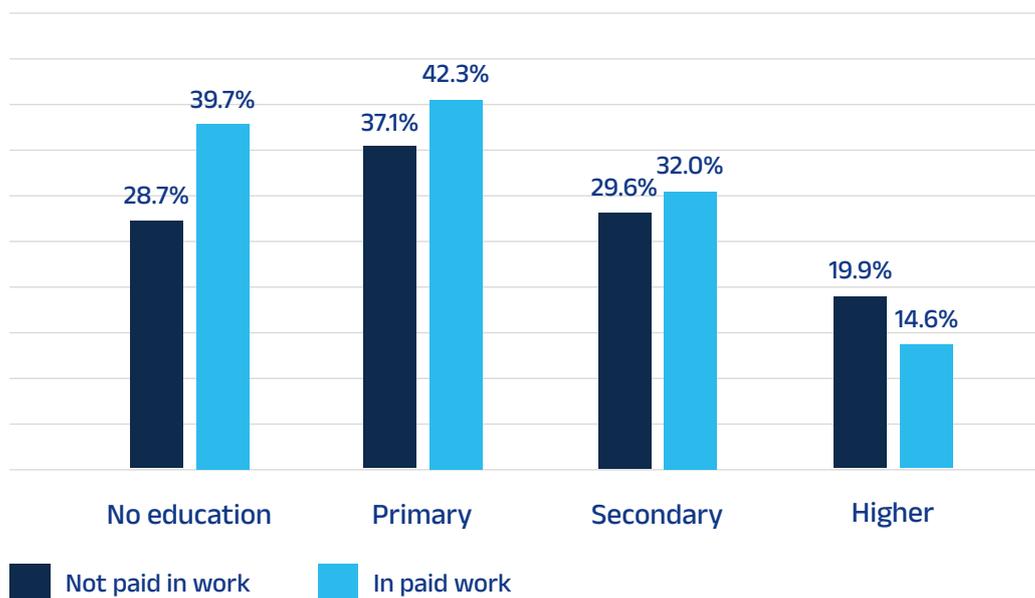
Another concern for women in paid work is the complex relationship between education, employment, and intimate partner violence (IPV) among urban married women (**Exhibit 16**). While women with lower education levels face higher rates of IPV, regardless of their employment status, the IPV rates are higher among those in paid work than their non-working counterparts, suggesting that employment might initially increase women's vulnerability in less educated households, possibly due to challenges to traditional gender roles.

This pattern reverses dramatically with higher education (≥ 16 years of formal education) - among women with higher education, those in paid work experience significantly lower rates of IPV (14.6%) compared to non-working women (19.9%). This indicates that education, combined with economic independence, provides stronger protection against IPV.

EXHIBIT 16

% Of Married Women Who Faced Intimate partner violence
In The Last 12 Months, 2019-21, Urban India

15-49 Years



Source: Estimates based on the NFHS 5 data

In the KPMG survey (2019), 27% of IPV victims in India said that they sometimes missed work. 31% of victims agreed that their quality of work decreased, and 35% found it difficult to concentrate on work. A report by the United Nations Development Programme in India in partnership with Samhita Social Ventures (2020) found that only two companies out of the top 100 companies listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange report are working on issues related to domestic violence.

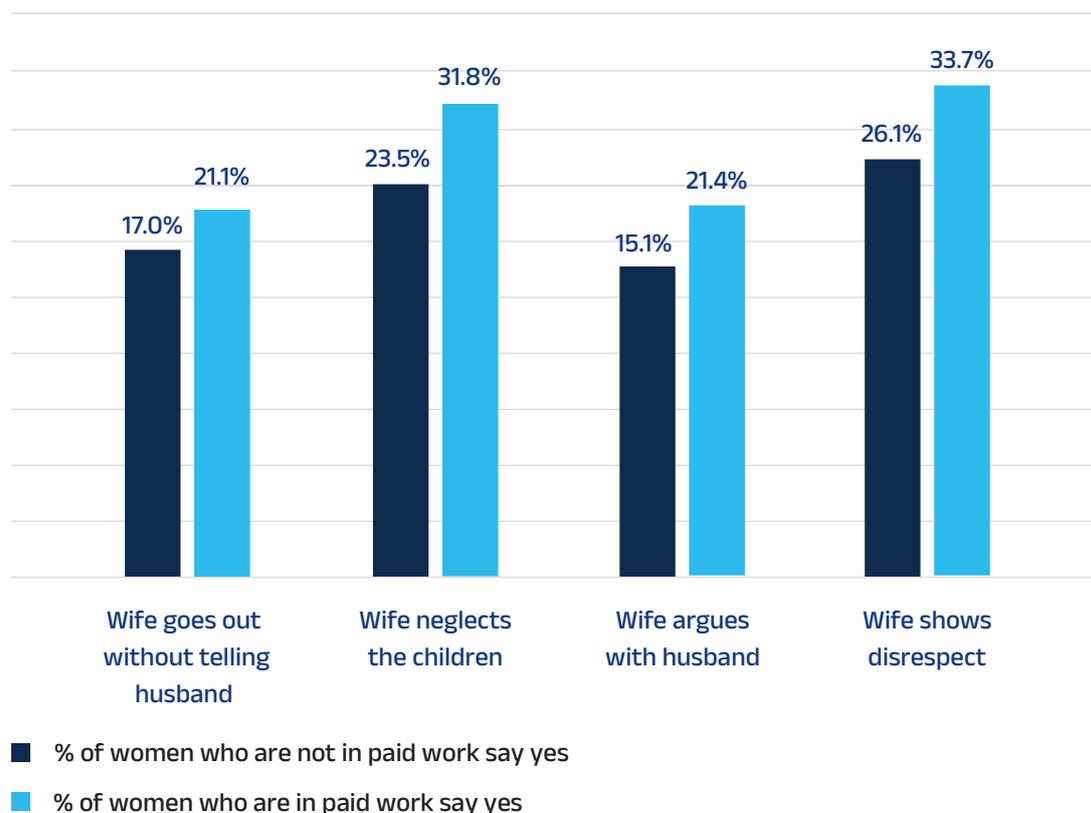
Higher Internalised Acceptance of Abuse among Employed Women

Paradoxically, employed urban women show higher acceptance of domestic violence (**Exhibit 17**), challenging simplified assumptions about economic empowerment and attitudes toward gender-based violence. Based on the 2019-20 data employed women are more likely to justify wife-beating: about 34% accept it for showing disrespect (compared to 26% of non-working women), 32% for neglecting children (vs 23.5%), and about 21% for going out without permission and for arguing with husband.

The higher acceptance of domestic violence among working women might reflect internalised patriarchal norms, possibly intensified by the 'double burden' of managing both work and domestic responsibilities, or could indicate that women who work face greater social pressure to demonstrate adherence to traditional gender norms to compensate for their economic independence (Dhanaraj and Mahambare, 2022).

EXHIBIT 17

Woman's Attitude - % Justifying Wife Beating, Urban India, 2019-21 15-49 Years



Source: Estimates based on NFHS 5 data

Women's Voices

On her own terms: balancing family, career, and self-fulfilment

Swadhitya, a 31-year-old engineer with an MBA, chose to take a six-year break after marriage, of her own volition, before beginning her career—a decision that she believes strengthened family bonds and deepened her understanding of her spouse. When her son turned one, she felt confident leaving him with her supportive in-laws, allowing her to commit to her professional life. Though initially struggling with guilt, her family's encouragement helped her overcome these feelings. At home, she contributes to family responsibilities by handling dinner preparation, weekend cooking, vacation planning, and festival celebrations, creating a balanced arrangement that works well for her situation.

While Swadhitya has limited remote work opportunities, given the nature of her work, her husband works from home three days a week, often putting in longer hours than on office days. In her previous workplace, she faced gender stereotyping and judgments from colleagues about leaving her one-year-old at home. She likes to maintain clear boundaries, leave work concerns at the office, and encourage others to understand their family dynamics better and pursue personally empowering and fulfilling careers.

– Swadhitya



Part IV – Implications and Policy Suggestions

Three key stakeholders hold the power to raise women's employment: society at large, the government through public policy, and the corporate sector through their workplace policies. In this section, we suggest critical interventions that both government and businesses can implement to dismantle barriers and foster inclusive environments where women can thrive professionally.

Many of these policy suggestions flow from the findings presented in this report, which are based on the secondary data, our three primary surveys, and the case studies. Some other suggestions, while not derived directly from our analysis, are critical for raising women's employment, and hence, we mention those as well.

These strategic interventions would deliver benefits far beyond individual women and their families—they represent a crucial economic imperative for India. Without fully engaging women in the workforce, the country forfeits a substantial portion of its demographic dividend, leaving untapped talent and productivity essential for sustained economic growth.

1. Public Policy Measures

An effective policy framework for increasing women's employment requires three distinct approaches: first, comprehensive measures that enhance employment opportunities for women across all demographics; second, targeted initiatives supporting mothers with young children; and third, specialised programs assisting middle-aged women seeking to re-enter the workforce after career interruptions.

Public Policies to Support Women's Employment of All Ages

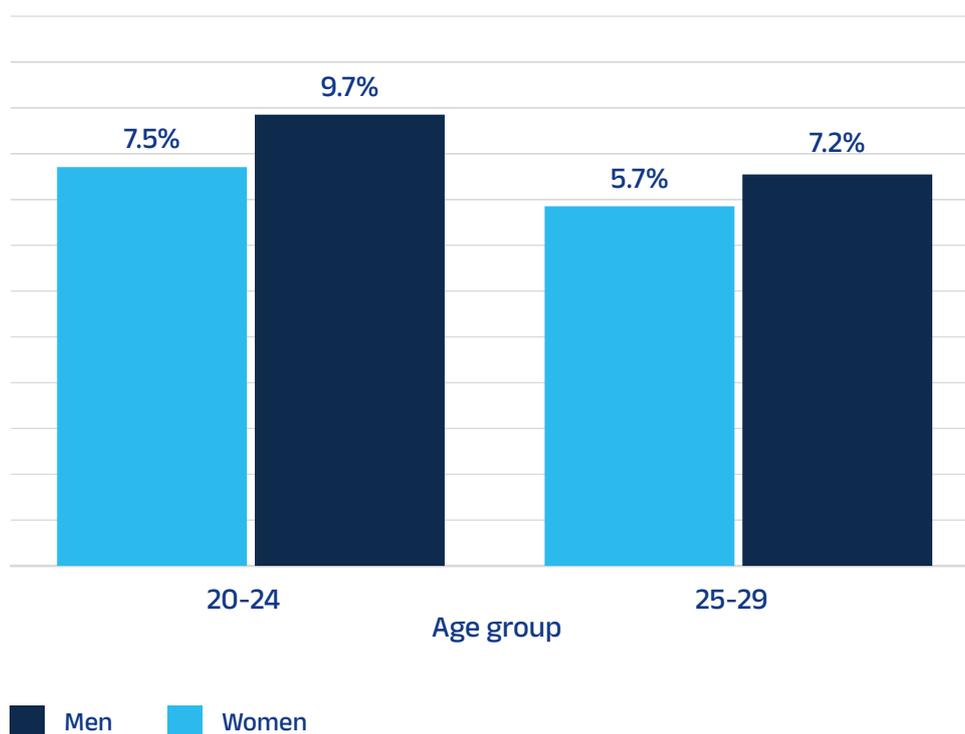
a) Scaling job creation

Men are true allies in women's empowerment, including supporting women's participation in paid work. In India, social norms for men continue to be stringent—they are expected to be the main breadwinners for their families. Women's employment will not rise enough if it comes at the expense of men's jobs. These norms will gradually evolve, and such cultural shifts occur slowly. Therefore, the central imperative remains expanding overall job creation to accommodate increasing workforce participation from all demographics.

In the 20-24 age group, male unemployment was nearly 10% compared to 7.5% for women in 2023-24, while in the 25-29 age group, the unemployment rates decreased but maintained the gender gap (**Exhibit 18**). The employment data presents a challenging outlook: given that young men struggle to find jobs even when women's job-seeking rates are low, a further increase in women's workforce participation could strain the likelihood of young men securing good-quality jobs.

EXHIBIT 18

Unemployment Rate by Gender and Age Group, Urban India, 2023-24



Source: Estimates based on PLFS data

Artificial Intelligence to Aid or Hinder Job Creations?

There is a growing risk that in some sectors, such as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), deploying generative AI for routine cognitive tasks through chatbots could lead to significant job declines over the next decade (Economic Survey, 2024-25). However, sectors such as healthcare, education, and caregiving, where human interaction is not entirely replaceable, are traditionally women-centric sectors in terms of employment.

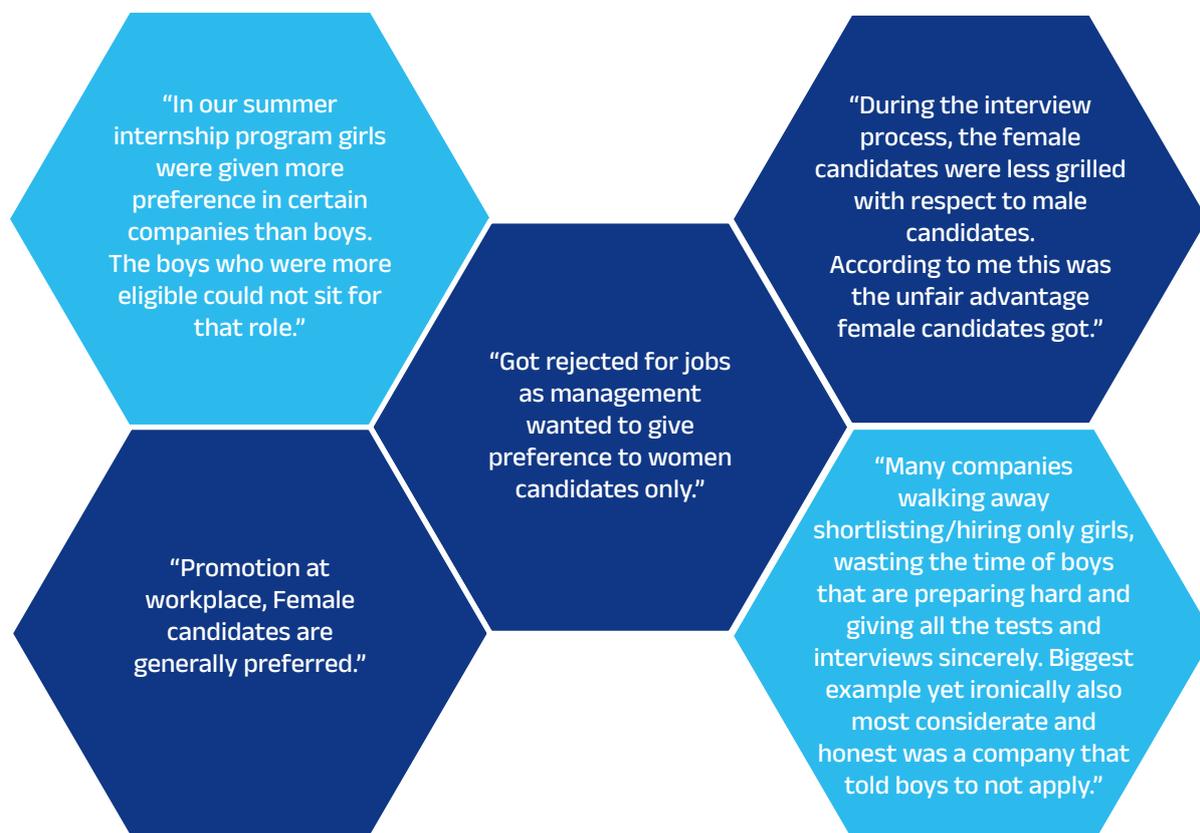
Rather than the sectors, the right question to ask now is which skills, and not jobs, are safe from technical advances (Mahambare, 2015, 2023). Those who can complement technology will be in greater demand and command a premium in coming years, and hence, women must develop TAP skills – ‘Technology’ Ready, ‘Analytics’ Nerd, and ‘People Skills’. (Mahambare, 2015). The government must ensure that India’s education system, by implementing the new education policy in 2020, allows girls and boys to develop these skills. Otherwise, there is a danger of growing diversity backlash.

Our survey of MBA students in 2022 revealed that the rising trend in urban women's employment may be triggering signs of resistance similar to the 'diversity backlash' observed in other countries. It unmasked growing discontent among young, educated men who perceive certain companies as favouring women candidates in hiring (**Exhibit 19**).

Whether this perception is grounded in reality or not, such sentiments among male workers could fuel increasing pushback against workplace gender diversity initiatives. This emerging tension highlights the need to manage gender inclusion efforts while addressing the concerns of all workforce segments.

EXHIBIT 19

Views Of Male Students



Source: Great Lakes Internal Survey, 2022

b) City planning and urban infrastructure

Urban designs

Given that women face higher time trade-offs between work and family responsibilities, jobs must be more accessible and nearer to home. Reduce urban sprawl to shorten commute times and implement mixed-use zoning to bring workplaces closer to residential areas, expanding job accessibility. The city and town authorities need to ensure widespread access to clean, safe public restrooms - a basic necessity that significantly impacts women's mobility and comfort in public spaces.

Affordable housing solutions

Create accessible, affordable, safe, and clean urban rental housing for families and especially for single working women, similar to successful models like Tamil Nadu's Annai Ladies Hostel Scheme. Such safe, reliable housing options will enable women to migrate for employment opportunities.

Gender-responsive transportation

Develop reliable, well-connected public transit options and secure last-mile connectivity solutions to alleviate commuting challenges and safety concerns. This is particularly crucial given that a high proportion of urban employed women rely on public transport for their daily commute.

Reliable provision of power and water

Despite 68% of urban households reporting access to piped water for drinking purposes (Rukmini, 2024), the continuous 24/7 in-home water supply remains limited. This deficiency disproportionately increases women's domestic workload and restricts their ability to utilise time-saving appliances like washing machines. In the case of electricity, studies show that an interrupted and unstable power supply adversely affects household purchases of consumer durables such as refrigerators, which help lower women's housework (Dhanaraj, Mahambare, Munjal, 2018).

c) Behavioural interventions to promote the sharing of household and care responsibilities

There is an urgent need for growing collaboration between governments, private healthcare providers, and NGOs, especially in urban areas, to expand quality elderly care service delivery. This will help retain women in paid work and can unlock the economic potential of India's economy, creating business opportunities and generating jobs for men and women.

Governments can draw inspiration from effective corporate campaigns like Ariel's 'Share the Load', which shifts the conversation from men merely 'helping' women with housework to establishing equal partnership in domestic responsibilities. Kerala's progressive approach in school textbooks, which depicts fathers and other family members participating in kitchen duties, offers another valuable model for challenging entrenched gender roles.

To accelerate this cultural shift, policymakers should consider leveraging celebrity endorsements, highlighting social proof through success stories, and implementing more assertive promotional strategies that normalize the equitable division of household labour.

d) Behavioural and legal interventions to lower domestic violence

As noted earlier, higher educational attainment among women reduces intimate partner violence (IPV) risk among employed women—a critical finding given that employed married women in urban India face elevated IPV rates compared to their counterparts who are not in paid work. There is a need for comprehensive interventions beginning in early childhood that address women's internalised guilt, challenge the unrealistic 'perfect wife and mother' narrative, and develop crucial confidence and negotiation skills that enable women to establish healthier home dynamics.

e) Other measures

Our report has not specifically covered the growing role of women entrepreneurship in urban areas, especially supported by social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, and women factory workers who also require appropriate policy support to overcome the barriers they face. For example, artificial intelligence tools could empower women entrepreneurs through low-cost marketing, inventory management, and remote work platforms. However, women may need training and support to develop capabilities to use such tools.

Public policies to support young mothers' employment

School-based childcare

In urban India, mothers face significant barriers to full-time employment due to the misalignment between school and workplace hours, at least up to primary schooling. Further, while the laws mandate that companies with more than 50 employees to provide a creche facility on premises, transporting children from schools to mothers' workplaces or private childcare facilities remains challenging, requiring dedicated personnel.

Our survey of educated women revealed that even among those with work-from-home options, approximately half preferred school-based aftercare programs rather than separate childcare facilities, which is an already familiar and safe environment and will eliminate the need for additional space/land. The governments could encourage pilots to be run in schools for paid after-school childcare.

Childcare vouchers

A more flexible approach to childcare support could involve government policies allowing corporations to provide childcare vouchers instead of mandating on-site crèches. This voucher system would allow parents to select childcare options that best align with their specific needs and conveniences. The cost implications of such a change in policy need to be worked out.

Public policies to support older adult women's employment

While our findings show that the employment-to-population ratio among women aged 30 to 49 years is the highest in urban India, it still has not reached 40%. Most women in this age group would have had a maternity and childcare break when they were younger and faced challenges re-entering skilled service industries due to rapid technological changes, including AI, which demand continuous learning and adaptation.

The central government has established an online learning platform, Swayam Central, aimed at skilling and re-skilling. Similarly, several of the world's top educational institutions and, increasingly, AI tools can be used effectively for self-learning by anyone. However, greater awareness and information dissemination about these resources are needed. Beyond the skill gaps and acquisition of new skills listed earlier, these women also encounter difficulties in job searching and matching their qualifications to appropriate positions.

Women's Voices

The 10-year pause: from childcare to career

Lavanya, a 40-year-old postgraduate living in a nuclear family, says she felt the societal pressure to have children immediately after marriage. Her journey back to work was delayed due to fertility complications and childcare responsibilities. She believes a joint family setup would have helped her better balance work and family obligations. Fortunately, her current workplace offers family-friendly policies, including work-from-home options and the ability to bring her child to the office.

Lavanya likes to maintain family harmony through structured routines—meal plans, dedicated study time, movie nights, nature outings, and celebrating small achievements. Her advice to others navigating similar challenges is refreshingly simple: "Just be yourself, learn to ask for help when needed, share responsibilities with trusted individuals rather than shouldering everything alone, and always have a plan in place."

- Lavanya



II. Corporate Policy Measures

a) Inclusive policies for all employees

Corporate initiatives to advance women's professional development would be most effective when they foster collaboration, inclusion, and mutual support among all employees.

Corporates should develop clear promotion pathways based on measurable achievements and merit-based criteria, avoiding diversity backlash from male employees, establish mentorship programs, and confidence building and negotiation skills training irrespective of gender and involve male employees in gender diversity initiatives

b) Fair Recruitment & Career Progression

Implement blind recruitment processes and standardised performance metrics to eliminate unconscious bias at the time of hiring. Having been out of paid work for several years, these women face significant gaps in their resumes, which is often a disadvantage while seeking employment. Similarly, negotiating fair compensation, unconscious bias in hiring, and stereotypes about women's commitment and capabilities after a career break can impact their chances of employment.

Corporate leadership and boardroom gender diversity have improved in recent years, driven partly by regulatory mandates. Shattering the glass ceiling completely requires greater policy transparency, genuine corporate commitment, and initiatives that prepare and empower women to step into top executive roles.

c) Childcare Support Expansion

The Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act, 2017, mandates that employers with 50 or more employees provide crèche facilities on their premises. However, only a few states have fully implemented the mandate, and in most cases, the facility is provided only to female employees. Such childcare facilities could be extended to all employees regardless of gender, potentially enabling spouses of male employees to maintain or pursue employment opportunities.

d) Crisis Support Framework

Urban Indian women in paid employment face elevated risks of intimate partner violence (IPV), resulting in two potential concerns. First, many women either abandon their careers or avoid entering the workforce altogether. Second, employed women often endure domestic abuse in silence.

IPV not only inflicts physical and psychological harm on women but also negatively impacts businesses through increased absenteeism and reduced productivity among female employees. Leading Indian corporates could study the prevention of domestic violence and abuse policy guide

e) Recognise the unique challenges of remote work

While WFH allows women to manage both paid work and care/housework, our survey finds many women worry about juggling both simultaneously, work longer hours, and feel that their chances of promotion are diminished because of WFH. Hybrid work structures or a provision of coming to the office may also help women network better. Organisations also need to be inclusive when it comes to flexible work and work-from-home policies, which should benefit all employees regardless of gender and indirectly benefit spouses of male employees with young kids.

f) Easing Corporate 'greedy' job culture

Greedy jobs, the term coined by Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin (2023), demand employees' constant availability and extended hours, undermining both women's career advancement and employment and family well-being, as men also are trapped in such roles. While access to remote work has become more common in recent years, corporate leadership in India needs to critically reassess workplace norms that prioritise presence over productivity, especially at the middle management levels, where the 'leaky bucket phenomenon exists for Indian women.

To conclude,

Women's employment trends in urban India show promising signs, though progress remains measured. While urban women are breaking barriers in education, employment, and leadership, several structural and hidden barriers persist. Addressing these challenges demands collaborative action: corporations rethinking workplace flexibility, governments overhauling infrastructure, and households redefining gender roles.

The path forward hinges on transforming incremental gains into systemic change to ensure women's employment rises but also fosters societal and corporate environments that promote women's overall well-being without demanding extraordinary 'superwomen' efforts.

True transformation requires men to be equal stakeholders in women's economic and social advancement - at home, in workplaces, and in society. While policy discussions often focus on women-centric solutions, the role of male support and advocacy remains underemphasised yet crucial.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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WOMEN *at* WORK