AXIS BANK

The Missing Half

Women and India's Growth Challenge

Neelkanth Mishra, Prateek Ancha & Vipul Jindal

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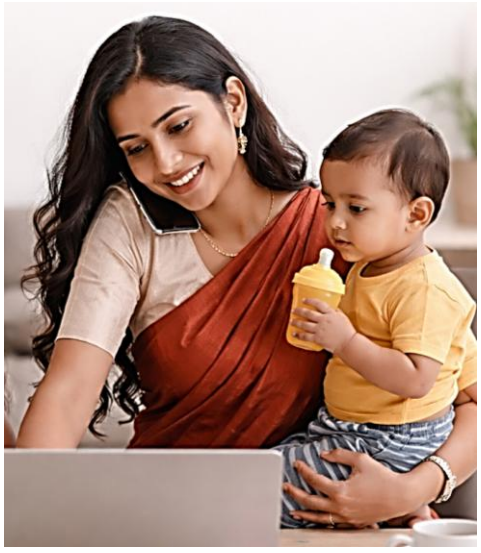


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rapidly falling fertility is narrowing the window available for rapid growth in India. We find that the necessary growth acceleration may not be possible without a substantial rise in female labour force participation rates (FLFPR). It is a necessary condition for 'Viksit Bharat'.

India's FLFPR remains among the lowest in the G20. Worse, a high number of those employed are in agriculture and unpaid or low productivity self employment. Even among those who get paid, 60% of work arrangements are informal, with low participation among urban, educated women.

To understand both the opportunity and the limits of policy, we place India within a longer global arc. India is currently near the bottom of the 'U' seen when countries are mapped on FLFPR vs. average incomes. High participation rates in poor countries fall as extreme poverty ends. Participation rises again with incomes as women begin to participate in the workforce for higher paying jobs. India is indeed climbing out of the bottom but not fast enough.

We therefore conducted extensive secondary research on trends in advanced economies, which, over the past century, have experienced a profound expansion in women's economic roles. Given the paucity of primary research on FLFPR in India, we also conducted a proprietary survey of around 11,000 college educated women across 42 Indian cities, all of whom worked at some point.

In developed countries, major bottlenecks in FLFPR have been addressed by shifts in demand for women's labour, its supply, as well as in cultural norms. Changes in type of work (more services), removal of legal barriers and reducing workplace bias raised demand, and household automation, education, out-of-home safety and reproductive control boosted supply. These would not have occurred without shifts in cultural norms, which were accelerated by war-time mobilization. Even high-income economies though continue to see gender gaps in pay later

Given the paucity of primary research on FLFPR in India, we conducted a proprietary survey of around 11,000 college educated women across 42 Indian cities, all of whom worked at some point.

in careers, mostly attributable to the 'motherhood penalty': differences in earnings emerge primarily after childbirth.

This structural lens helps understand India's challenges. There has been substantial progress on the supply-side, like inputs that reduce time spent on household work: *pucca* houses, dense energy access (electrification, cooking gas) and piped water. Higher-education enrolment ratios for women, necessary to reduce the 'marriage penalty', are rising and are now mostly at par with men in most states.

However, there are demand side constraints like too few accessible non-farm jobs (for men and women), fewer jobs in sectors that are globally women-dominated, and several remaining supply-side constraints like unpaid care, safety concerns, and social norms that suppress participation.

For the cohort we surveyed (white-collar, English-speaking: at the top of the social pyramid), the survey reveals a clear transition to "Career AND Family", and a shift in aspirations to viewing paid work as a career and as central to their identity, not merely a source of income. Yet they face many challenges, mostly like those in the west, including cultural norms (less so among younger respondents).

Raising FLFPR meaningfully, in our view, will require investment in childcare infrastructure, safer and more accessible urban mobility, formalisation of flexible and part time work, credible return to work pathways, women's skills programmes, and deeper leadership pipelines.

MD & CEO STATEMENT

Women, Work, And The Future Of India's Economy

Amitabh Chaudhry
Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer

I am delighted to present the latest study from Axis Bank economics research. In this study, our team explores why women's economic participation has become one of the most consequential issues shaping India's growth trajectory. As India's demographic transition accelerates and the window for labour-led growth narrows, the question is no longer whether greater female participation is desirable, but whether sustained economic expansion is feasible without it.

To place India's experience in perspective, the study then draws on a century of global evidence. The economic integration of women in advanced economies was neither automatic nor linear; it unfolded through distinct waves driven by technological change, institutional reform, reproductive autonomy, and the evolution of careers. Importantly, that experience also highlights what remains unfinished. Even in high-income societies, gender gaps now persist not at entry into the workforce, but later in life, shaped by motherhood, job design, and non-linear rewards to time and continuity.

To help inform the discussion for Corporate India, Axis Bank has taken a lead commissioning a proprietary survey of around 11,000 college graduate women across 42 Indian cities.

The survey-based evidence captures how urban, educated Indian women navigate work, family, safety, identity, and aspiration today.

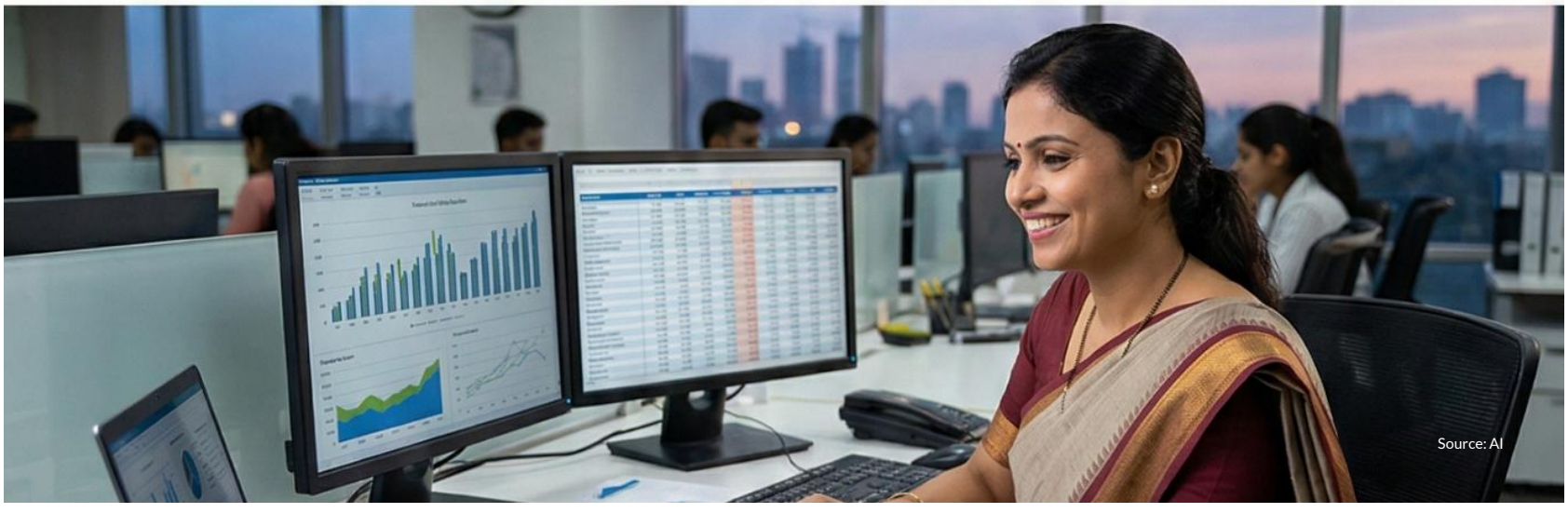
These perspectives ground the macro and historical analysis in contemporary realities, revealing where constraints are binding and where progress is already under way. The "bottom up" insights from the study illuminate existing academic work in the field.

Finally, these insights are translated into a set of practical priorities. Raising women's participation meaningfully will require coordinated action: expanding care infrastructure, redesigning work and career pathways, improving safety and mobility, enabling re-entry after career breaks, and strengthening leadership pipelines. These are not social add-ons; they are economic investments with material implications for productivity, growth, and resilience.

Taken together, this study frames women's economic participation as a central pillar of India's long-term growth, rather than a distributional consideration. I trust readers will find it informative and thought-provoking.

INDIA'S JOURNEY: A LONG ROAD AHEAD

For India to 'get rich before it gets old', it must quickly get women into productive and paid work. Its female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) remains one of the lowest in the G20. Much of the increase in recent years has been confined to agriculture and unpaid low-productivity self-employment or in paid informal work. India is climbing out of the bottom of the 'U' shaped global curve for FLFPR versus per capita GDP, but not fast enough for its growth aspirations. Several supply-side bottlenecks have been/are being fixed: inputs to speed up housework (like electrification, LPG, piped water) and education (improve skills, reduce the marriage penalty). However, inadequate demand for work, out-of-home safety, and adverse cultural norms (including lack of role models) continue to be challenges.



Source: AI

“All hands on-deck” to grow rich before we grow old

Demographics change faster than Economies

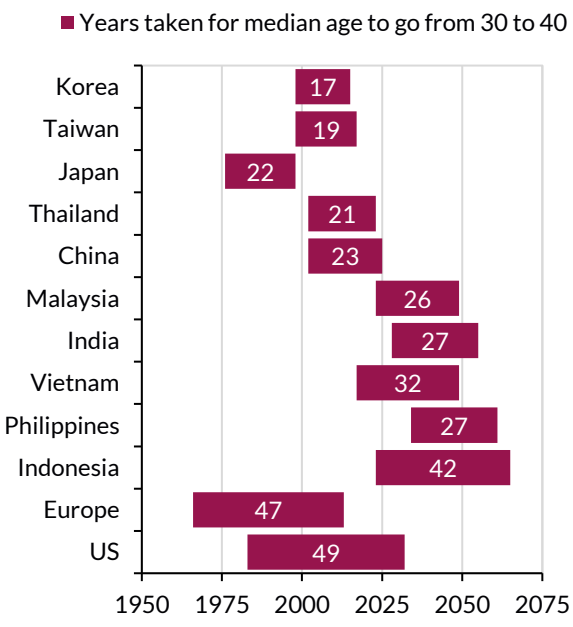
The pace of economic change has accelerated in recent decades. Whereas currently developed countries grew per capita incomes from USD3000 to USD15000 (PPP adjusted) over around 100 years, several economies have done (or will do) so in 20-40 years. But demographic transition has been much faster, narrowing the window available to economies for rapid growth. For example, India’s Total Fertility Rate (TFR) dropped from 3 to 2 in just 12 years, versus 50-80 years in developed markets. It has also dropped below 2.5 at per capita GDP of just USD4000 versus 15-20,000 USD (PPP adjusted) in currently developed markets (Fig 1).

Given evidence that economic growth slows meaningfully when median age crosses 40 years, India only has another 25-30 (Fig 1) years where it can sustain rapid growth.

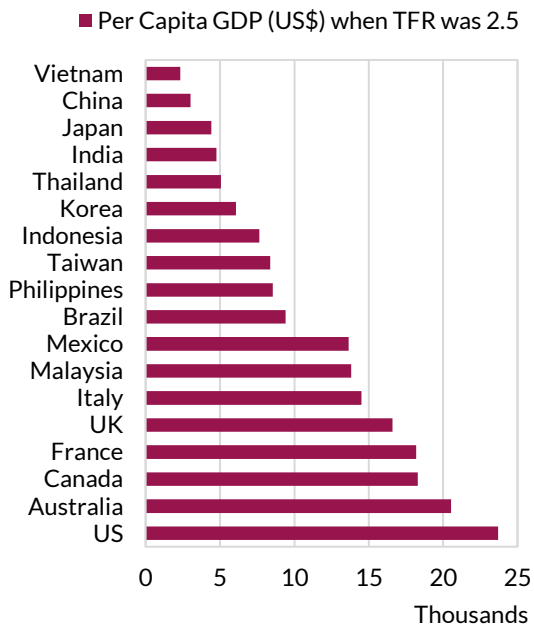
Maximizing use of available labour

The economy thus needs to sustain 9% annual growth in USD terms until 2052 (when median age is expected to cross 40 years) to attain US$20,000 per capita GDP, the likely threshold then for rich-country status (Fig 3). A likely split of this 9% can be 7% real growth, 4% inflation, and a 2% annual depreciation of the INR against the USD.

Fig 1 – Fertility falling faster than economic growth, and at much lower levels of GDP per capita



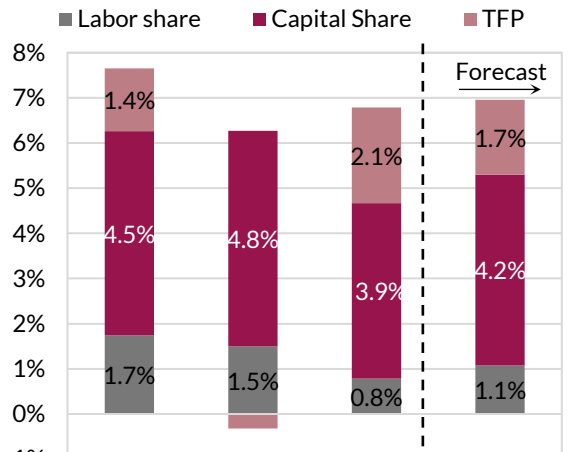
Source: UN WPP 2024, Axis Bank Research



Source: UN WPP 2024, World Bank, Axis Bank Research

There are only three drivers of real economic growth in economy: labour, capital, productivity. To boost growth, one can add more workers (labour input), give them more capital (capital input: like machines, infrastructure or software), or improve process or technology (productivity). The current labour-capital-productivity-split is 7% is 1%, 4% and 2%, respectively (Fig 2).

Fig 2 – How labour, capital and productivity contribute to growth



Source: RBI KLEMS, Axis Bank Research.

Within a decade, though, the pace of labour force expansion is expected to slow sharply, with compounded growth over only 0.4%.

While capital formation can pick up, productivity growth is also likely to slow as India gets closer to the productivity frontier.

Thus, to sustain 7% real-growth, India will need to expand its worker participation rates in paid work from 47% to 60%. If growth is to be faster, participation would need to rise further.

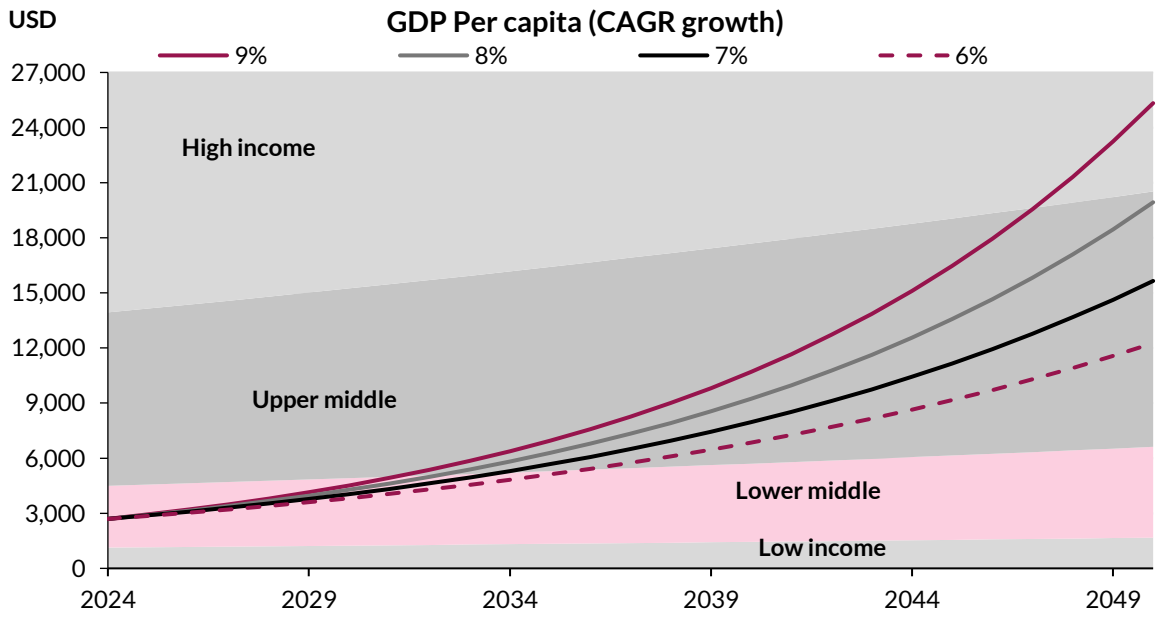
As a large part of the lifetime economic value of a worker is realized before they turn 60, getting them in the workforce is critical for prosperity.

India has too few women in paid work; low productivity a challenge too

4th lowest women's participation rate in G20

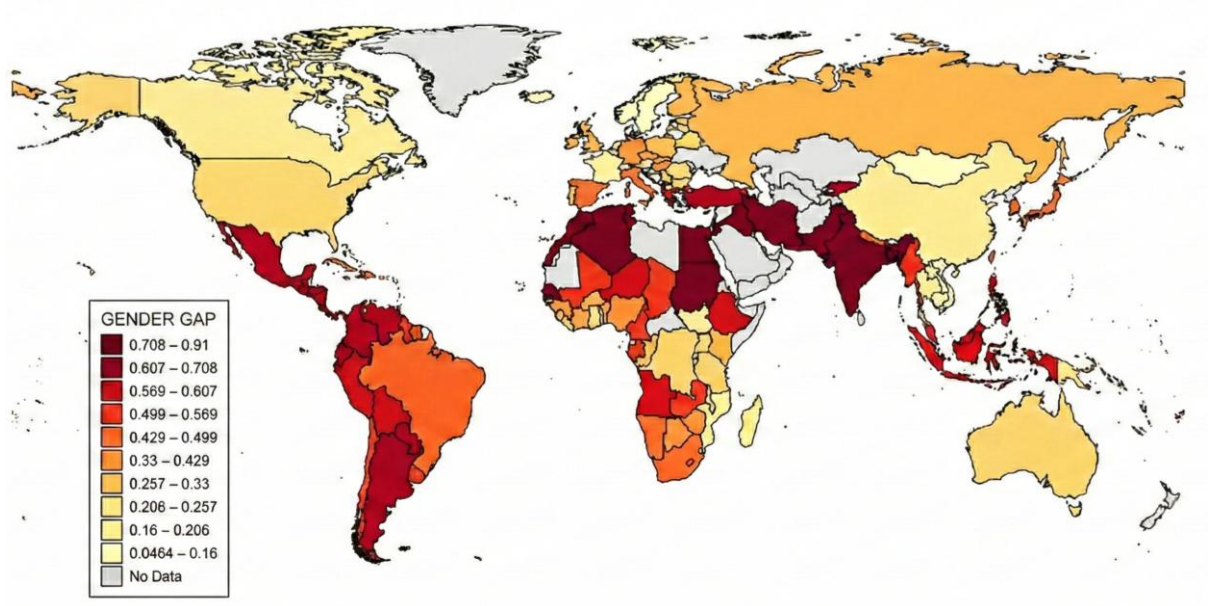
Male worker participation ratios in India are at par with those seen in other economies. But female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) is a low 42%. This ratio is negatively impacted by known constraints of GDP accounting, as unpaid household and caregiving work, where Indian women spend 20% of the day, is not counted in GDP or in workforce participation. Every additional hour of unpaid care/household work lowers women's odds of employment.

Fig 3 – To be called rich in 2050, India's GDP per capita must exceed 8% CAGR



Source: World Bank, Axis Bank Research Estimates

Fig 4 – Heatmap of gender gaps in employment



Source: Klevan et. al, "The Child Penalty Atlas". Review of Economic Studies
Note: Gender gap is defined as (Lm − Lw)/Lm, where Lg denotes the average employment rate for gender g = w, m.

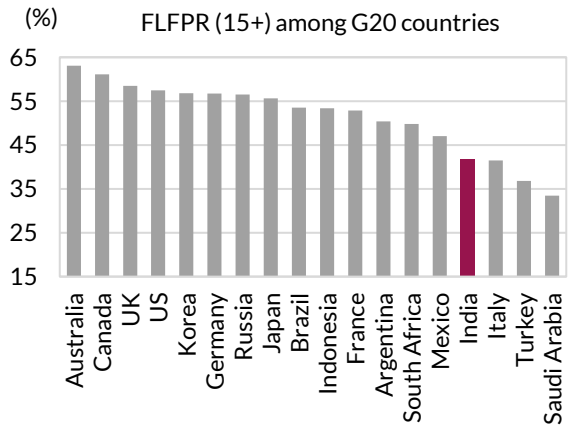
However, this is not the reason why India lags every G20 country other than Italy, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in FLFPR (Fig 5) as the median of the share of day spent by women on unpaid housework is around 15% in major economies where this data is available (Fig 6).

Unrealized dividend: Two-thirds of working women in low-productivity jobs

Not only is participation low, 61% of women who do work in India are in agriculture: this is much above Emerging Market peers (Fig 7), and three times China. In developed markets this ratio is near zero. These are low-productivity jobs (45% of India's workers in agriculture generate 15% of its GDP), and often unpaid.

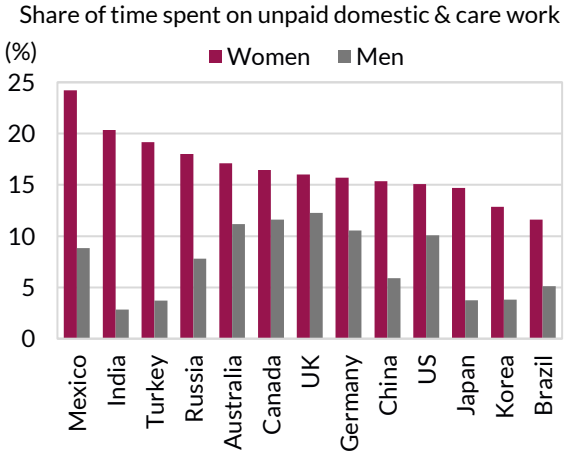
As per the OECD, the female-to-male ratio of time spent on unpaid work is 6.8 in India, vs. 1.5-2.6 in most countries. Two-thirds of women in India are self-employed, of which more than half do unpaid work (like animal husbandry). The ratio of women in paid work is improving, but very slowly (Fig 8).

Fig 5 - India's female labour force participation rate is among the lowest globally



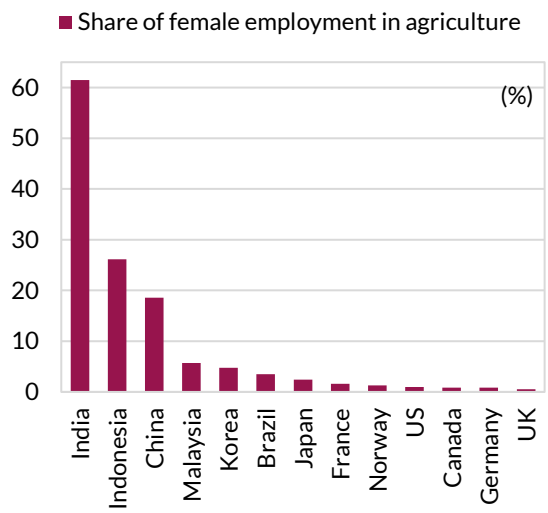
Source: PLFS, ILO, Axis Bank Research

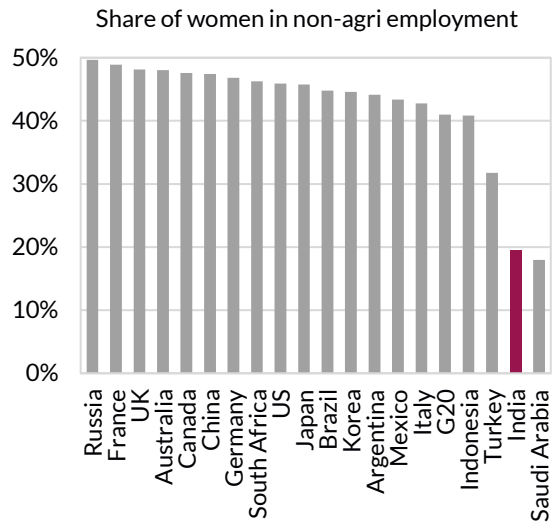
Fig 6 - Indian women spent 20% of the day on 'uncounted' work, vs. 15% in other countries



Source: World Bank, Axis Bank Research

Fig 7 - India employs much greater proportion of women in agriculture than its EM peers





Source: ILO Modeled Estimates, Axis Bank Research

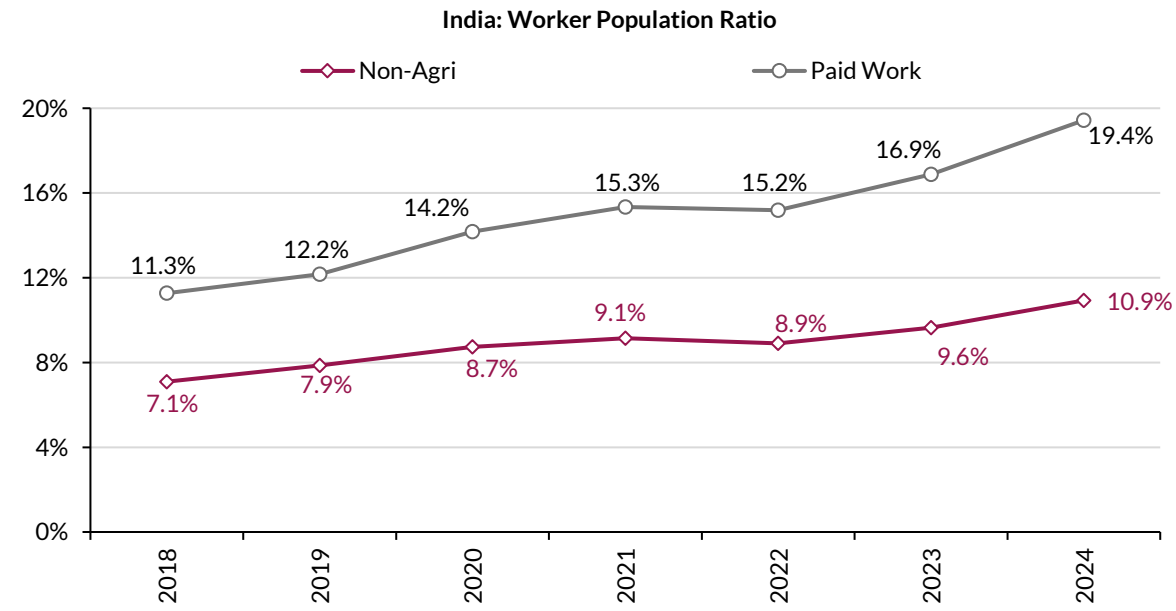
Even among women who get paid, 60% of work arrangements are informal (i.e., no written job contract or social security benefits). These boost household income but the impact on overall economic productivity is underwhelming.

The reason, in our view, is not worker choice, but limited availability of non-farm jobs, worsened by constraints on mobility. When non-farm opportunities near home are scarce, women fall back to family farming.

India is pulling out of the bottom of the 'U', but the pace is slow

Researchers have documented the relationship between women's market work and economic development – it takes the form of a 'U'. In poor countries participation rates tend to be higher but they fall as extreme poverty ends, and production moves from household to market.

Fig 8 - Non-Farm WPR and paid work improving in recent years, but still low



Source: PLFS, Axis Bank Research

Participation rises again as women get better educated and participate in the workforce for higher-rated or higher paying jobs.

India is currently at the bottom of the 'U' (Fig 9). The only countries that are below India have religious constraints on women working. That said, this is not deterministic: at India's per capita GDP several countries have higher participation rates too.

Consistent with this framework, India's FLFPR over time also shows a 'U' shape: it fell over 2005-2018 in the NSS surveys and has risen thereafter in the Periodic Labour Force Surveys. It is unclear how much of the improvement is due to changes in the survey itself.

A clear trend though is that participation rates in non-farm work are rising but not rising fast enough to reach desirable levels in time.

There are several factors that affect FLFPR, especially in non-farm work, which often requires women to step outside the household regularly. Globally, these include "supply-side" changes like health, education, fertility control, household technology/automation and legal changes, and "demand-side" changes like growth in "women appropriate" jobs and availability of work with flexible hours.


Source: AI

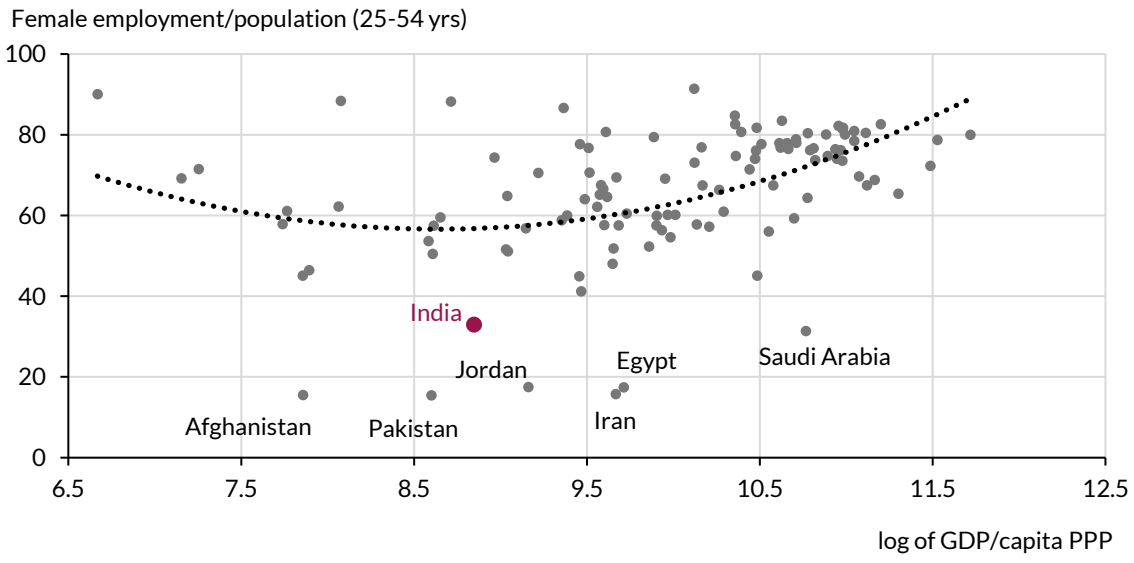
Globally, cultural norms also play a role, like women's status in society, availability of childcare and safety outside the house. Historical global trends are discussed in detail in the next chapter. Here we explore these in India.

Some states solving problems faster than others

We find strong correlation between a state's per capita NSDP (Net State Domestic Product) and its non-farm participation ratios (Fig 10). The causality here is likely bi-directional – more working women improves per capita output, and the ability to create higher-value jobs attracts more women to the workforce.

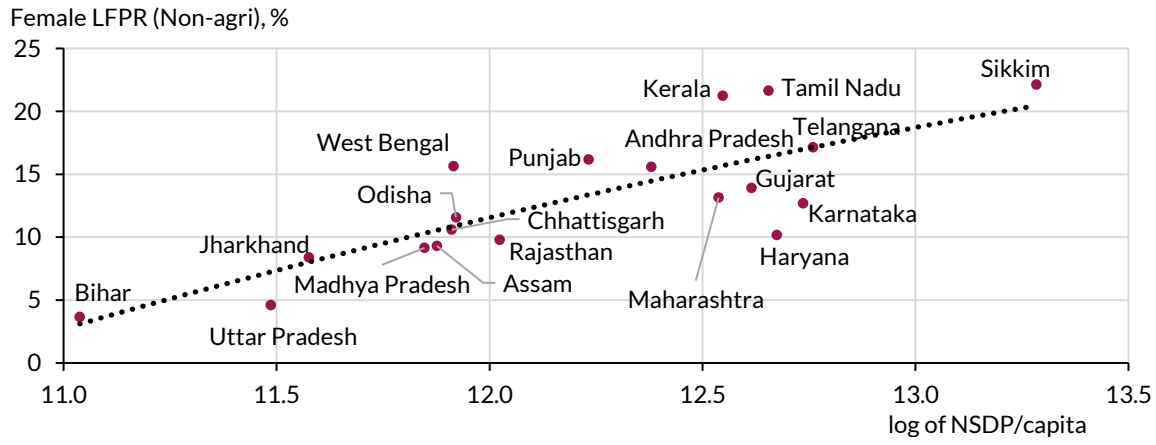
The extreme outlier is Haryana, which has strong cultural biases against women working (it has the most skewed gender ratio at birth) but NSDP is boosted by proximity to Delhi.

Fig 9 - Cross country U curve of female participation in paid work



Source: ILO, IMF WEO. Adapted from Nobel Lecture: An Evolving Economic Force (2024)

Fig 10 - Women's participation rates in non-farm work correlated with per capita NSDP



Source: PLFS, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research estimates

Significant improvement in India's household productivity over the past 15 years

Over the past 15 years, the time that needs to be spent on unpaid household work has declined meaningfully in India (Fig 11):

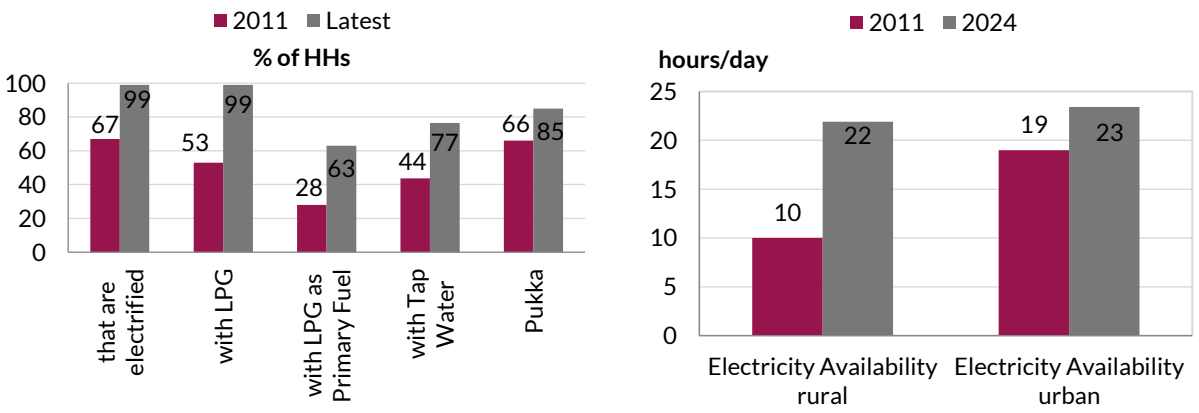
- 85% of houses are now *pukka*: these are easier to maintain than *kuchcha* houses.
- Household electrification has risen from 67% in 2011 to 97%-plus currently. Availability of electricity has also improved to 23 hours, even in rural areas to 22 hours.
- Nearly all households have access to energy-dense cooking fuel. While in early years its usage was limited, over time habits have also shifted to LPG as the primary fuel.
- Tap-water access has improved substantially, reducing time needed to fetch water.

We believe these changes are the main driver of the sharp increase in FLFPR in rural areas seen over the past decade. The impact of these shifts on women's roles outside the house is likely to increase over time, in our view. If jobs become available in geographical proximity, the transition could be faster.

Fertility falling but method of contraception points to 'stopping', not 'spacing'

India's rapidly falling fertility rates reduce the childcare burden on women. But the increase in FLFPR in the western world post adoption of the 'pill' has not yet been seen in India. Methods used in India are substantially different from that seen elsewhere (primarily tubectomies: Fig 12), focusing on 'stopping' rather than 'spacing'. This approach points to reduced ability to time or postpone childbirth: important for FLFPR.

Fig 11 - Significant improvement in productivity in household work saves time



Source: Census (2011), IHDS-II, Ministry of Power, Ministry of Jal Shakti, CAMS (2022-23), Axis Bank Research

Education necessary but not sufficient for higher FLFPR; labour demand must come first

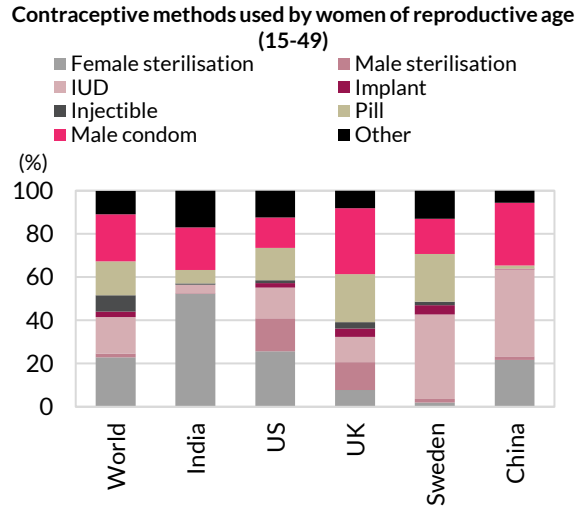
There is a strong correlation between the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in a state and female non-farm participation rates (Fig 14): among other factors, education reduces the 'marriage penalty': see Chapter 3. The outlier is Haryana -low FLFPR despite high GER.

However, education is not a sufficient condition for improving national FLFPR. The gap between education and employment is often explained by the gap between the social and economic value of education. In conservative societies, the first step is usually girls' education for social value: suitability for marriage or status. While non-vocational education is a generic problem in India, this is more so for women (Fig 13).

There are ~125 million women in India currently with secondary or higher education (including ~35 million graduates & post-graduates) but out of the labour force: 60% of women graduates have made that choice. For women who want jobs, unemployment is nearly twice the rate for men at the graduate level and thrice that for men at the post-graduate level.

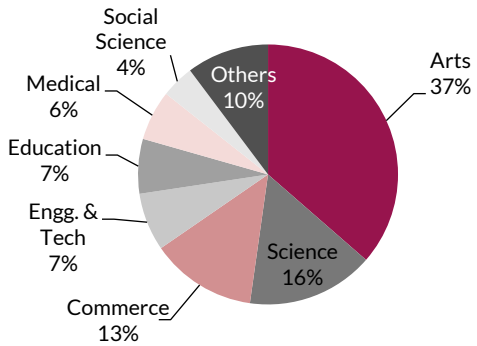
And still, compared to their overall share of workers, women are much better represented in white-collar jobs, reinforcing the view that the constraints may be bigger on the demand side.

Fig 12 – India's preferred method of contraception 'stops', doesn't 'time'



Source: UN World Contraceptive Use 2024

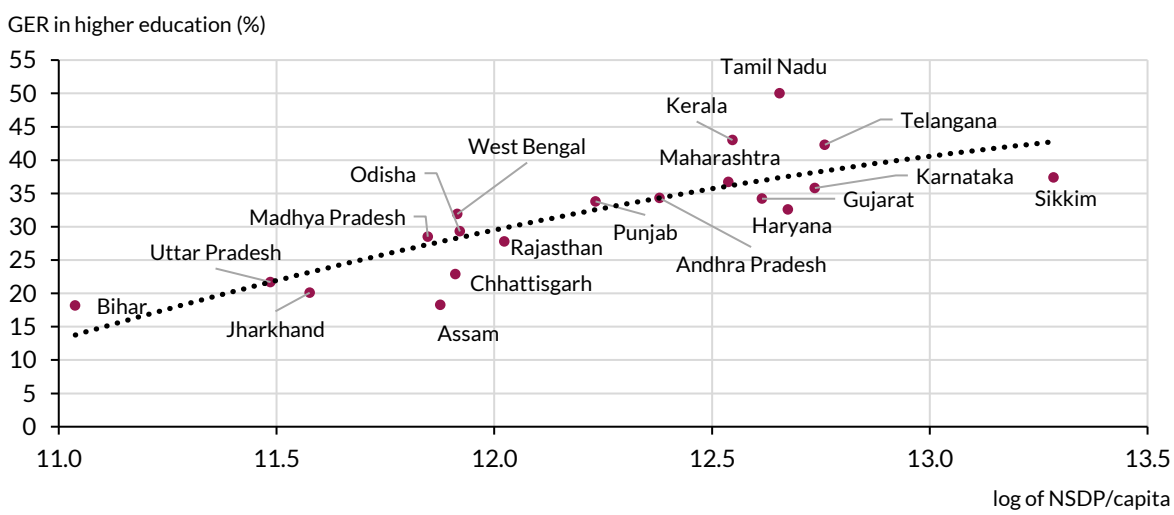
Fig 13 – Women rarely take applied courses



15.8mn women enrolled in 2022

Source: AISHE, Axis Bank Research

Fig 14 - States with higher Gross Enrolment Ratio have higher per capita NSDP



Source: AISHE, MoSPI, Axis Bank Research

Source: AI

Legal enablement/removal of constraints

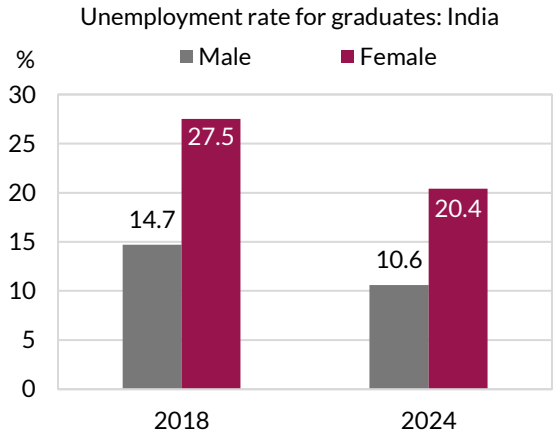
Over the past three decades, several constitutional changes have mandated a 33% threshold for women legislators. Legal barriers to women working are being removed as well (Fig 16).

Lack of safety continues to be a concern

A lack of physical safety became a deterrent for women as work moved out of home during the industrial revolution (more on this in Chapter 3). An integral part of the rise in FLFPR in several societies has been a drop in violent crime. In India, this still needs work: 61% of women in our survey rated safety and mobility as a barrier to work, the most important among all reasons.

While cognizable crimes per lakh population fell from 531 in 2011 to 446 in 2024, crimes against women rose from 19 to 66, helped by better reporting (e.g., Kerala has the highest rate). 30% of these are by the husband/family.

Fig 15 - Female graduates face higher unemployment than men (~2x)



Source: PLFS, Axis Bank Research

Fig 16 - Legal changes have a material impact on enabling women to work

Year	Policy changes
1993	73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments: 1/3 reservation for women in rural & urban local bodies
2023	106th Constitutional Amendment: 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha & State Assemblies
2025	States removed restrictions on women working night shifts or in 'hazardous' manufacturing
2026	Labour Codes notified: Night shifts allowed; mandatory creches, 26-weeks paid maternity leave

Cultural norms can be a deterrent too

The gap between male and female FLFPR is not only due to constraints emerging from labour demand, household automation, education, laws/regulations or out-of-home safety.

The decision of whether to work or not also depends on the non-economic value of work (e.g., identity, social respect, "the mattering instinct"), optimizing hard-to-value but important use of time (e.g., with family), and the risk of shifts in power structures within a family (who decides for a family?). This is where cultural norms help: given the complexity of these choices, doing what others do eases decisions. Norms though take time to change.

Social Norms and Women's Participation

Social norms, the "**unwritten rules**", that shape human behaviour, usually formed to provide a survival advantage. Conformity being core to humans, norms are passed from parents to children or learnt from peers. They persist till '**norm entrepreneurs**' challenge them.

The status of women in society has varied over time and place, but their economic roles were less affected by social status (except in inheritance of assets) for most of history.

After **agriculture** started, mobility for most men and women got restricted to within city or village boundaries. Wars and trade, which occurred outside, were too unsafe for women. Within village boundaries, there were very few jobs outside the house. A working wife was thus a negative status-signal.

The **Industrial Revolution** made work away from home more economically lucrative and pulled workers to factories. However, law and order in the rapidly growing cities was weak, with high homicide rates, and many new jobs were themselves unsafe and needed physical strength, like in mines or on factory floors. Result: a social norm that incentivized men to work to support their families and rebuked husbands/fathers whose wives or daughters worked.

The 'new' service jobs that emerged at this time in domestic help, as hours away from home stretched for many, were also at risk of exploitation and carried a social stigma.

Over time, better law and order and working conditions, especially the rise of white-collar work, with shorter hours and less harsh work environments, the stigma on married women's employment eroded. Even high-status

Source: AI

women could now work after marriage.

Some norms, though change slowly. Alesina et al[1] explored why cross-cultural differences in gender norms—especially attitudes about women's work—are so persistent. They tested the Boserup hypothesis, that societies that historically used the plough, which needs upper-body strength, made male labour dominant, and developed norms that "women belong in the home". Societies using hoe/shifting cultivation, more compatible with women's participation did the opposite.

They found that across countries and ethnic groups, descendants of plough societies today exhibit less gender-equal attitudes, lower female labour force participation, weaker political representation of women, and fewer female entrepreneurs. These effects persist among second-generation immigrants in the EU/US, implying deep cultural transmission rather than only economic adaptation.

A CENTURY OF CHANGE: HOW WOMEN TRANSFORMED WITH THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Over the past hundred years, women in the advanced economies have moved from the economic periphery to the centre of production, innovation, and policy.

This transformation unfolded in distinct waves: education and enfranchisement; wartime mobilization; household technology and services led growth; reproductive autonomy and legal reform; globalization and corporate pipelines; and, most recently, data driven legal equalization and flexible work. The drivers spanned “supply side” changes (health, fertility control, education), “demand side” shifts (more services and knowledge work), and institutional and cultural reforms (anti-discrimination laws, childcare, safety, and changing norms). But the most important has been the shift of women viewing work as ‘careers’ and integral to their identity rather than ‘jobs’.

The result was an extraordinary, if still incomplete, economic convergence. Mid/late-career gender inequality in wages though persists, attributable largely to the ‘motherhood penalty’.

Source: AI

Lessons from the West: Can India accelerate this transition?

Most developed economies are at the right end of the 'U' mentioned in the first chapter – high female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) and high per capita GDP. Over the past hundred years, women in these countries have moved from the economic periphery towards the centre of production, innovation, and policy.

This transformation unfolded in distinct waves, which hold lessons for developing economies like India which are in the early stages of this transition. They may foretell the legislative and policy shifts India needs to accelerate the climb (from the bottom of the 'U'), given the necessity to sustain a quicker pace of growth.

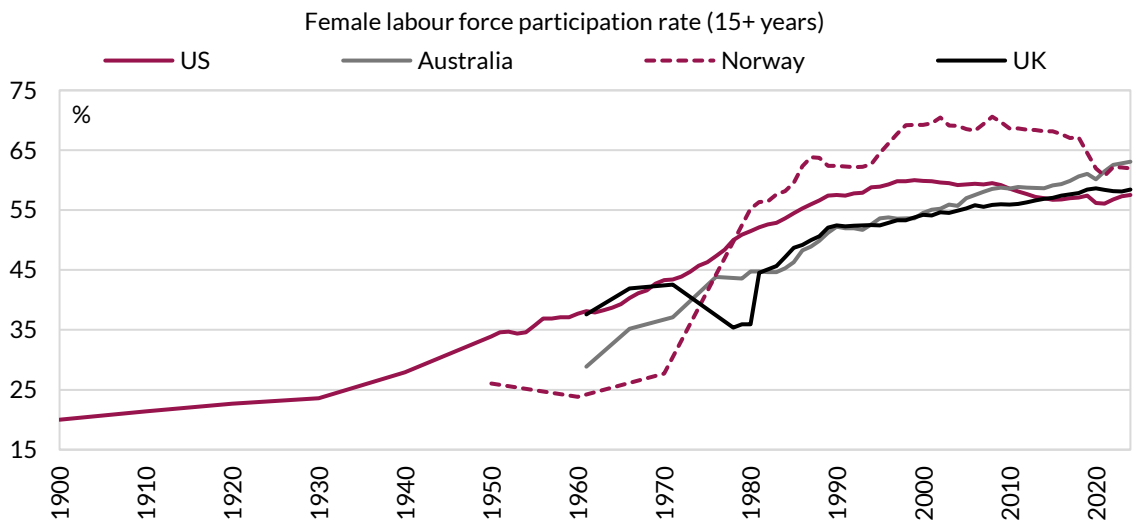
In the US, the first wave started with education and enfranchisement about a hundred years ago, enabled by household technology and services led growth – the first time, as per Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin, that women could think of 'career and family' instead of the 'career or family' choice forced on them earlier.

Mobilization during the second world war (WWII) boosted their economic involvement out of necessity. Post war, legal reform and reproductive autonomy enabled by the pill improved women's participation further.


Source: AI

These drivers have spanned "supply side" changes (household automation, immunization, fertility control, education), "demand side" shifts (structural change toward services, knowledge work), and institutional, legal and cultural reforms (anti-discrimination laws, childcare, safety, and changing norms of agency). The result is an extraordinary — if still incomplete — economic convergence.

Fig 17 - Economic progress of women in the developed world over the past century



Source: Acemoglu et al (2002), US Department of Labor, ILO, Axis Bank Research. US data is for 16+

Inter-war period laid the foundations: Electricity, Education, Suffrage, and Early Labor Market Shifts

The period between the two world wars (1920-40) laid the foundation for a transformation in women's economic lives. Although female labour-force participation would rise more dramatically in the postwar decades, this period established the structural, institutional, and demographic preconditions for that revolution.

At the start of the twentieth century, women occupied a deeply constrained position in the labour market. Those who did work were typically young, unmarried, and concentrated in a narrow set of low-paid occupations.

Only a small minority of married women worked outside the home: in the US, for example, in the 1920s fewer than 10% of married women were recorded as employed. This reflected both cultural norms and labour market barriers that explicitly barred married women from many occupations. Women had short career time-horizons and thus investment in long duration professional training did not yet seem rational.

Education: Employability as well as Aspirations

The first force was education. The early 20th century saw rising female high school attendance, reflecting rising mass education (men's education increased too). White-collar work expanded too, that demanded clerical and administrative labour.

Education served two roles: it enhanced women's human capital and employability, and it also elevated aspirations, planting the seeds of future career identities and professional ambition at a time when labour market opportunities were limited.

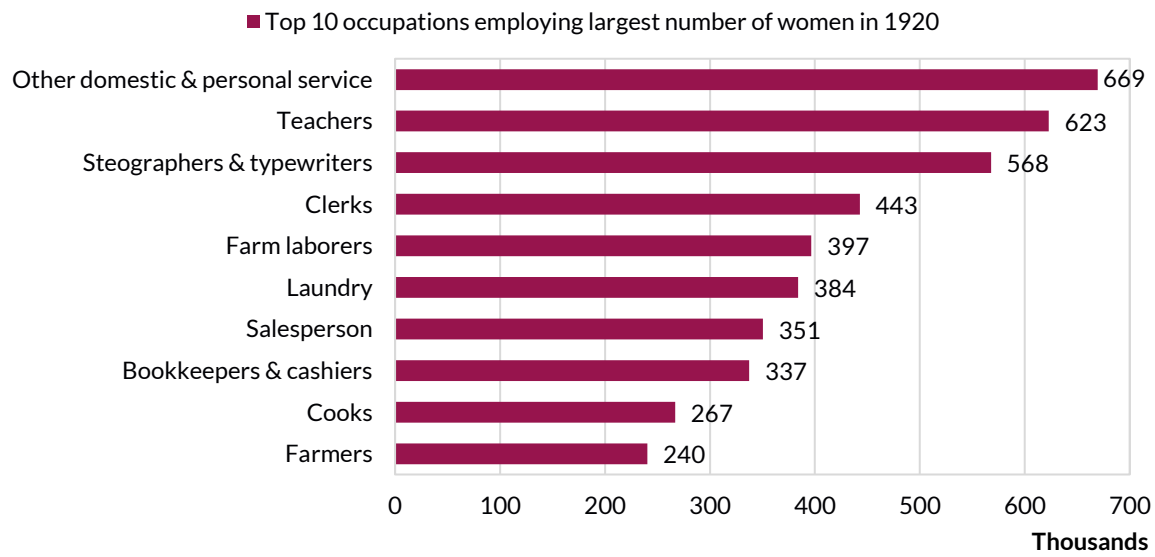
Technological change: Electricity, home automation, immunization

The second force was technological change, especially electrification, which fundamentally altered home production technologies and, gradually, the opportunity cost of women's time.

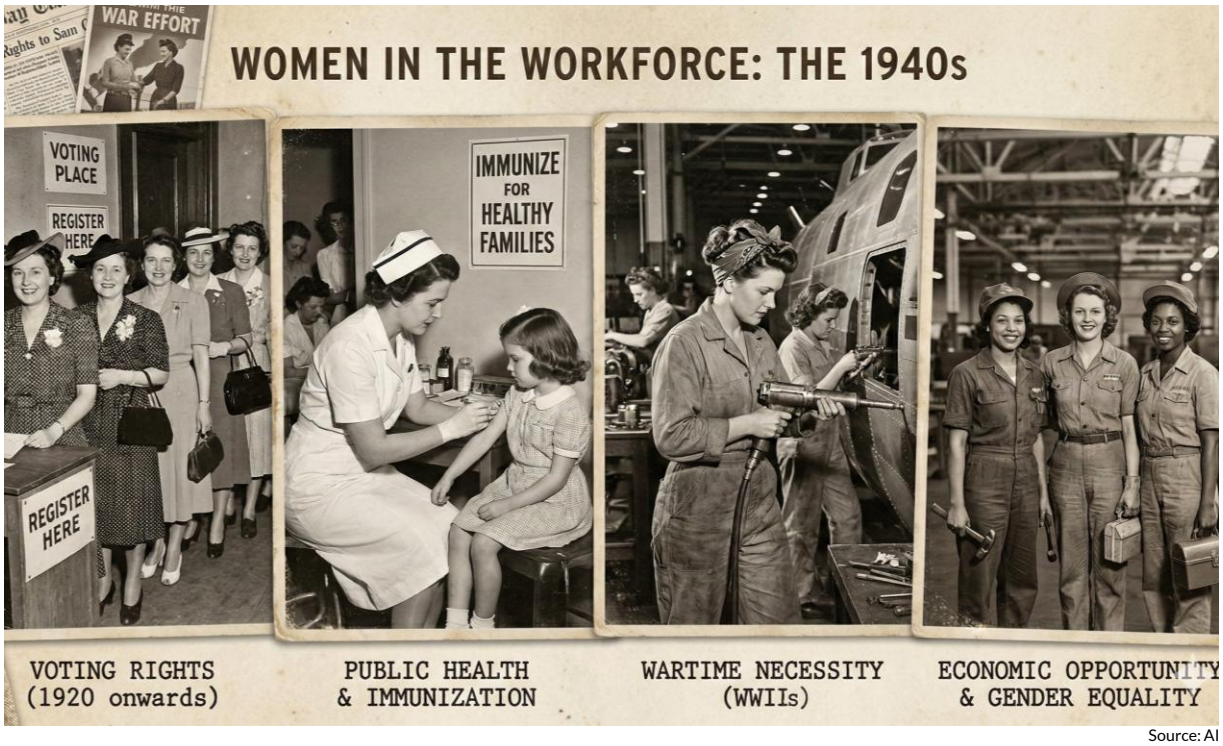
Electrification reduced the hours required for home production. Combined with the advent of central heating and the rise of urban sanitation networks, this significantly reduced the time needed within the household and made part-time or intermittent market work increasingly feasible.

Although the home appliance boom would accelerate after World War II, the groundwork was laid during this period. Research on the period 1880–1940 shows that the diffusion of electricity increased market opportunities for skilled women and accounted for a significant share of rising female labour force participation during this early industrial transition.

Fig 18 – Top occupations for women in the US in 1920: limited diversity, fewer 'career' paths



Source: US Department of Labor, Axis Bank Research



Source: AI

Immunization of children also picked up during this period, bringing down childhood morbidity as well as infant mortality significantly, curtailing the guilt working mothers often carried, removing an important emotional barrier to women working outside the home.

Electrification also altered the composition of labour demand, strengthening clerical, service, and light manufacturing roles well suited to the expanding pool of educated women. These shifts widened the structural cracks through which later generations would step into more sustained and better-remunerated employment.

Legal and social constraints, especially post marriage

However, strong social and legal constraints remained. Marriage bars, widely enforced in the 1920s and 1930s, required women to resign from teaching, clerical, and civil service jobs upon marriage. Norms pushed women without higher education into factories as piece-rate workers, while educated women were funneled into teaching and nursing.

Those with limited access to formal education often stayed in agriculture and domestic service, but were more likely to continue working after marriage, reflecting economic necessity rather than opportunity. Female labour was thus structured simultaneously by discrimination and varying household economic conditions.[2]

The Great Depression did not reverse the trend: New Deal childcare initiatives helped

Job scarcity during the Great Depression of the 1930s intensified social hostility toward women working (that they "took jobs" from unemployed men), but their employment fell less than men's because they were concentrated in lower-wage sectors that contracted more slowly. The economic necessity of women adding to household incomes meant the trend of rising education and participation did not reverse.

As part of the New Deal in 1933, the FDR administration's Works Progress Administration (WPA) established 3,000 nursery schools across the US for 2-5-year-old children. The direct creation of 6,700 jobs aside, the 75,000 children enrolled in them at peak allowed both their parents to work. These schools ran from 9am to 3pm, with extensions in some areas to accommodate needs of working parents.

More importantly, these laid the groundwork for the 1941 Lanham Act which set up a national childcare system serving 130,000 children, allowing their mothers to work in factories.

World War II: Women's mobilization changed perceptions permanently

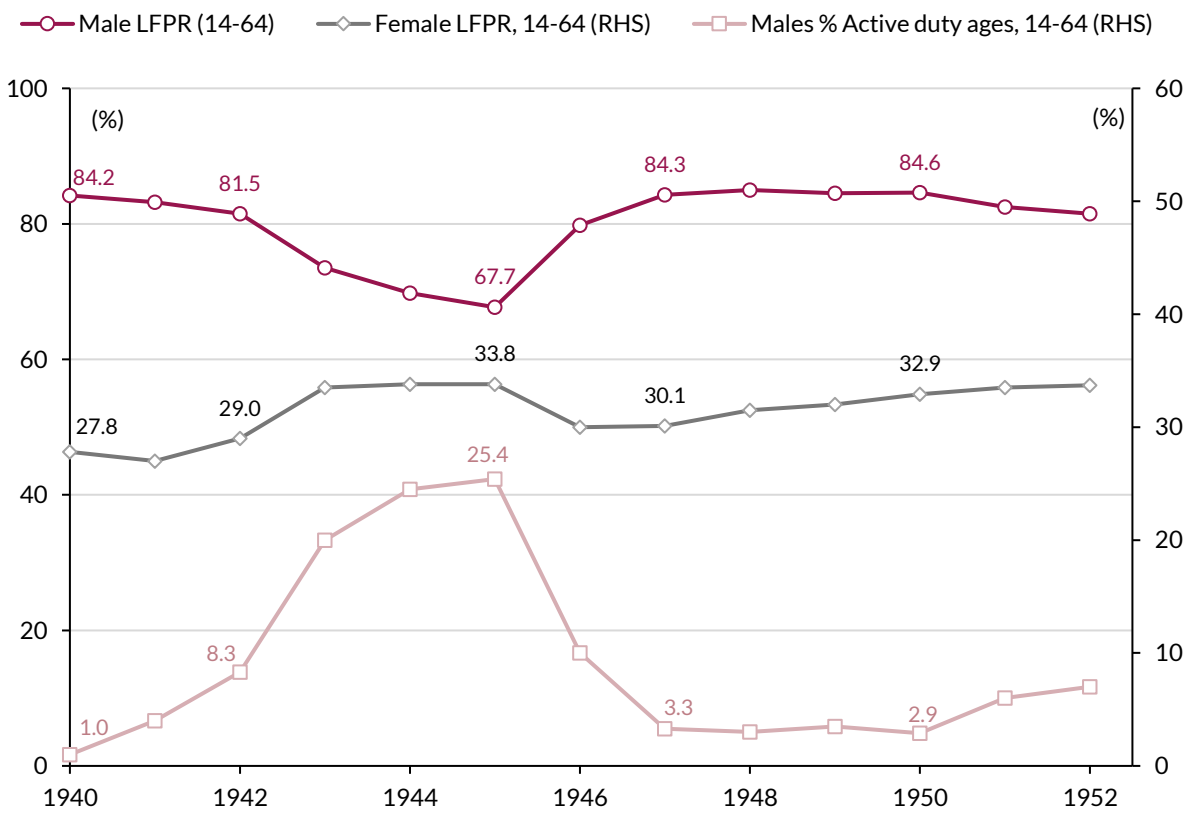
After the US entered World War II (WWII), and millions of men were mobilized for the war effort, labour shortages pulled unprecedented numbers of women into paid work, including in heavy manufacturing, which was earlier closed to them. The U.S. female labour force expanded by 6.7 million workers. The share of women in manufacturing rose from 21% to 34% between 1940 and 1944. Propaganda campaigns like "Rosie the Riveter" provided both government endorsement and the social importance of women's industrial labour.

However, much of this reversed once the war ended: overall participation rates in 1947 were back to pre-war levels. Much of the war-time increase had come from older, married women, not young entrants, and a large fraction of these exited the labour force soon after the war. One factor was that The Lanham Act schools were de-funded, and mothers had to exit to take care of their children. The US government was worried about a second depression if returning soldiers could not find work.

But the WWII mobilization had profound indirect effects. It challenged cultural norms like women's capacity for physically demanding and technically complex work, exposed employers to women's capabilities in "male" jobs, imparted industrial experience and skills to women, and accelerated the dismantling of discriminatory barriers. Expectedly, after the immediate post-war drop, the rise in FLFPR resumed (Fig 19).

WWII also enabled an equally important social shift: wartime savings accumulated by female workers contributed directly to postwar household formation, bolstering women's bargaining position within families and communities. Even more importantly, it shaped young girls' ambitions as they saw their mothers and aunts managing both home and work.

Fig 19 – US: Labor force participation and military active service personnel, 1940 - 1952



Source: Acemoglu et al (2002)

Rosie the Riveter became a powerful cultural icon in the US, representing the millions of women who joined the industrial workforce during World War II. They helped build airplanes, ships and other war supplies. The picture shows Naomi Parker Fraley (worked a lathe), but the name is of Rosalind Walter, a socialite who worked the night shift at a fighter plane plant in 1942 and had a song written about her that became a national hit.

During WWII, women stepped into roles earlier reserved for men, running heavy machines, construction tasks, and technical work. After the war, though many women returned to traditional roles, the episode dramatically shifted cultural norms and planted the seeds for modern workplace equality. She became an icon of feminist movements of the 1960s–1970s—inspiring pushback against gender norms and strengthening calls for equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation.

Post-War (1945-70): Jobs to Careers; HH automation, and the rise of services

From Jobs to Careers

Unlike the dramatic but short-lived wartime spike in female employment, the postwar decades witnessed steady, compounding changes in both the demand for women's labour and the supply of skills they brought to the labour market.

Importantly, as the changes in cultural norms about women working accelerated, the economic logic of women's lives shifted from intermittent participation framed by family needs and responsibilities to more sustained employment shaped by educational investment and occupational shifts: From Jobs to Careers.

While this was primarily a shift in norms, several technological shifts helped enable it.

Jobs vs. Careers: Understanding the Difference

Identity and Purpose

A career is a long-term professional path that becomes part of a person's identity, often shaping how people see themselves — whether as a doctor, researcher, or teacher.

A job, on the other hand, is primarily a means to earn money and usually doesn't play a central role in defining one's identity or sense of purpose.

Time horizon and Investment

Building a career typically involves sustained effort, skill development, and deliberate planning over many years. A job usually requires less long-term investment and does not necessarily offer clear stages of progress.

Fig 20 – Affordability of home automation has improved dramatically over the past century

Appliance	1920s Labor Hours	2020s Labor Hours	% Reduction
Washing Machine	~120	~15–20	-85%
Refrigerator	~3,000	~25–40	-99%
Electric Range	~350	~20–30	-92%
Vacuum Cleaner	~50–60	~4–8	-90%

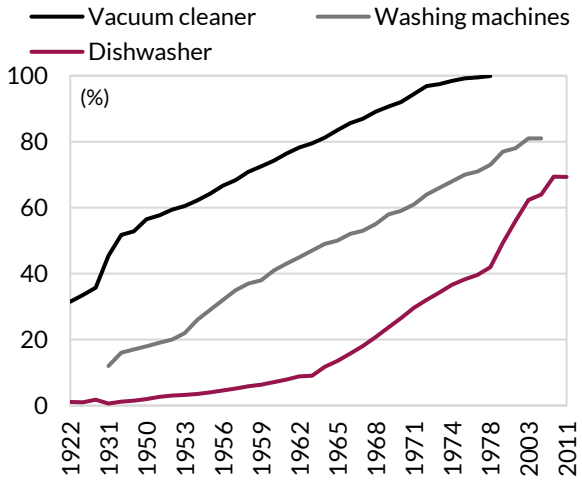
Household automation became widespread

One of the most powerful drivers was the diffusion of household technology, which transformed the economics of time within the household. New appliances: washing machines, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators and then dishwashers — reduced the intensity and rigidity of home production. Every US household, for example, had vacuum cleaners by the late 1970s. By increasing the productivity of household labour and lowering its opportunity cost, electrification laid the foundation for the long-run increase in FLFPR.

These tools had entered the market in the inter-war period (as discussed above), but as growing efficiency made them more affordable (Fig 20),

penetration improved meaningfully (Fig 21), and a greater number of households/women could own and benefit from them (Fig 22).

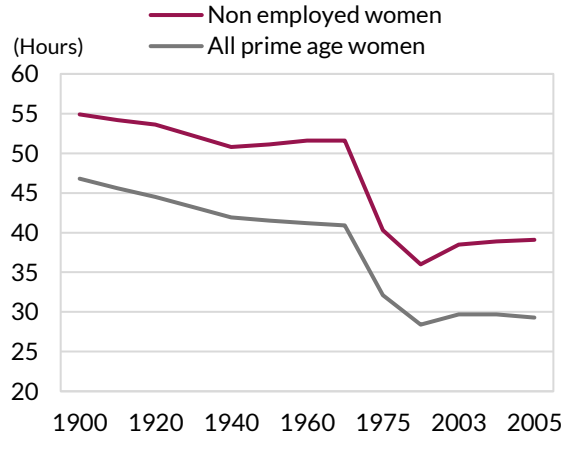
Fig 21 - Rapid adoption of household automation in 50s and 60s



Source: Horace Dediu; Comin and Hobijn (2004), Axis Bank Research

Fig 22 - Sharp decline in time spent in home production (1965-85)

Weekly hrs spent in home production: Women (18-64)



Source: V. Ramey (NBER, 2008)

Growth of services boosted demand

The postwar economy also underwent a major sectoral shift from goods-producing industries toward services, administration, and information processing. This increased demand for clerical, sales, and administrative roles, the occupations most accessible to women in a period when marriage bars were only beginning to erode.

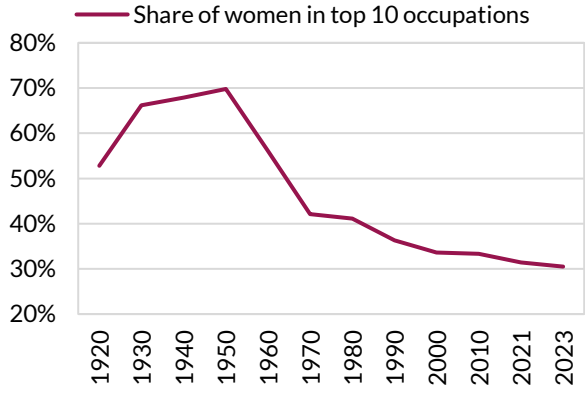
The arrival of office technologies, new forms of record keeping, and expanding public administration opened a vast white-collar frontier. Women now entered the workforce not only as temporary "office girls" before marriage but, increasingly, as clerical employees who gained experience, wages, and aspirations beyond single early-life employment spells.

The types of work women did expand substantially: the share of women in top 10 occupations fell sharply from 70% in 1950 to just 40% in 1970 (Fig 23).

Improving education, but identity tied to family

Female high-school graduation rates rose substantially in the 1940s-50s (as it did for men: the share of women in high-school graduates in fact declined in this period, Fig 24), giving women the credentials required for clerical and administrative work, and raising their own expectations of career advancement and higher wages. But despite rising educational attainment, most women stayed within narrow occupational tracks.

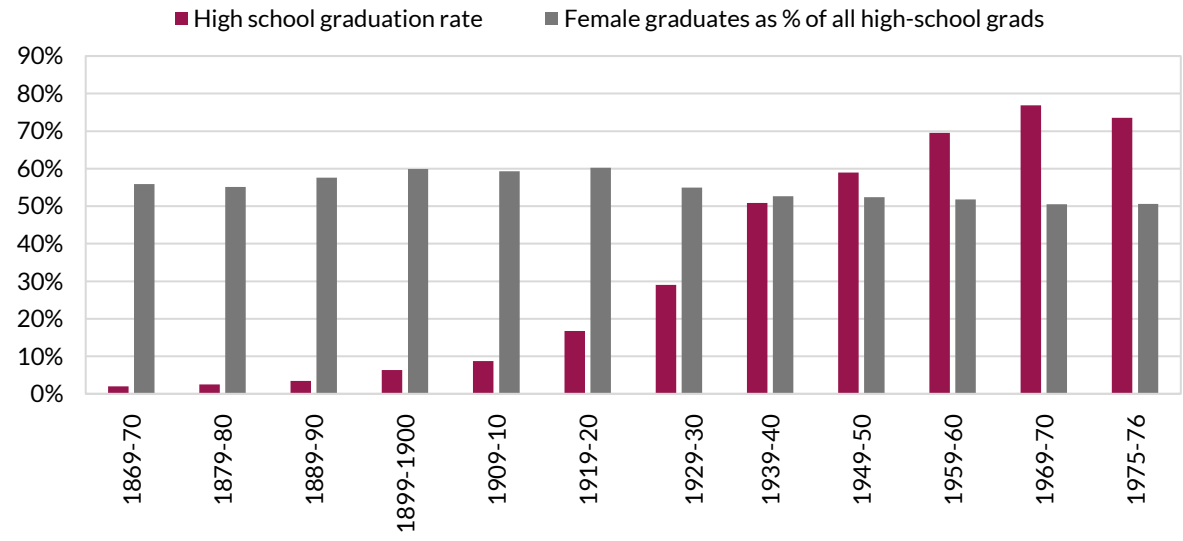
Fig 23 – Their roles became more diversified



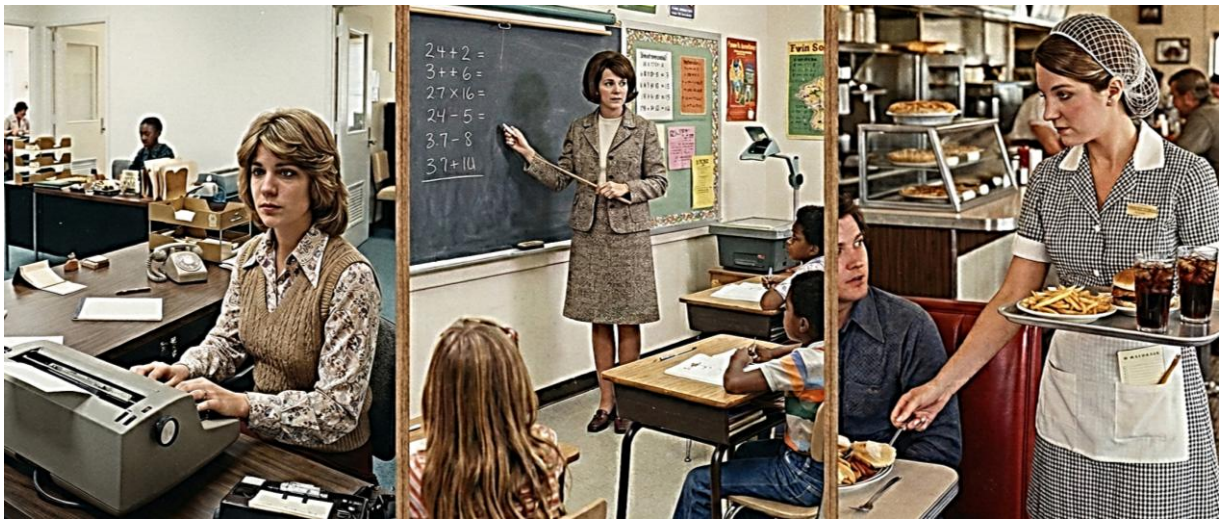
Source: US Department of Labor, Axis Bank Research

Their decisions remained constrained by horizons: most still expected to interrupt work upon marriage or childbirth. While more women saw themselves as workers, as part-time jobs and flexible clerical roles proliferated, their identity was still tied primarily to family, and decision-making typically positioned women as secondary earners adjusting to husbands' labour-market choices. Though marriage bars began to weaken after WWII, they remained widespread into the early 1950s, particularly in teaching, clerical work, and public-sector roles.

Fig 24 –The share of US women finishing high school rose from 50% around WWII to ~80% by 1970



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Axis Bank Research



Source: AI

Occupational segregation; no investment in professional careers (rational choice)

This restricted long-term career building and pursuing professional occupations. Most women were in teaching, nursing, clerical roles, retail sales, and domestic service. These had limited upward mobility and strong turnover penalties for career breaks.

Professional occupations — law, medicine, engineering and even academia — remained almost entirely male. As late as 1970, only about 8% of law and medical students were women, and women earned only 14% of doctoral degrees. These stark imbalances reflected institutional exclusion as well as the self-selection effects of short-horizon planning.

Women rationally avoided professions requiring long, costly training when marriage and motherhood were expected to interrupt careers. Incentives changed decisively in the 1970s with reliable contraception, anti-discrimination legislation, and changing family norms.

Changing cohorts: "Nieces learning from aunts"

Deep changes were afoot. The generation reaching adulthood in the 1950s and 1960s—daughters of the Depression and war years—had witnessed mothers contribute materially to household survival. This experience altered intergenerational expectations: norms shifted as women saw role models in clerical and professional settings, increasing the perceived legitimacy of combining work and family. Economic historians argue that such cultural learning resembles a logistic diffusion curve: early adopters influence peers and younger cohorts, enabling small initial shifts to accelerate over time.

Although most women still exited the labour force upon childbirth in the 1950s, retention rates began to rise by the mid 1960s, especially among educated women.

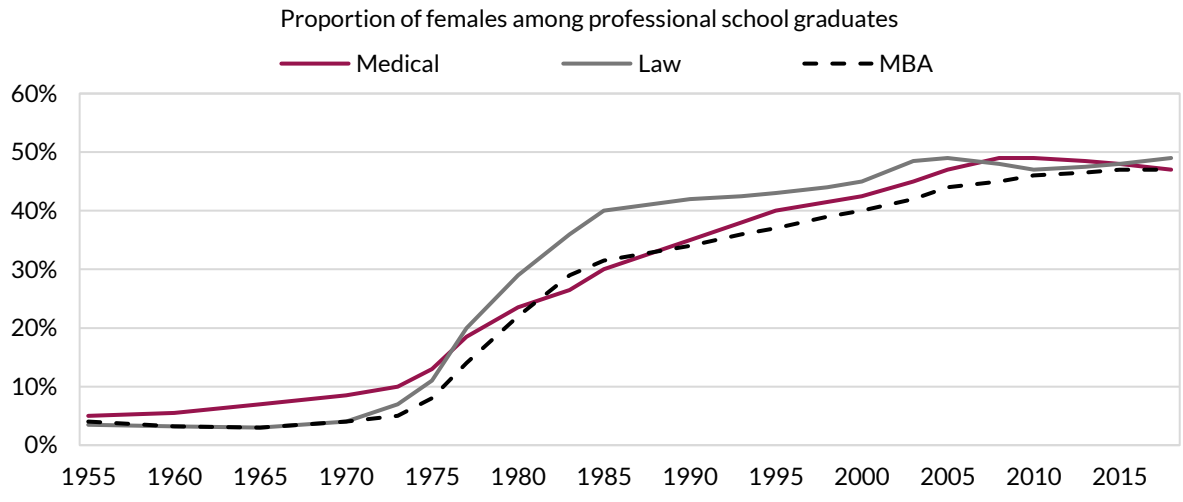
Women were not yet pursuing careers in the modern sense, but they were increasingly integrated into the paid workforce, accumulating experience, and developing the expectations that would, in the following decades, transform both their economic roles and the structure of labour markets.

1970-90, The Quiet Revolution: Reproductive Autonomy, Law, and the Rise of Careers

Between 1970 and 1990, women's economic roles underwent the most profound structural transformation of the 20th century, what Claudia Goldin[3] famously termed the "quiet revolution." Unlike earlier phases, this period transformed women's fundamental expectations about work, family, identity, and autonomy.

Three forces drove this seismic shift: the diffusion of the contraceptive pill, the institutionalization of antidiscrimination law, and the rapid expansion of higher education and professional careers. Together they redefined women not as intermittent earners but as forward-looking economic actors investing in long-run careers.

Fig 25 – In the US, professional education in medical, law and business moved towards parity



Source: C. Goldin (2021)

The Power of the Pill

The contraceptive pill was FDA-approved in 1960, but legal access broadened only in the late 1960s/early 1970s. State-level changes lowered the age of majority and granted mature minor consent rights, allowing unmarried women (incl. college students), to obtain the pill.

This had two immediate and far-reaching effects. First, it lowered the probability of early, unplanned marriage and childbirth. Second, it dramatically reduced the career risk associated with multi year professional training. Women now had credible control over the timing of fertility, allowing them to pursue law, medicine, business, and academia—fields that required long investment horizons.

Professional school enrolment data confirms the magnitude of this shift: women's share of U.S. law graduates rose from under 6% in 1970 to 40% by the mid-1980s, with similar patterns in medicine, business, and the sciences (Fig 25).

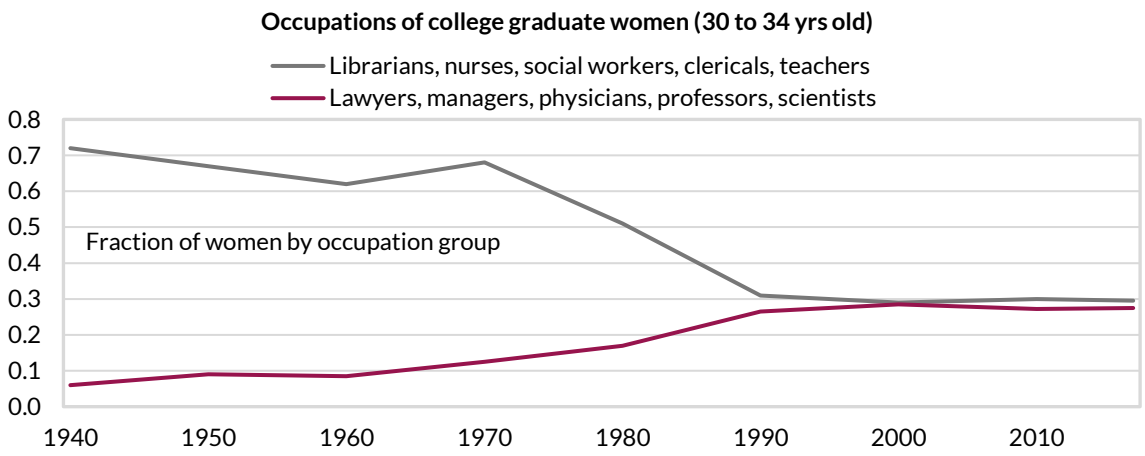
Equal Opportunity: Legal Reform, Changing Aspirations

The 1970s also saw the enforcement of Title VII, the implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), bans on discriminatory job advertisements, and the introduction of policies related to equal pay, credit access, and employment protections. These laws changed the informational environment and the perceived legitimacy of women's labour-market aspirations.

Women themselves began to internalize new norms around opportunity, fairness, and ambition, seeing careers not just as temporary employment before family formation but as central components of personal achievement and societal contribution. The women's movement of the 1970s, which marched in parallel with these reforms, helped normalize occupational aspirations previously deemed inappropriate or unattainable for women.


Source: AI

Fig 26 – Rising aspiration among college graduate women in the US



Source: C. Goldin (2021)

Rising college completion rates met growing demand for cognitive and analytical skills

As college completion rates rose, young women acquired both the credentials and occupational expectations associated with the emerging knowledge economy. Simultaneously, technological change expanded demand for cognitive and analytical skills, favoring sectors like finance, communications, consulting, public administration, and professional services.

By the 1990s, only 30% of women aged 30–34 were clustered in traditional occupations such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work (Fig 26), down from 65% in the 1950s and 1960s.

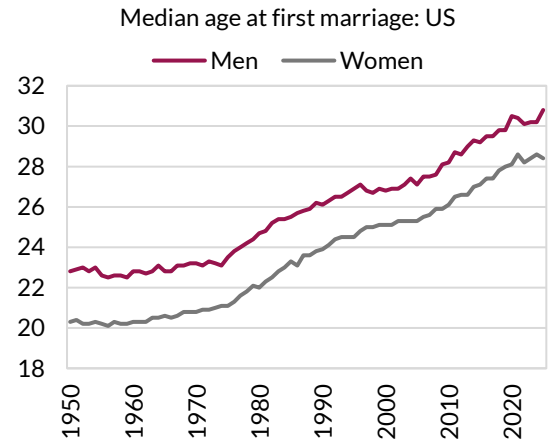
Changing expectations from life and work

The quiet revolution was also about behavioral and cultural change as much as about the enabling environment

Norms changed for both what society and families expected from women, and importantly, what they expected from themselves. Women delayed marriage (Fig 27) and childbearing (Fig 28), increasingly inverting the traditional sequence of prioritizing families and then seeking paid work. They now pursued education and careers first and then formed families.

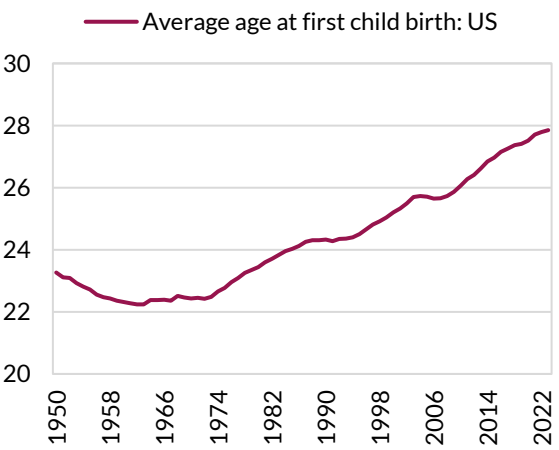
More women remained employed through their twenties and early thirties, accumulating crucial early career experience that yielded higher lifetime earnings.

Fig 27 – Marriage steadily postponed



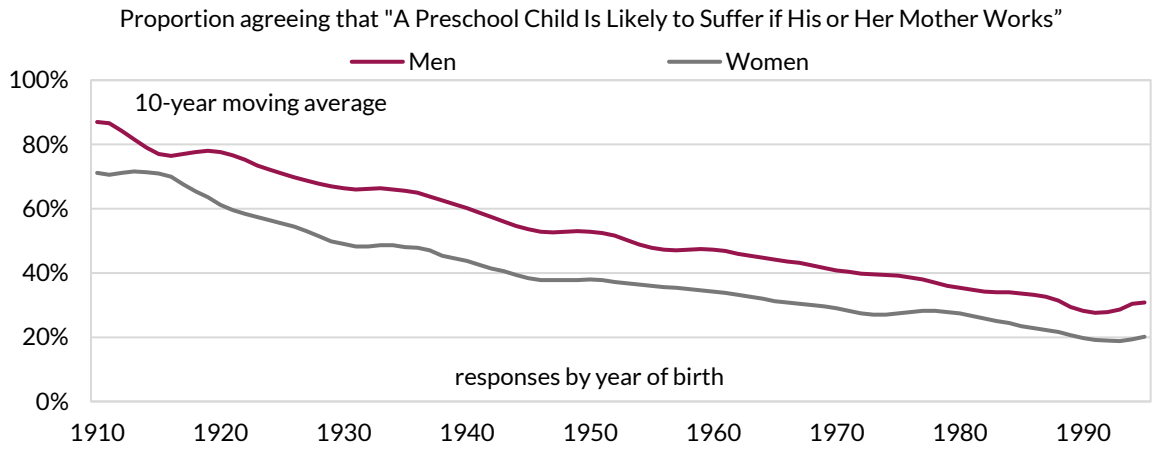
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, Axis Bank Research

Fig 28 – Child postponed, skills accumulated



Source: Human Fertility Database (2025), Our World in Data, Axis Bank Research

Fig 29 – US: Gender norms have improved over time



Source: General Social Survey (GSS) micro data from 1977 to 2016, C. Goldin (2021)

Women also increasingly began to view employment as part of self-identity rather than solely as a financial necessity. This changed job-search behavior, increased willingness to enter competitive fields, and raised aspirations for leadership and status.

These changes also accrued over generations, continuing the earlier-discussed cohort-driven transformation that started after WWII. Each successive generation of young women: those graduating in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, entered adulthood with different expectations than their predecessors.

This led to a new equilibrium in which women's continuous employment was increasingly normative. But underneath this virtuous cycle was the changing nature of work itself.

Some gaps remained, though:

- **Greedy Jobs disadvantage women:** These are high-paying professions that reward temporal commitment (long hours and inflexible schedules) more than pure skill. Steep pay premia for continuous availability create earnings disparities that disadvantage primary caregivers (still overwhelmingly women) even as legal discrimination declined. These dynamics became more pronounced after 1990.
- **The Leaky Pipeline:** fewer women in leadership roles. Despite entering

Source: AI

professional fields in unprecedented numbers, women remain under-represented in senior leadership positions. Pipeline leakage, caused by career interruptions, discriminatory promotion processes, and lack of mentorship, have continued to be a challenge for recent cohorts.

Source: AI

1990–now: Globalization, Competition, and the Corporate Pipeline

After 1990, the world economy saw rapid globalization, technological acceleration, deregulated capital flows, expanding services sectors, and intensifying competition.

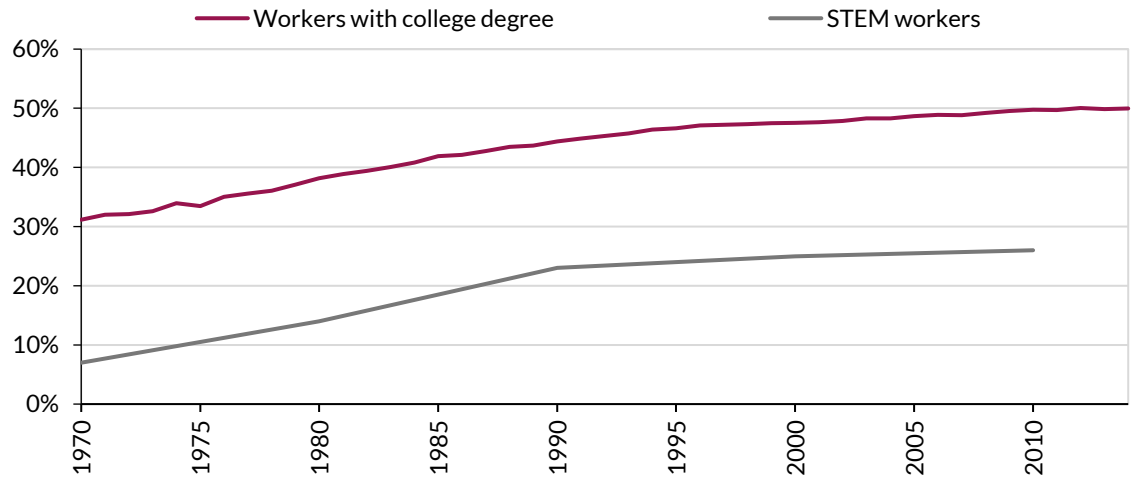
Globalization accelerated norm diffusion (e.g., on gender equality) and institutional change via global media and civil-society networks. Some countries benefited more than others basis their institutional readiness and desire to change.

Though women's representation in professional schools continued to improve (Fig 30), new challenges emerged. First, jobs benefiting from globalization were "greedy jobs" (where women have a disadvantage). Second, in many high-paying careers, men were over-represented at entry points due to legacy reasons: this is hard to change. Historical hiring patterns can account for as much as 75% of observed salary gaps within major institutions, implying that inequality was not due to current discrimination.

Likely affected by these factors, convergence between male and female pay slowed after 1990. Research shows that this was due to the 'unexplained' component of the wage gap which usually stands for discrimination, differential job sorting and persistent motherhood penalty.

Still rising educational levels and shifting cultural norms should continue pushing for equality.

Fig 30 - US: Share of female workers as % of total



Source: US Department of Labor, BLS, Axis Bank Research

MOTHERHOOD, EARNINGS DYNAMICS AND THE STRUCTURE OF WORK

Over time, several contributors to gender gaps in lifetime earnings like the marriage penalty have faded away in the developed world. However, one remains: the 'motherhood penalty,' which emerges after childbirth and widens over time. It results from (i) child-related labor supply adjustments, (ii) non-linear pay structures that reward availability for long hours, and (iii) rational household specialization under time constraints. From the time the emergence of bipedalism and growing brain-sizes made 'mating for life' an evolutionary success factor, mothers and fathers have optimized their collective output by specializing. In recent decades, the "cult of domesticity" engendered by the shift of production out-of-home and a lack of physical safety, has broken. But the dominance of "greedy" work forces optimization against mothers' lifetime earnings.

Source: AI

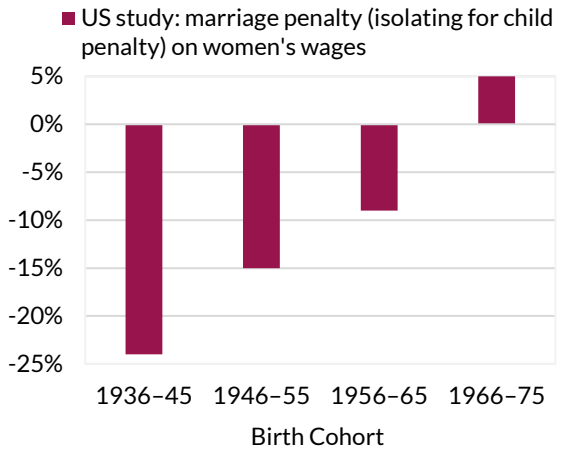
‘Marriage penalty’ nearly gone in the West; still meaningful in India

In most of the developed world, several decades ago, there used to be a meaningful drop-off in female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) and wages after marriage. This ‘marriage penalty’ has now nearly disappeared (Fig 31), except in economies like South Korea (25%) and Japan (20%), where cultural norms have slowed the shift. Even there, nearly all the penalty is due to a drop in participation; women who continue to work see no drop in the number of hours worked or wages.

In nearly all emerging markets, though, the marriage penalty still exists. Recent studies in India, for example, show a nearly 20% drop in participation rates post-marriage even in recent years, which worsens after childbirth (Fig 32). This is comparable to the 16% seen in China, but lower than the 35% estimated in Brazil (some attribute the high penalty in Brazil to lack of support from joint families/grandparents).

This drop is not visible in our survey: 75% of married women said they were working, vs. 60% of the overall sample. But that could be influenced by the survey being conducted among English-speaking educated women who have worked before. In the long run, we believe women who have invested in their education are more likely to prioritize its monetization.

Fig 31 - Marriage penalty has declined in developed countries…



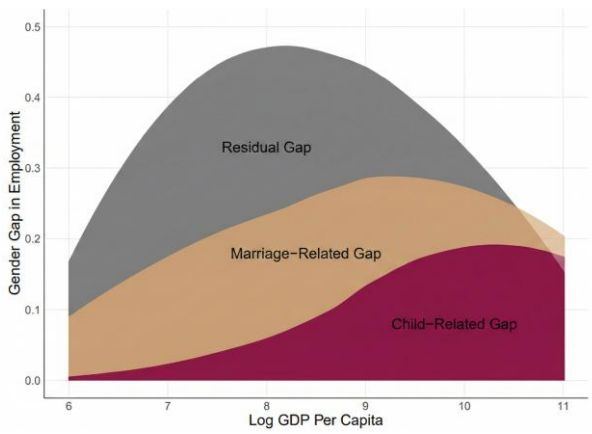
Source: Juhn & McCue (2016)

Fig 32 – …but still exists in several places esp. in Asia incl. India, Korea, China, Japan)

Source: Bussolo, Rexer, Triyana (2024)

Equally importantly, higher economic value of out-of-home work (translated into wages) drives this prioritization and shifts social norms as well. Globally, the marriage-related gap is seen as shrinking substantially as per capita GDP grows. It is reasonable to expect the same in India going forward as prosperity improves.

Fig 33 – Decomposition of gender gap by stage of development



Source: Klevan et al, "The Child Penalty Atlas"

The puzzle that remains: earnings catchup stalled for high-skill jobs

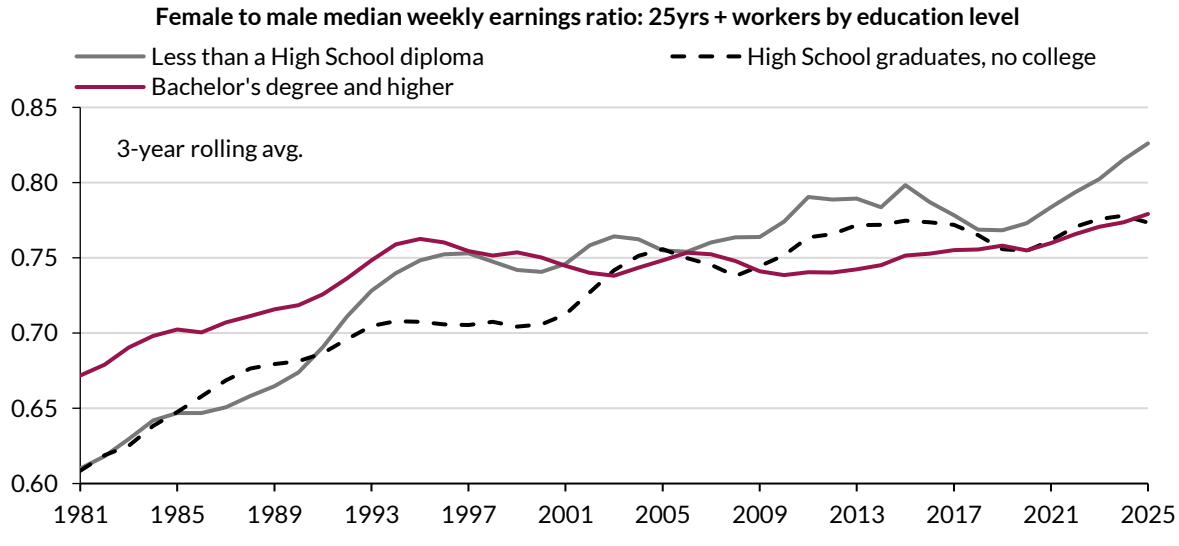
Till a generation ago, gender inequality in earnings could be attributed to the marriage penalty, differences in education, occupations chosen, or overt discrimination against women. As discussed earlier in this report, most of these factors are no longer as important in developed economies, where women match or exceed men in schooling, enter similar occupations, and begin their careers at wages that are near parity. And yet, there are sizable earnings gaps in aggregate, which expand with age.

These gaps are narrower for the less educated, and continue to shrink, implying progress in reducing generic bias against women. The gap for workers with less than a high-school diploma has narrowed from 25% in 1995 to 17% now.

But the pace of progress has slowed for women with bachelor's degrees or higher (Fig 34). For the most educated women the gap is now higher than for less-educated women and has barely reduced from 24% to 22%.

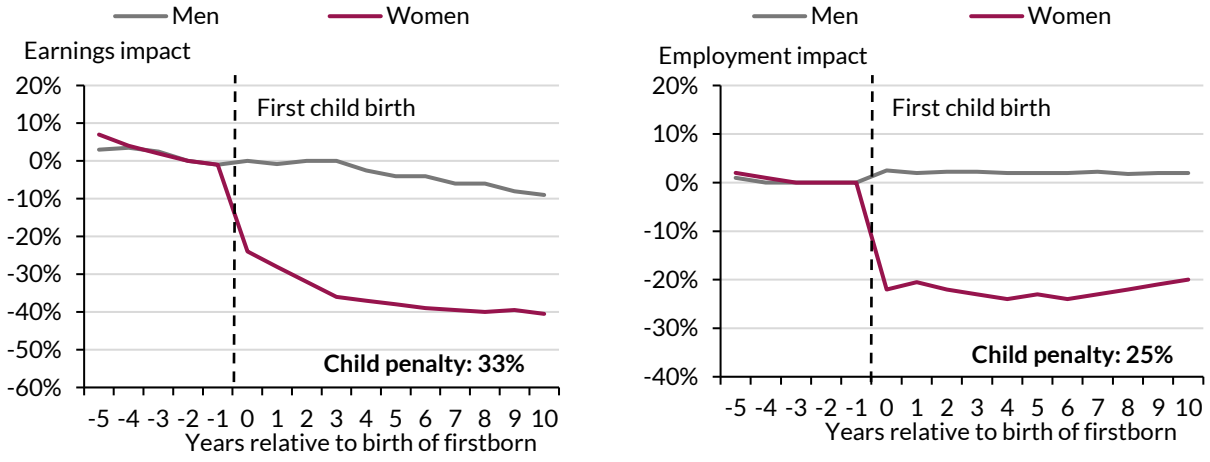
A range of studies across societies show that in several types of jobs, earnings trajectories diverge after childbirth. In such jobs, there is parity early in the career between men and women, but there is significant mid-career divergence; fathers' earnings typically continue to rise, while mothers' earnings growth slows or permanently shifts downward. This pattern is visible across countries and persists despite generous family friendly policies.

Fig 34 – US: Pace of progress in reducing gender pay inequality has halted for educated women



Source: BLS, Axis Bank Research

Fig 35 – Child penalties in the US; while magnitude varies, trends are similar across the western world



Source: Kleven, H (2022)"The Geography of Child Penalties and Gender Norms" NBER Working Paper No. 30176

The question, then, shifts from why women earn less than men at a point in time, to why women's earnings growth slows after motherhood in these types of jobs.

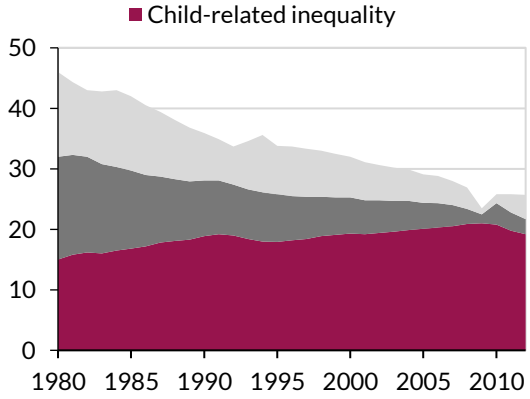
Answering it requires shifting from static wage gaps to the structure of work, the timing of child care, and household responses to labour market incentives. Policymakers must focus on post-motherhood dynamics given:

- **Entry Level Parity:** Conditional on education and occupation, men and women earn similar wages at entry into labour markets and till arrival of the first child (Fig 35).
- **Post Birth Divergence:** In several (but not all) types of jobs, earnings gaps widen sharply after the first birth and continue to expand over the life cycle.
- **Parenthood Asymmetry:** Fathers experience no comparable penalty, but mothers see a persistent downward shift in earnings.

'Motherhood penalty' now explains nearly all the earnings gap in the western societies

While even till 1980, gaps in education, choice or availability of occupations, marriage and other biases affected the gender-related gap in earnings, their influence is now insignificant (Fig 36). The child-related impact on earnings is now the dominant explanation for the gap and is higher than it was in 1980.

Fig 36 – Decomposition of gender inequality in earnings (%), in Denmark



Source: Kleven, Landais & Søgaard (2019)

Two features distinguish the motherhood penalty from traditional wage discrimination against women that used to occur earlier in developed economies and still does in developing ones.

First, the 'motherhood penalty' depends on the type of occupation: penalties are large in some occupations and minimal in others.

Second, small differences in hours, continuity at work, or availability at all hours, compound into large lifetime gaps in earnings due to a range of factors that we will go through now.

Mothers have a lower probability of becoming a manager

The motherhood penalty manifests itself in many forms, but perhaps the most significant is a drop in a mother's likelihood of climbing the corporate ladder. Managers after all earn more than other employees in most firms. Even in egalitarian societies like Denmark, the probability of a woman becoming a manager falls by 26% after having a child, whereas there is no difference between men and women before the child is born (Fig 37).

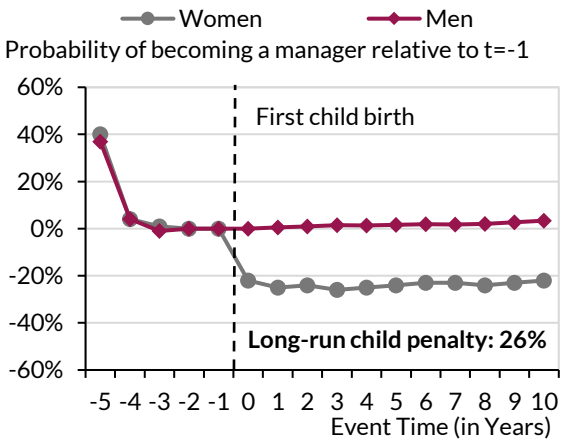
Discontinuity hurts mothers

Motherhood affects women's careers along three dimensions: participation, hours, and continuity. While some mothers exit the labour force temporarily, many stay employed but adjust hours or availability for some time. However, all undergo a discontinuity in their careers. Crucially, in many high paying jobs, the earnings impact of these adjustments are disproportional to the lost hours, as this affects how experience, client relationships, and promotion opportunities accumulate.

While a common narrative emphasizes occupational segregation, i.e., that women move into lower paying fields after motherhood, it is unlikely that a lawyer or a doctor would become a teacher. Some mothers move into more flexible, lower paying roles within the same occupation (Fig 38).

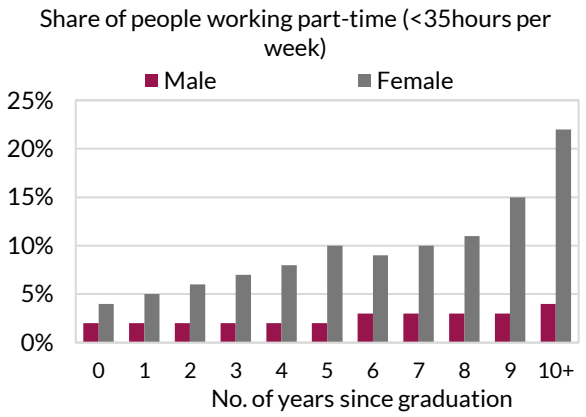
Importantly, they need not make these compromises in some types of jobs, including some high-skilled jobs like medicine (Fig 39).

Fig 37 – Motherhood affects promotions



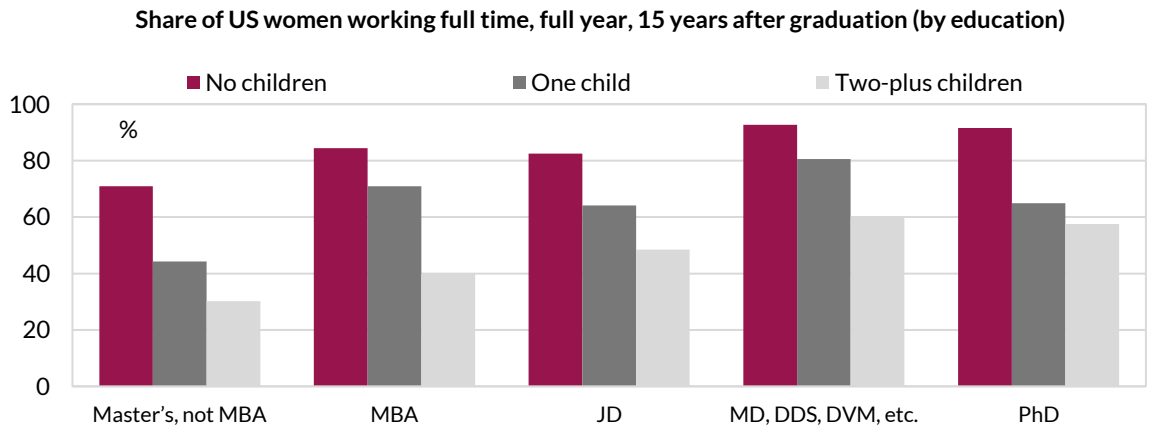
Source: Kleven, Landais & Søgaard (2019)

Fig 38 – Women's part-time rises after 8 years



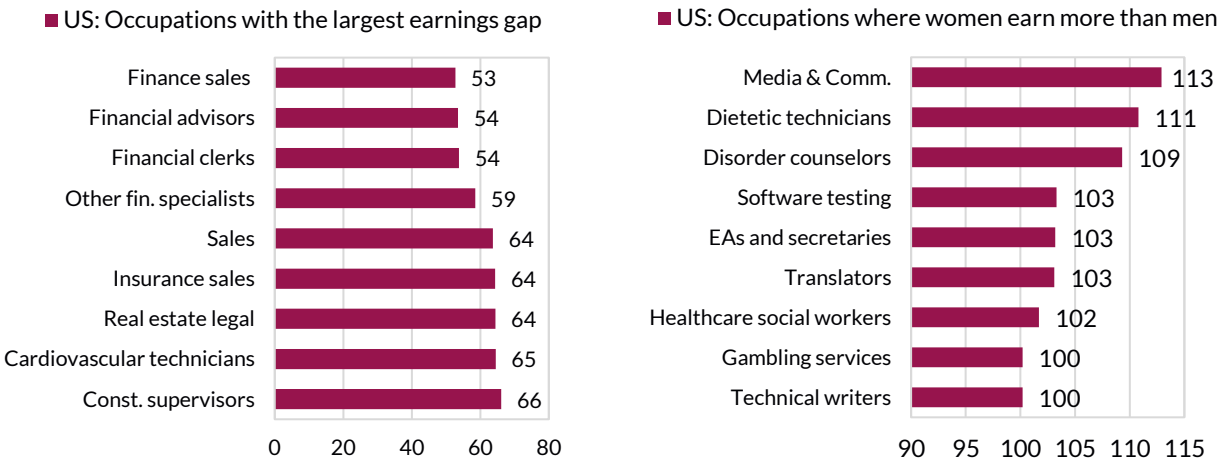
Source: Bertrand et. al (2009)

Fig 39 - Significant drop in highly qualified full-time female workers once they have children



Source: Goldin and Katz (2008)

Fig 40 – Women face the highest earnings gap in 'greedy jobs'



Source: US Dept. of Labor, Axis Bank Research

'Greedy Jobs' hurt most: non-linear pay structures

We encountered "greedy jobs" in Chapter 2, where women have a disadvantage. These jobs have non-linearity in pay, i.e., earnings rise faster than hours worked. Occupations like finance, law, consulting or senior management disproportionately reward workers who can commit to long, unpredictable hours. Claudia Goldin called this 'greedy work': output depends on being present at specific times, tasks and relationships are hard to hand off (substitution is hard), and earnings increase more than proportionally with hours/availability.

In such careers, flexibility can be costly. The role changes and task assignments that women are forced to choose upon motherhood explain most of the motherhood penalty.

Where pay is close to linear and substitutes are readily available (e.g., pharmacy, some technical roles), motherhood penalties are small.

Households have made optimization choices for thousands (millions?) of years

Bipedalism and large brains ➔ Pair-bonding, social complexity

Around four million years ago, as some primates became bipedal (i.e., began walking upright), their hands freed for tool use, which in turn allowed for brain-size (problem solving) to enter a spiral of evolutionary success. However, growing brain size combined with the changes to pelvic anatomy necessitated by bipedalism created new challenges, triggering new adjustments.

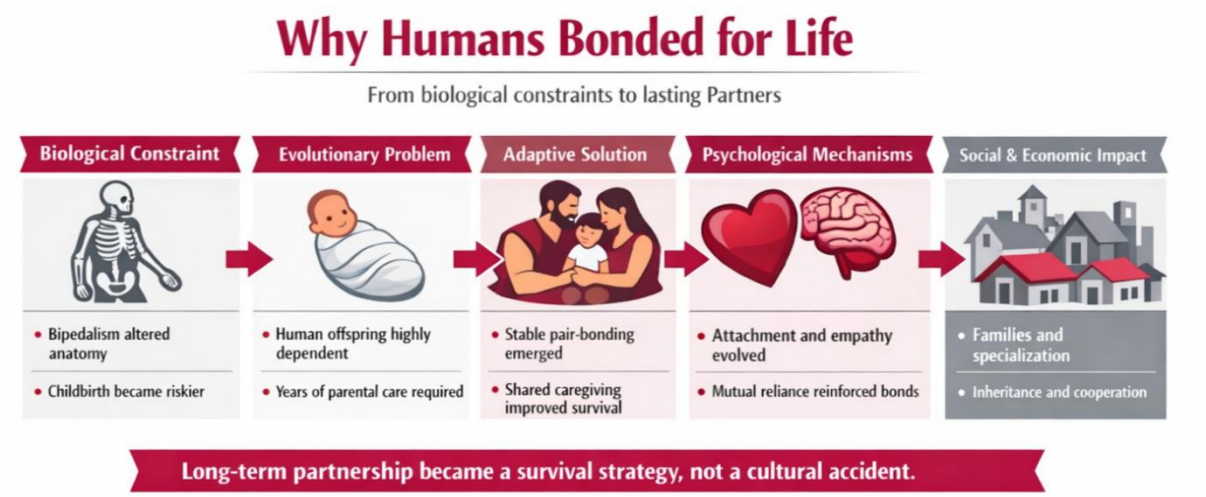
The physical difficulty (near impossibility) of a woman who walks erect delivering a child with a large brain meant a meaningful part of growth of human children began to occur after birth.

For humans, at birth the brain is only around 25% of the eventual adult size and takes 5 years to reach 90%. Humans are born unusually helpless compared to any other species (it takes 6 months for a baby to learn to turn, and 9-15 months to talk) and need significant resources (food and protection) after birth.

Long-term paid bonding, also called "mating for life" was an evolutionary response to this challenge. Evolution selected for genes that drove both mother and the father to sustain stable partnerships and invest time, protection, and resources during the uniquely long dependency period of human children.

Emotional bonding, empathy, and mutual dependence thus were not cultural add-ons but adaptive responses to biological vulnerability.

While biology meant that child-care was overwhelmingly the mother's responsibility, the mother and father that most efficiently divided work had the most offspring survive, entrenching these instincts into human behaviour.



The obstetric dilemma (walking erect and large brains) also drove a significant rise in social complexity. Despite a substantial part of the growth occurring after birth, the human infant's head is still rather large and makes human childbirth one of the most prolonged and complex among all animals, and the reason maternal mortality was so high till recent medical interventions reduced it.

The rise of midwifery was therefore important for the success of the species (this is seen in some other primates too but is not common). This, together with the downstream effects of pair-bonding increased social complexity: as families formed, multi-generational relationships became valuable, e.g., 'the grandmother hypothesis' – older relatives contribute to survival of young.

Pre-history, post-agriculture: Matriarchy and Patriarchy alternated

Over time, as humans spread out over varied ecosystems, they formed complex and larger social structures: this enabled specialization and thus productivity growth.

This also meant that the relationship and division of work between men and women became more diverse and complex. For example, in several ecosystems, more calories were collected through gathering than hunting, increasing the economic value of women. Recent archaeological evidence also questions the gender-segregation assumption (i.e., that hunters were men and gatherers were women). Remains from a burial around 9000 years ago in Peru are of a woman in hunting gear (the 'Wilamaya Patjxa huntress", found in 2018). Another study found that in the Americas, of 27 remains found in hunting gear, 11 were women.

Once agriculture started around 12000 years ago, and surpluses began to accumulate, new decisions had to be made. As assets grew, their inheritance and control became important.

DNA studies of bones from ancient burial sites show evidence of significant diversity in which gender dominated.

While patrilocal societies (males were closely related, with women coming from other tribes/villages) were seen as the norm, several recent finds show matrilocality: women in a village were closely related, with male remains of outsiders (e.g., in China , Britain and Anatolia). This affected the status of women in a society, even if it did not change gender roles.

The relative importance of men and women in a society also depended on cultural norms that often emerged from the dominant economic activities (see the box in Chapter 1). In her seminal work Ester Boserup (1970) showed that in societies that used the plough, which required more physical strength, men had higher stature, but where the hoe was used, women had equal if not better status. This has been observed in a range of societies, from native American tribes to the differing cultural norms between Indian states (the wheat vs. rice difference).

Source: AI

Violence over economics: start of religions and dogma against women entrenched norms

Economic integration continued to rise, and larger iron-age kingdoms emerged across the world, helped by the start of organized religion.

Around this time, women's roles had retracted in many regions, as the transition from the late bronze-age civilizations to the early iron-age civilizations was chaotic and violent, which made societies favor men. Dogma in emerging religions built-in these norms, and women's status did not recover till the modern era industrial and social revolutions, when violence fell.

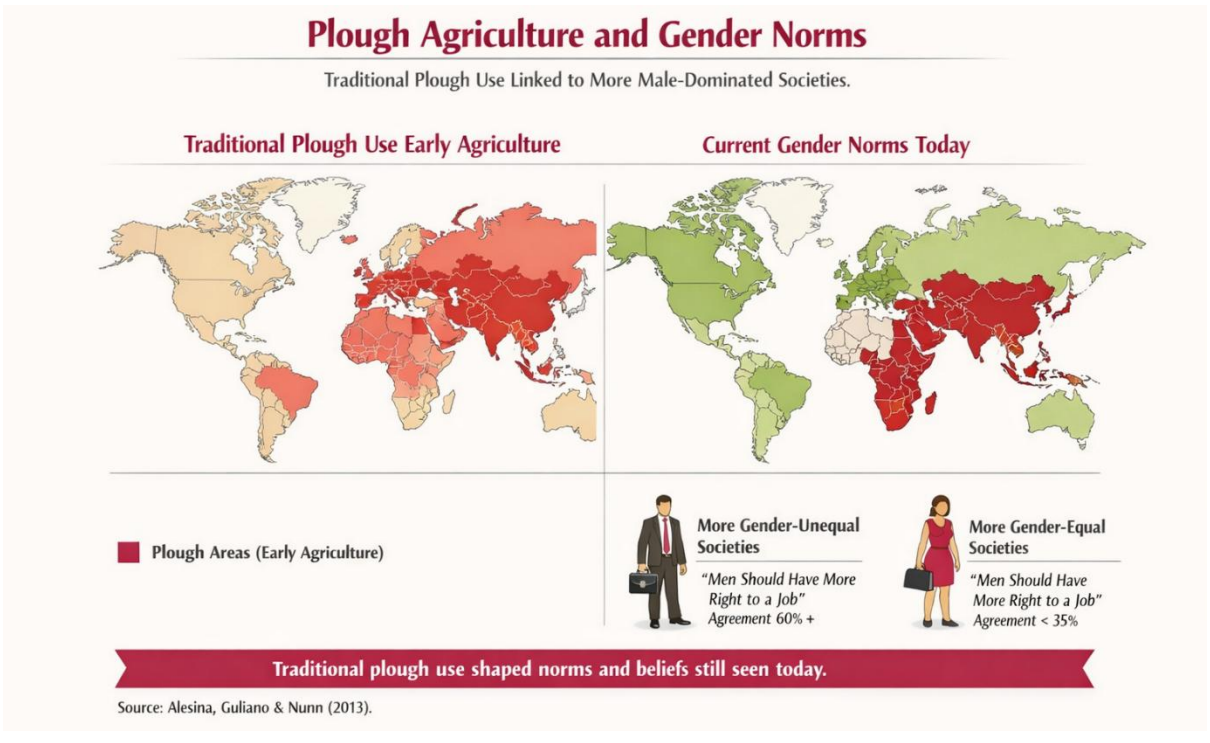
For example, the spread of Roman law that favored men (*patria potestas*, literally 'power of a father', gave the father lifelong authority over his kids and descendants) into a large part of Europe and Asia hurt the status of women. The Roman Empire was effectively an army with a state. Abrahamic religions that emerged in the region inherited this and codified it in dogma that lasted centuries, spread geographically with these religions, and persists today in some parts.

In the west, while religious dogma was diluted to some extent by the Renaissance, norms did not change till economics forced them to.

Spread of Roman law (*patria potestas*, literally 'power of a father') gave the father lifelong authority over his kids and descendants into a large part of Europe, Asia and pushed down the stature of women.

Many post-renaissance philosophers during the Enlightenment (18th century CE) did not see women as equal to men, likely influenced by the prevailing social norms and religious texts.

Where religious doctrine was less extreme, like in China and India, the status of women was better, especially during periods of political stability. However, rampant inter-state violence, and periodic attacks from invaders influenced social norms against women. In China, the Communist Revolution accelerated the empowerment of women: Mao's phrase "Women hold up half the sky" during the Cultural Revolution was to encourage women to take on tasks earlier reserved for men. But social norms continued to dominate (e.g., there are very few women in Chinese leadership).



'Out of home' work, and the decline in violence

The Industrial Revolution moved production out of home. As societies at this time were much more violent than they are today, women were seen as being safer inside the home. Further, as most of the early mechanized jobs, like in mining or factories required physical strength, and were hazardous, this further separated the "male" public sphere from the "female" private sphere.

It was not until the two World Wars forced women into the labour force to replace men who had to fight, that the "Cult of Domesticity" was broken, and women's economic necessity was proven. This also fueled the suffrage movements in western societies.

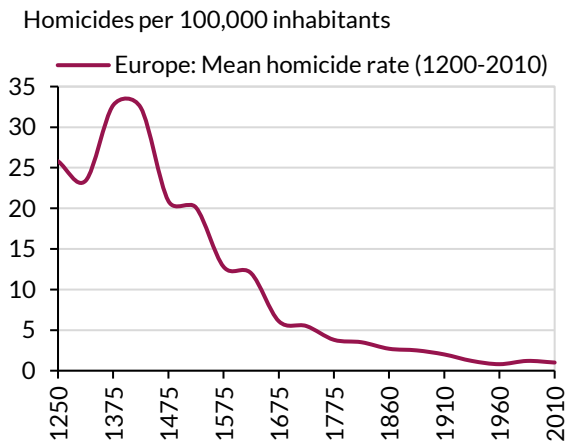
Further, as violence declined substantially over time (Fig 41), physical strength became less necessary to survive outside the house.

Current economy: back to optimizing the collective output; mothers take the back seat

As safety outside the house is no longer a deterrent and religious dogma is less relevant, families can now better optimize resources to meet the dual and sometimes conflicting objectives of work and parenthood.

Bringing up children is a primal instinct, and a common objective of marriage: only 12% of married women in India aged 40-49 were childless in 2019-2021 (was 7% in 2015-16). It is a low 15-20% even in developed countries.

Fig 41 – Violence has declined in the West

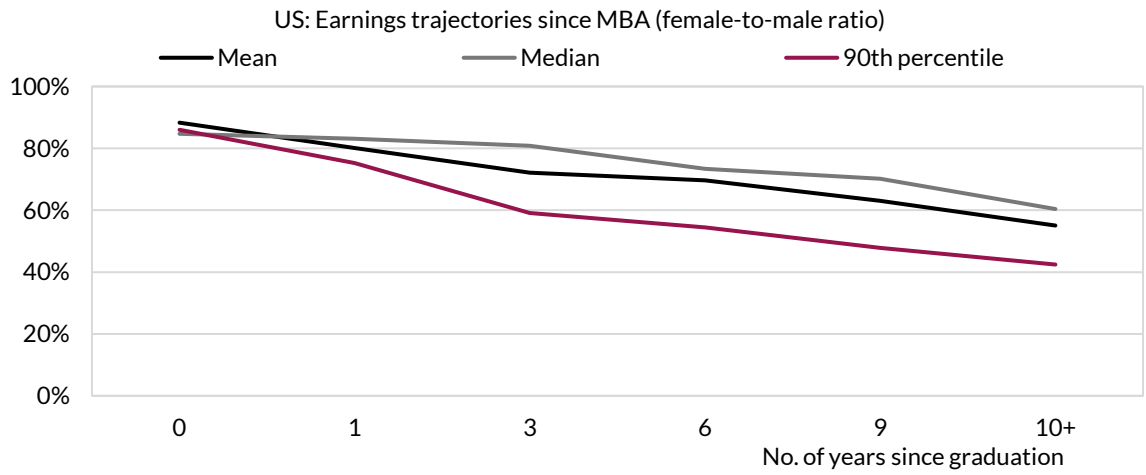


Source: From Swords to Words, M. Eisner (2014)

Childcare introduces time constraints that require at least one parent to be reliably available.

When jobs are greedy (as explained earlier in this chapter), households face the choice that either both parents avoid greedy roles and thus accept lower earnings, or one parent does so while the other specializes in childcare. Given the disproportionate positive gains from high performance in these jobs, and the necessity to work continuously (a small drop in hours available to produce hurts earnings disproportionately, as do short employment interruptions), data shows in most families the mother seems to be choosing to stay back and absorb caregiving responsibilities.

Fig 42 –The gender earnings gap widens over time



Source: Bertrand, Marianne; Goldin, Claudia; Katz, Lawrence F. (2009)."Dynamics of the Gender Gap for Young Professionals in the Corporate and Financial Sectors." NBER Working Paper No. 14681.

Motherhood penalty now sits at the heart of the fertility debate too

Children reduce female labour supply

For much of the 20th century, economists treated the correlation between women's work and fertility (higher FLFPR and lower fertility) as a choice: that employment and motherhood were substitutes. However, as seen above, the causality runs from having children to reduced female labour supply. Given how modern labour markets penalize motherhood, mothers are effectively forced out of the most lucrative jobs.

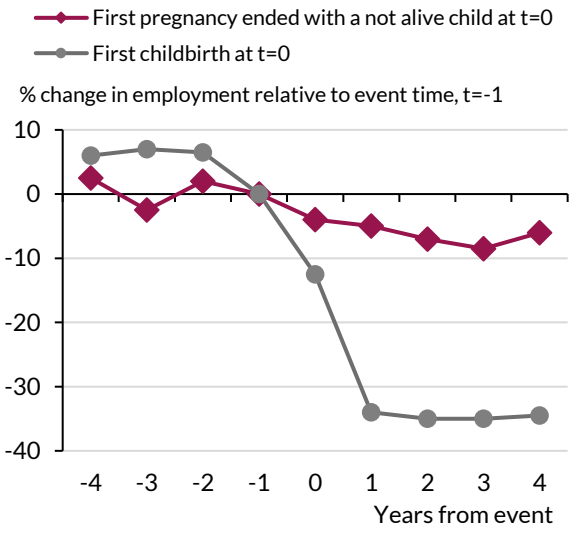
This suggests that the substantial fall in fertility rates across societies comes from the motherhood penalty. As economies develop, the income foregone due to motherhood rises too, and the fertility-labour supply trade-off becomes larger and more negative. Women respond rationally by delaying childbirth, having fewer children, or exiting demanding career tracks altogether.

Even in China, regions where motherhood penalties have risen most sharply have experienced the steepest fertility declines, and women who move into high penalty regions subsequently reduce fertility relative to comparable women elsewhere.

Research has ruled out explanations that women select motherhood because they do not want to work, and has also narrowed causality to child-care, by ruling out just pregnancy as a causal factor for the motherhood penalty (Fig 43).

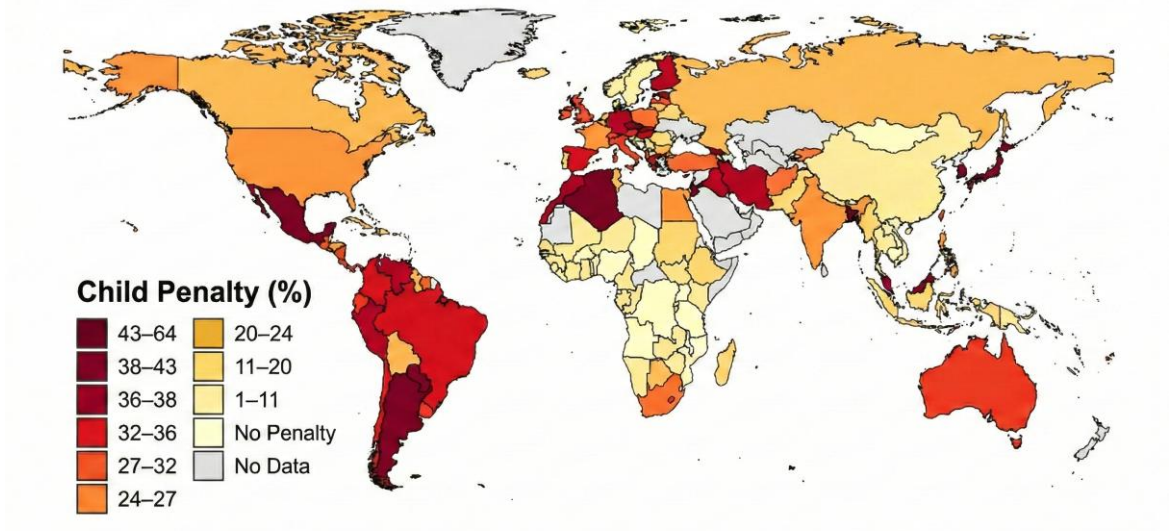
Given how modern labour markets penalize motherhood, mothers are effectively forced out of the most lucrative jobs

Fig 43 - Employment effects of non-live pregnancies and first childbirth



Source: Berniell, Inés et. al (2021) "Motherhood, Pregnancy or Marriage Effects?"IZA Discussion Paper No. 14841.Institute of Labor Economics (IZA)

Fig 44 - Heatmap of child penalties in employment



Source: Klevan et. al, "The Child Penalty Atlas". Review of Economic Studies

HOW URBAN, EDUCATED INDIAN WOMEN NAVIGATE WORK AND FAMILY

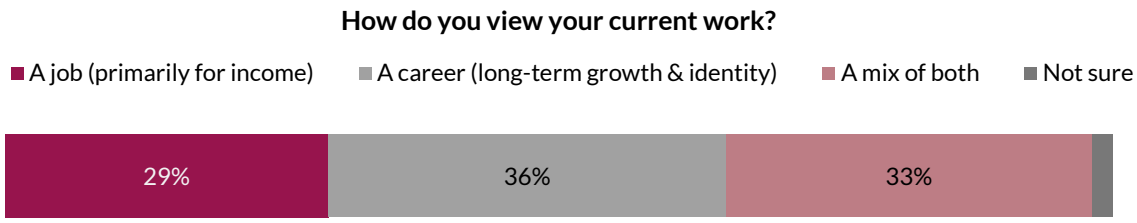
There is very little primary work in India on female labour force participation. Further, given the scale and diversity in India, different parts of the population face different challenges, e.g., for educated women living in India's cities, the challenges are like those experienced in the developed world. We commissioned a new Axis Bank–Ipsos survey of around eleven thousand college graduate women aged 25–55 across 42 Indian cities with work experience. We find that this cohort has already transitioned to the 'Career AND Family' stage (instead of the 'OR' conundrum faced by many, and prevalent in the west a hundred years ago), and views work as careers, and integral to their identity. Yet entry into the workforce, career progression, and re-entry after breaks continue to be shaped by marriage, caregiving demands, workplace design, and durable social norms.

Source: AI

Both career and family are central to modern women's identity

Responses to our survey show that across age groups and cities, most women view paid work as more than a source of income (Fig 45). Two-thirds describe their work as a career or as a mix of income and identity, and a large segment say having a career is important for a woman's self-respect (Fig 46). Financial independence, personal fulfilment, and social recognition emerge as powerful motivators for staying attached to the labour force (Fig 46).

Fig 45 – For two-thirds of respondents in our study, work was a career or a mix of job and career

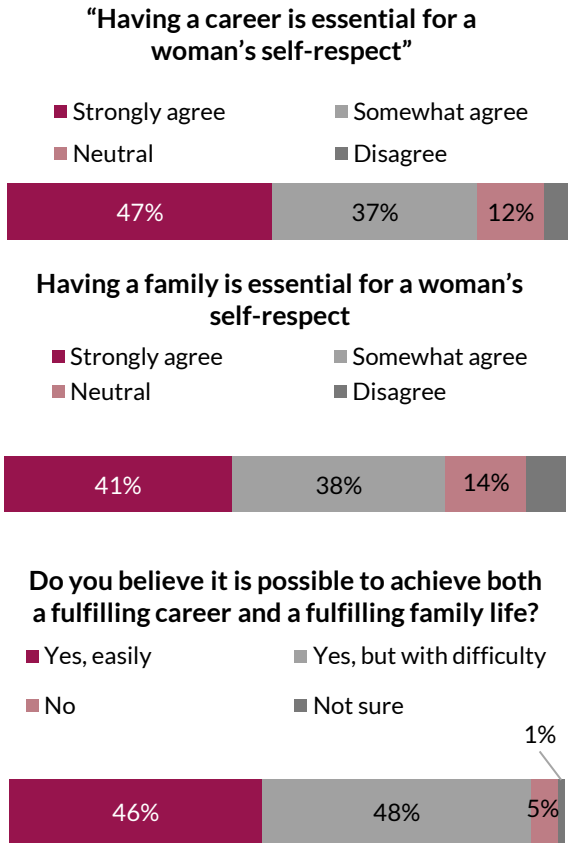


Aspirations, identity, and social expectations coexist uneasily

When asked about identity, many women say both career and family are central to who they are (Fig 47). Few frame their lives as an either-or choice. Instead, identity is layered, reflecting aspirations to succeed in having both a career and a family even if reality may require prioritization at different stages.

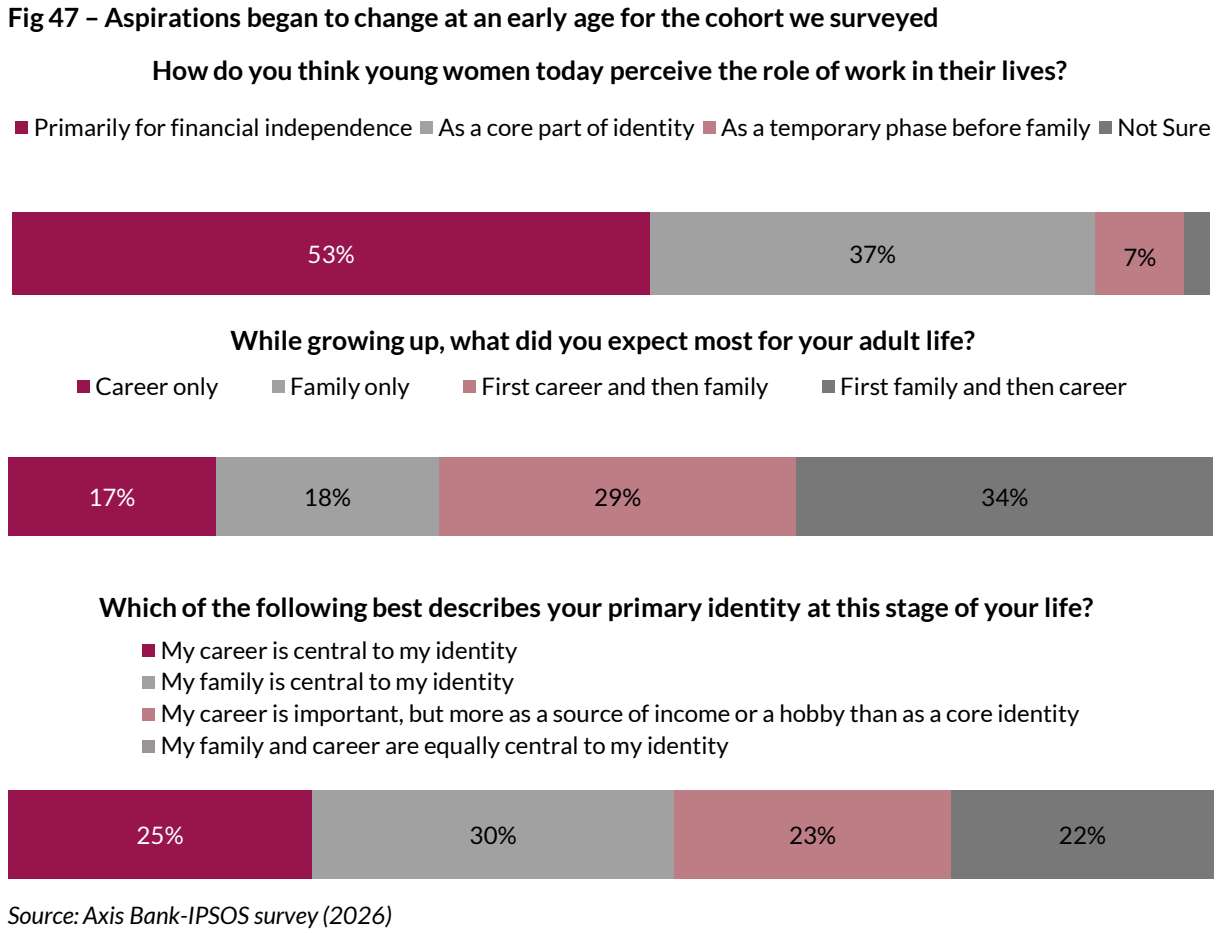
This framing helps explain why trade-offs between career and family are often experienced as losses and not a choice. Women are not rejecting work or family; they are navigating constraints.

Fig 46 – Respondents overwhelmingly chose Career AND Family as defining their identity



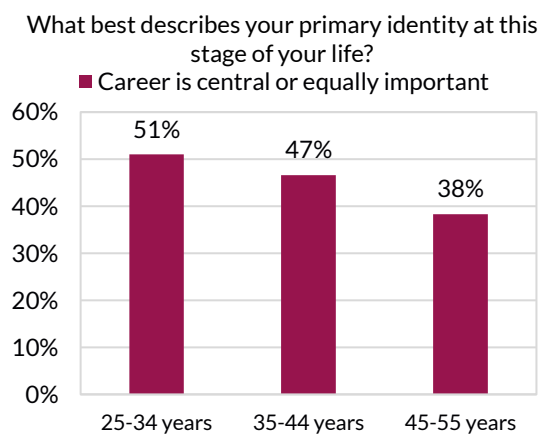
Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

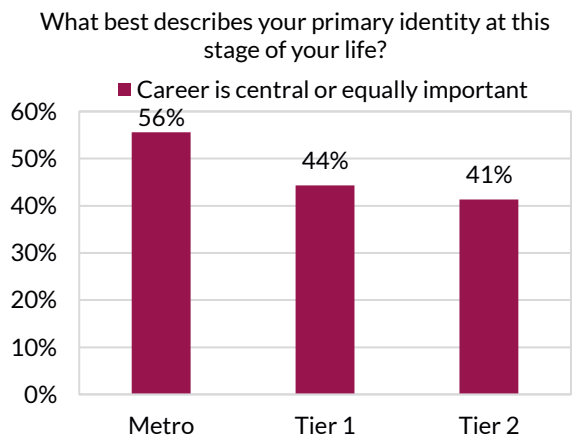
Fig 47 – Aspirations began to change at an early age for the cohort we surveyed



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Fig 48 - Younger college-educated workers, especially those in major cities, are more likely to view their careers as central to their identity



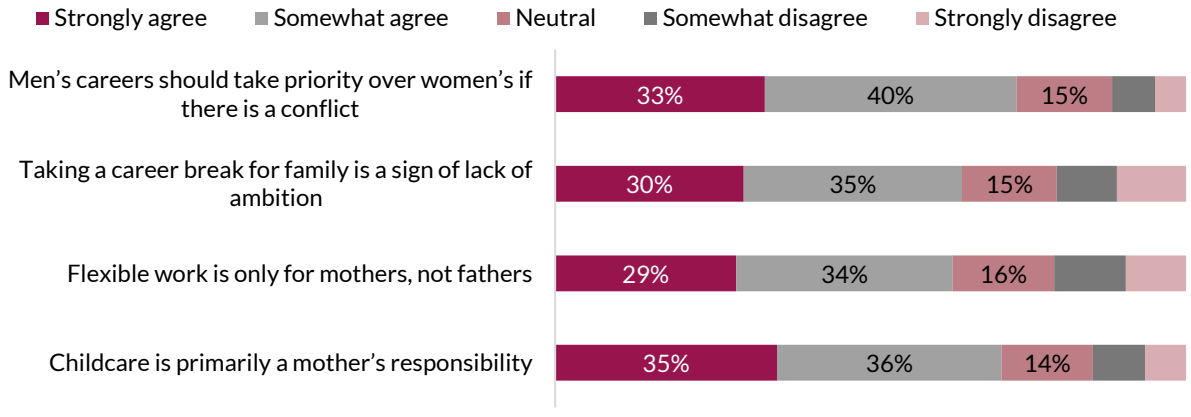


Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Social norms are shifting but unevenly

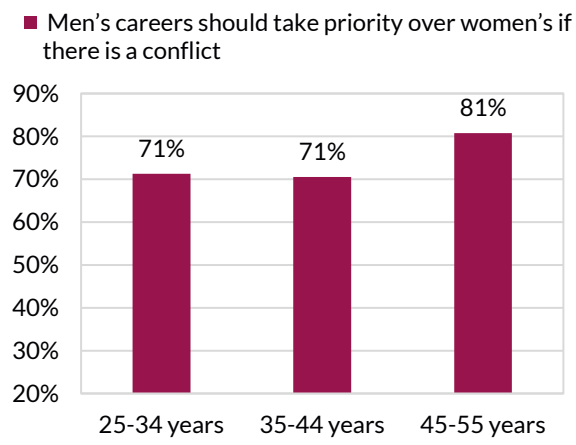
Social norms, however, continue to exert influence. Only a small minority of our respondents reject the idea that men's careers should take priority in case of a conflict (Fig 49). Most expect flexible work and childcare to be a mother's responsibility. While 35% of women do disagree that career breaks signal lack of ambition, such perceptions are still believed to exist in workplaces and society at large.

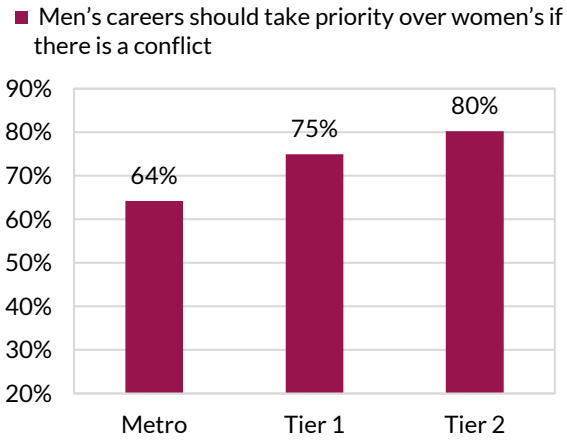
Fig 49 - The stickiness of social norms: men's careers have priority, flexible work is for mothers



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Fig 50 - Beliefs vary by age and extent of urbanisation

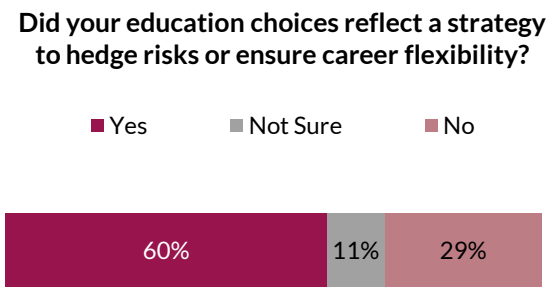




Source: Axis Bank–Ipsos survey (2026)

Education as insurance

Education plays a strategic role in life planning for men and women. 60% of women say their educational choices were shaped, at least in part, by a desire to hedge risk or preserve flexibility. This shows an awareness of potential career interruptions. This view of education as insurance underscores how early in life women anticipate future constraints, even as they aspire to sustained workforce participation.



Role models inspire but structural constraints matter more

Seeing women in leadership positions is widely viewed as motivating. The majority of respondents say that the presence and achievements of women leaders encourage them to aim higher in their own careers, reinforcing the importance of representation and visibility of women in leadership roles.

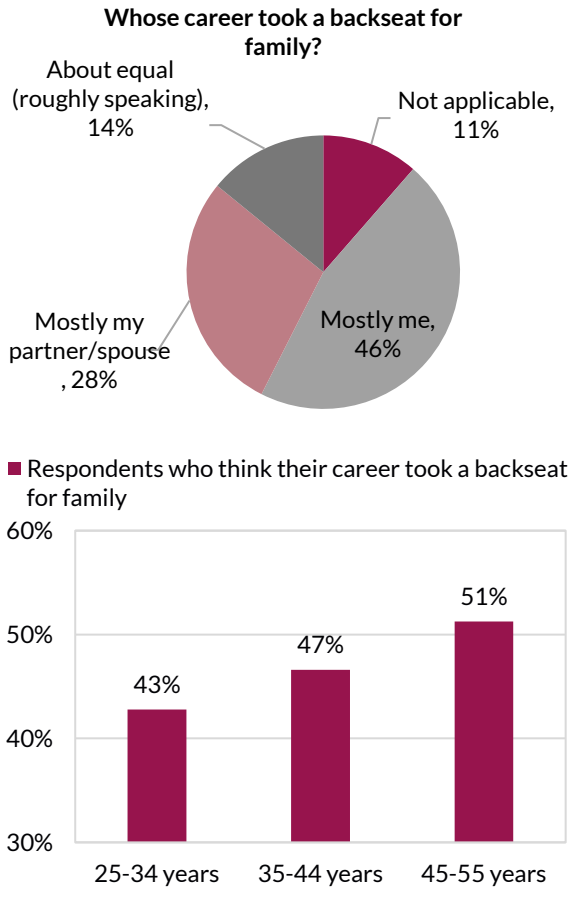
Yet inspiration alone is not seen as sufficient. Women consistently point to practical changes — flexible work design, childcare support, fair hiring practices, and supportive workplace cultures — as essential for translating aspiration into sustained participation.

Source: AI

Marriage & parenthood remain inflection points

Many women report a slowdown in career progression after marriage, often reinforced by relocation decisions. When couples move for work, women are more likely to relocate for their partner's career than the reverse. That more older women say they sacrificed for family than younger ones (Fig 51) implies cultural norms are changing.

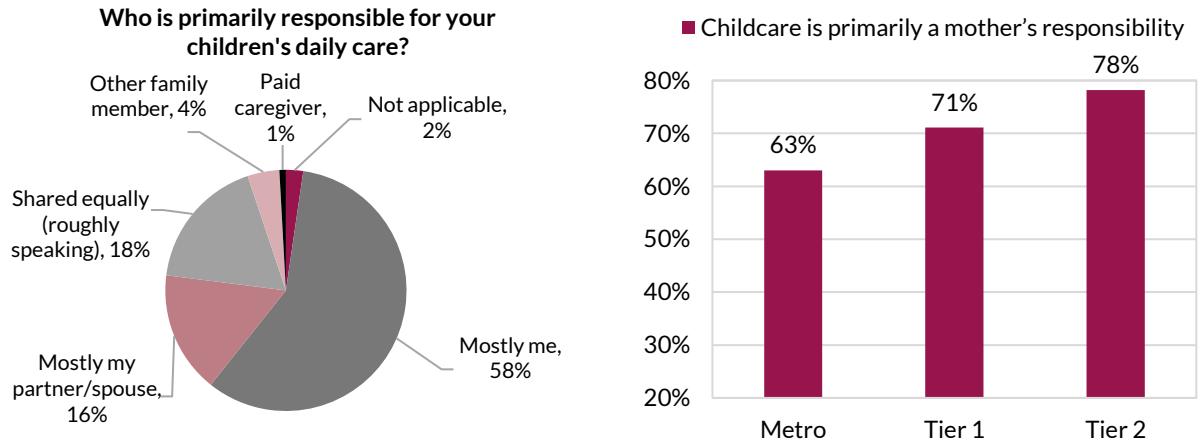
Fig 51 – 46% of the women feel their career took a backseat for family, especially older women



Source: AI

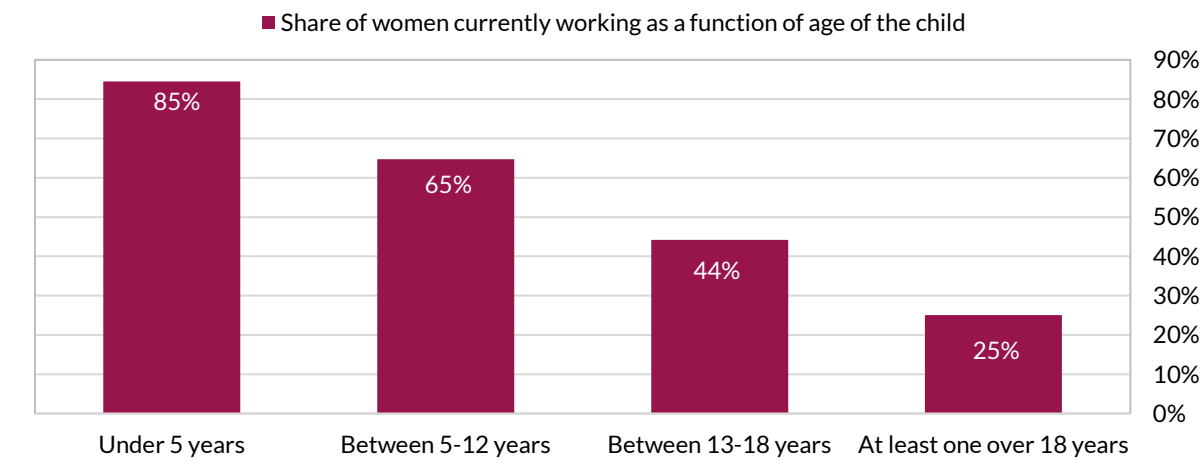
The arrival of children deepens these asymmetries. Primary responsibility for daily childcare continues to fall disproportionately on mothers, even among working women (Fig 52). While some households report more equal sharing or rely on paid caregivers or extended family, caregiving demands—especially during early childhood—remain a central constraint on women's labor supply, hours, and job intensity. This is consistent with global trends too. These adjustments are rarely framed as purely voluntary, reflecting instead the challenge of managing care responsibilities in settings where institutional support remains uneven.

Fig 52 - Childcare is primarily a mother's responsibility; these norms dominate in Tier-2 cities



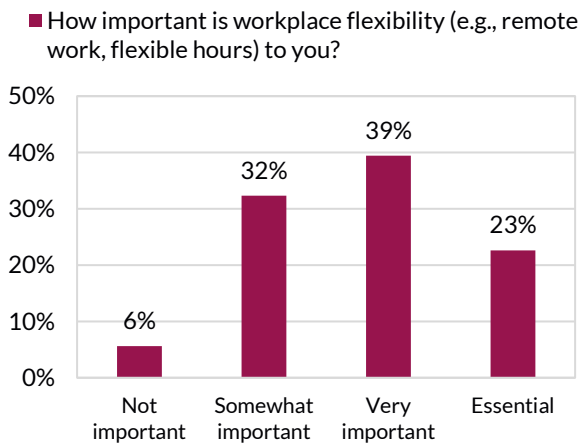
Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

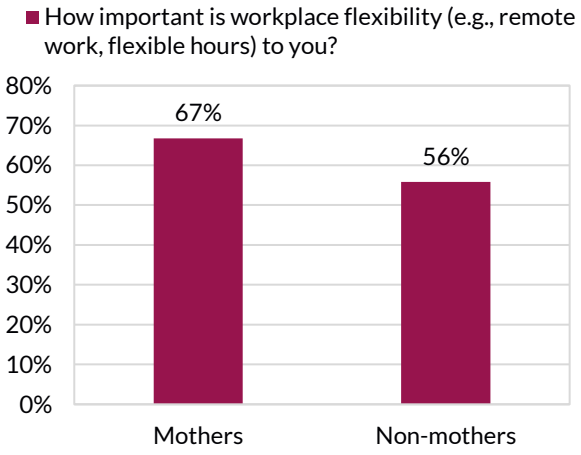
Fig 53 – That women with older children work less, likely due to older women facing higher penalty



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Fig 54 - 62% of respondents rate workplace flexibility as very important/essential; dominated by mothers





Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Workplace flexibility matters but access is uneven

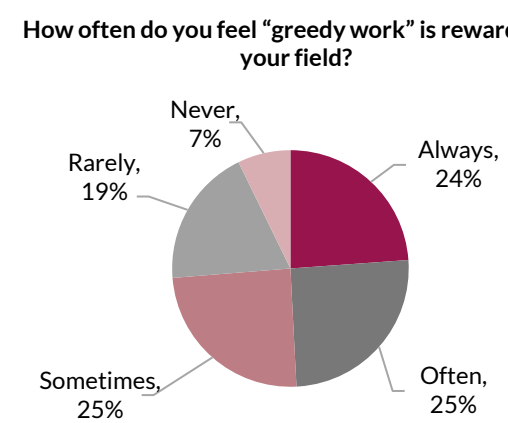
Among women who are currently employed, perceptions of workplace support are mixed. Many describe their workplaces as somewhat supportive of family responsibilities, but fewer characterize them as highly supportive. Flexible hours and remote work options are widely valued and often cited as essential rather than optional benefits (Fig 54).

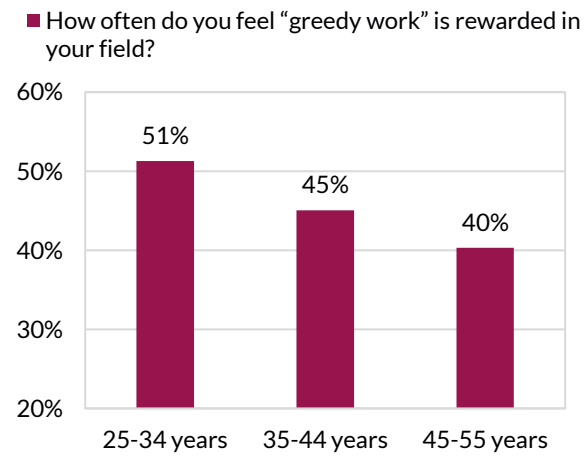
At the same time, many women operate in work environments where long hours and constant availability are rewarded. Jobs that demand inflexible schedules are commonly seen as pathways to advancement, reinforcing the sense

Many women describe their workplaces as somewhat supportive of family responsibilities, but few characterize them as highly supportive

that caregiving and career progression are often in tension. Unsurprisingly, 47% of our survey respondents said that they have at some point seriously considered leaving their job and some (24%) did because of difficulties balancing work and family life.

Fig 55 – Majority of women feel "greedy work" is rewarded, especially younger women





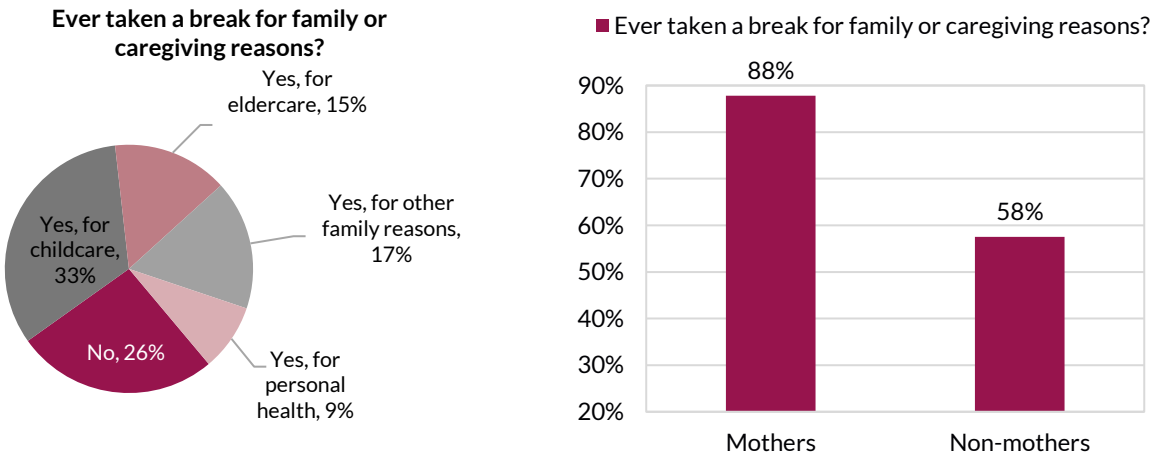
Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Leaving the workforce is common

Extended breaks from paid work are a defining feature of many women's employment histories. Childcare is the most frequently cited reason, followed by eldercare and other family responsibilities (Fig 56). This is especially true for mothers.

Extended breaks from paid work are a defining feature of many women's employment histories, with childcare being the most frequent

Fig 56 – 74% of women took a break; even 58% of non-mothers took a break (88% of mothers did)



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

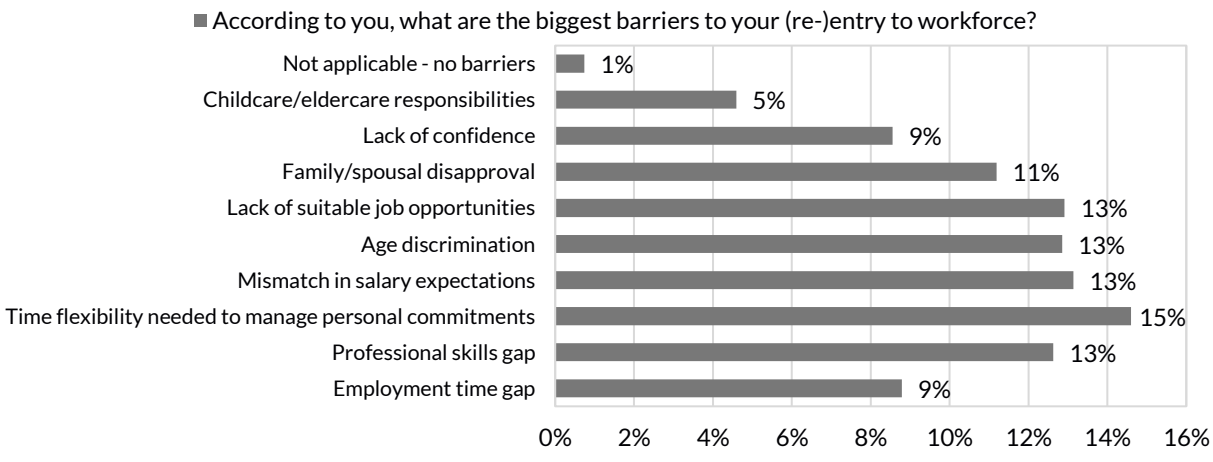
Re-entry is widely viewed as the hardest stage

Legal enablement/removal of constraints

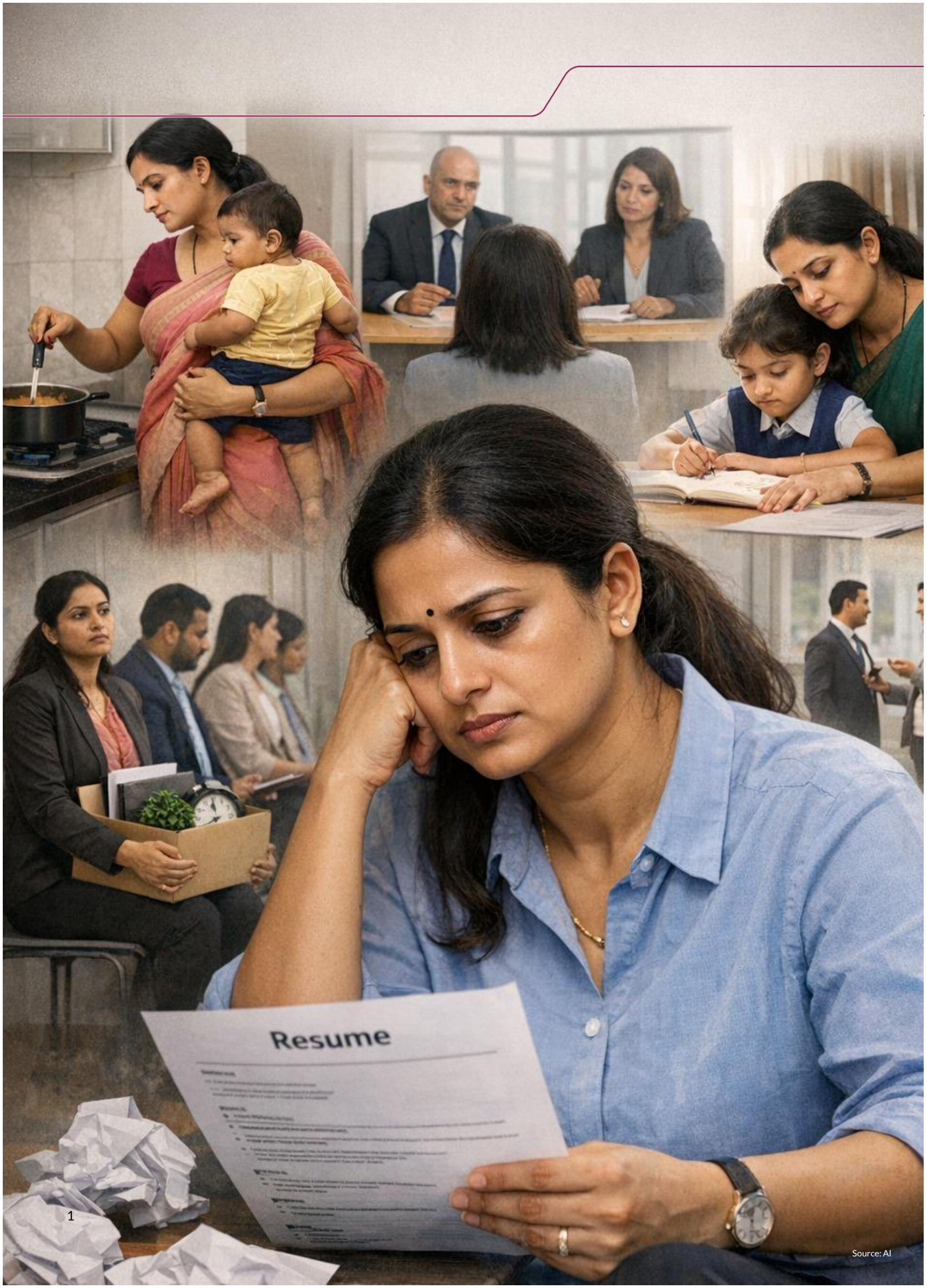
Re-entry into the workforce emerges as one of the most challenging phases of women's work lives. Women who have attempted to return, or are considering doing so, point to a web of obstacles: employment gaps, skill erosion, age bias, inflexible job designs, and hiring practices that penalize non-linear careers.

Perceptions of bias are widespread. Many women believe employers and recruiters view returnees, especially mothers, less favorably, whether through shortlisting decisions, interview dynamics, or job role assignments. These concerns persist even among women who remain confident in their skills and experience.

Fig 57 – Barriers to women's re-entry into the workforce



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)



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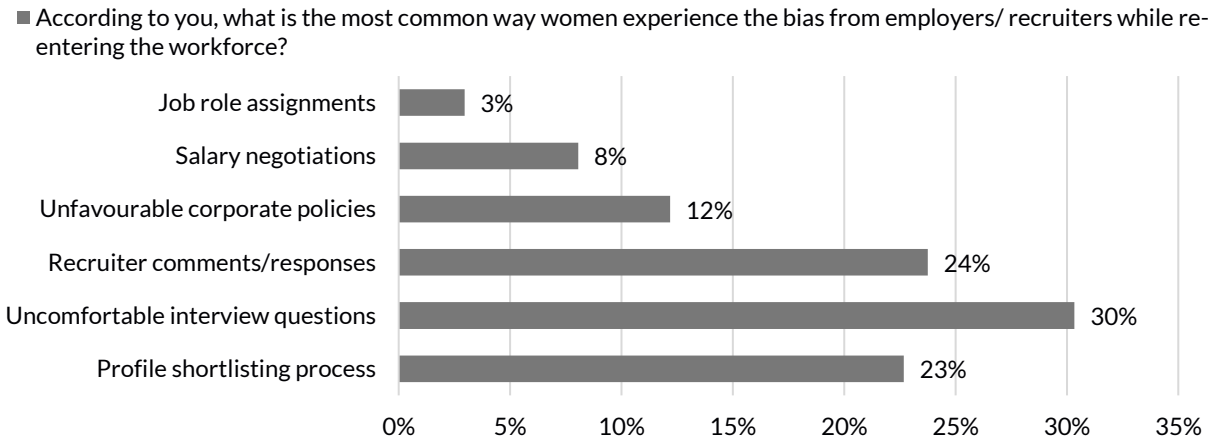
Source: AI

Fig 58 – Most returning women see bias in shortlisting norms and interview questions



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

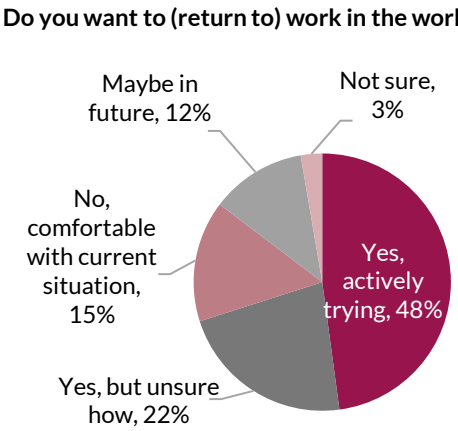
Wanting to work is not the same as knowing how to return

Among women currently outside the labor force, many express a desire to return to work—but are uncertain about how to do so. A lack of suitable opportunities, rigid schedules, and concerns about work life balance stand in the way.

What pulls women back into the workforce

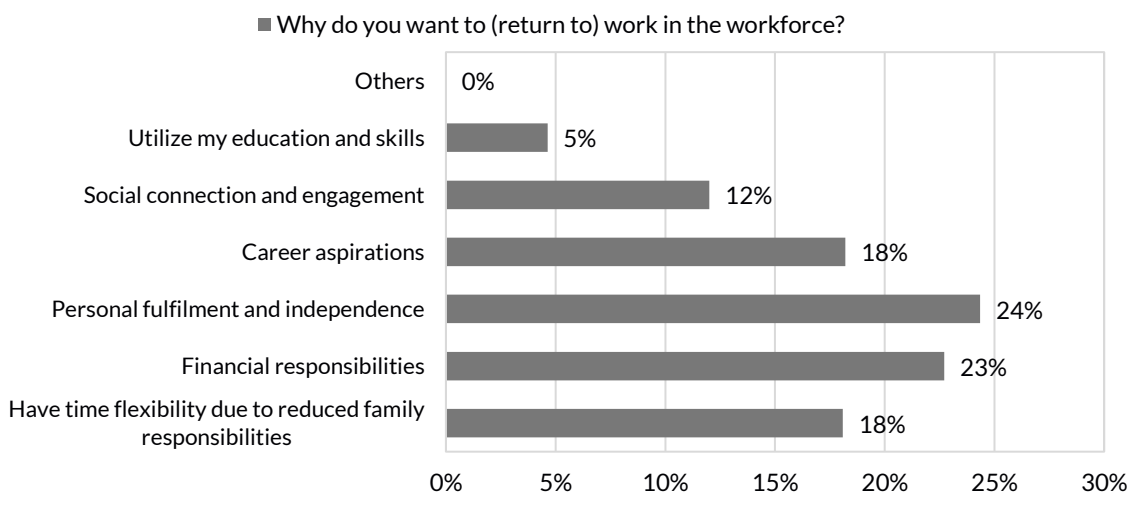
For women who do return, motivations are varied. Financial necessity plays an important role, but it is rarely the only factor. Personal fulfillment, renewed career aspirations, social engagement, and a desire to use one's education and skills are also powerful drivers.

Fig 59 – Almost half of the women currently out of workforce want to join back



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Fig 60 – Personal fulfilment & financial responsibilities key reasons for their willingness to work again



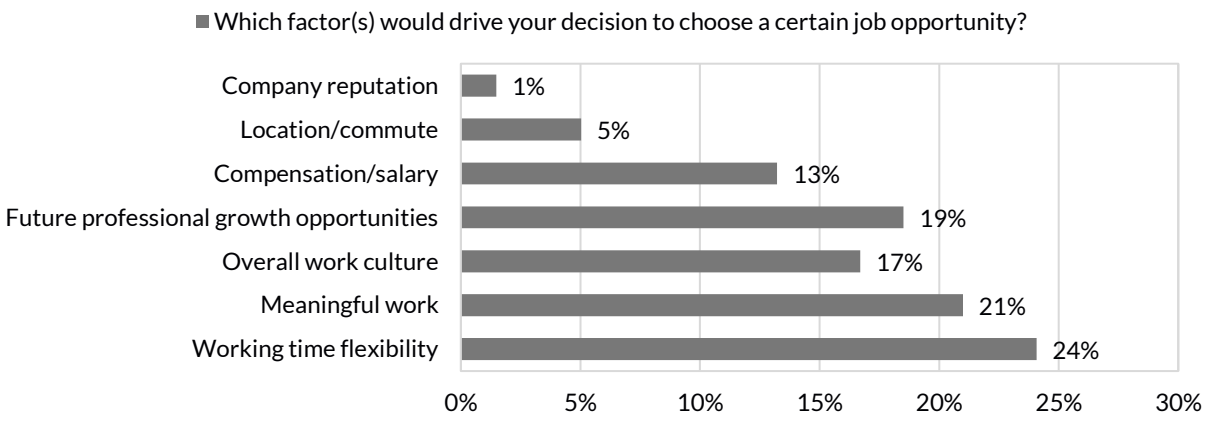
Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Life cycle changes matter. As children grow older or caregiving demands ease, many women reassess earlier trade offs and seek to reconnect with paid work (Fig 60).

Others remain out of paid work by choice, citing family responsibilities or financial security.

Even here, however, decisions are often contingent rather than final, with many women open to re entry under different conditions.

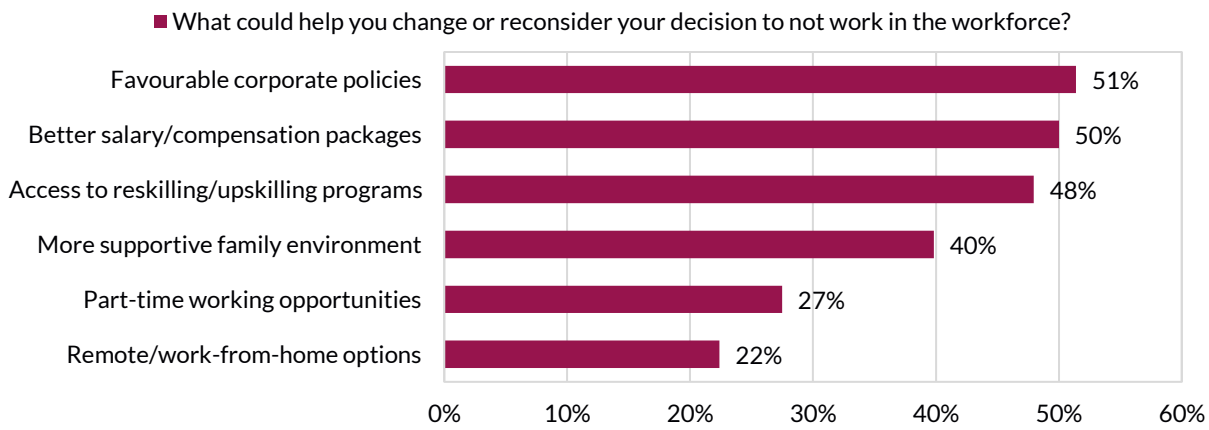
Fig 61 – Women returning to workforce feel flexibility, meaningful work, and growth opportunities are the key factors while choosing a job



What women say would make re entry easier

Women consistently identify a set of institutional supports that could ease re entry. These include flexible and part time roles, remote work options, 'return' programs, skill refresh initiatives, supportive hiring practices, and affordable childcare. Mentorship and visible pathways back into meaningful work are also seen as important.

Fig 62 – Women feel that favorable corporate policies & upskilling programs would make re-entry easier



Source: Axis Bank-IPSOS survey (2026)

Cautious optimism about the future

Despite persistent barriers, women express cautious optimism about the future. 58% of our respondents believe that societal and workplace obstacles will ease further over the next decade, even if progress is expected to be gradual. Views of younger women suggest a growing emphasis on financial independence and career identity, alongside continued awareness of family responsibilities.

Still, optimism is tempered by realism. While women hope the next generation will find it easier to combine career and family, our research shows that meaningful change will require shifts not only in attitudes, but also in how work itself is organized.

WHAT MUST BE DONE: JOBS, REGULATORY SUPPORT, SAFETY, CHILDCARE

The challenge of increasing women's labour force participation must be met at several levels. When education raises aspirations, but markets fail to offer suitable opportunities, women rationally stay out. Shortage of jobs overall is a problem in India and affects male workers as well. Further, there are fewer jobs in India in sectors that are female dominated globally, and women's share in non-agricultural sectors are also much lower than in peer markets. India needs to create near-home high productivity jobs, and improve access to higher education, remove legal constraints on female employment, improve policy support for part-time/flexible work, invest in the childcare ecosystem and ensure safety & mobility for women. Some of these changes should occur naturally over time but need to be accelerated.

Source: AI

We now summarize the challenges for India, and lessons from other countries for policymakers.

Need more research on FLFPR in India!

During our months-long study, we perused multiple books, and too-many-to-count papers, podcasts and blogs. But we found very little high-quality and actionable research on women's workforce participation in India. We have used lessons from global research (which itself has gaps), which by-and-large should be applicable, especially for corporate jobs. But there is no calibration for India's unique socio-cultural characteristics.

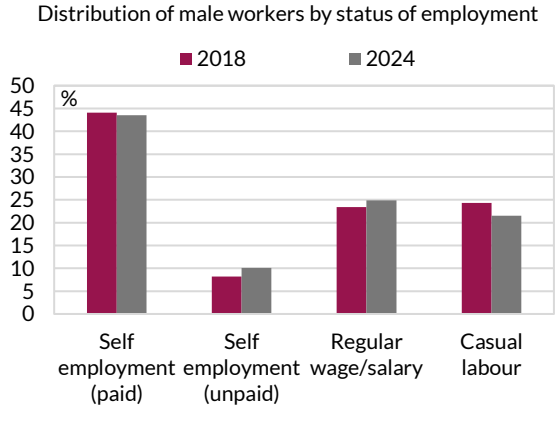
Weak overall labour demand exacerbates penalties

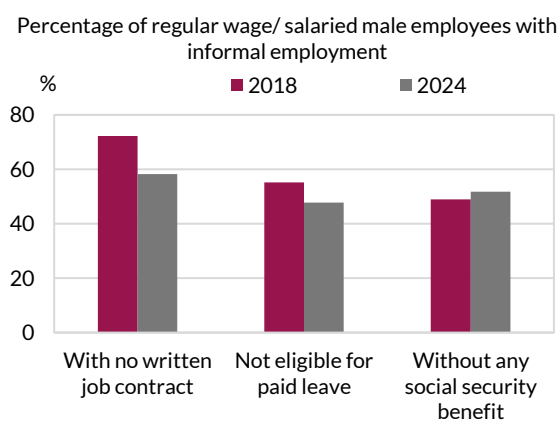
Even as more women are becoming ready to work, participation rates are hurt by weak overall demand for labour. When education raises aspirations and reservation wages, but suitable employment opportunities are lacking, women rationally choose to not participate.

The underlying problem is demand for labour, whether male or female. While overall labour force participation rates are at par with peer nations, and the unemployment rate is 5% (Fig 64), the challenge is under-employment. Only a quarter of males are in regular wage jobs and are often over-qualified for their roles (Fig 63). The rest are in informal, low productivity "disguised" unemployment, self-employed, or work fewer hours than they desire. More than half of Indian graduates are in informal work with no social security (Fig 65). Social norms do not force women to go through this charade.

The solution therefore is to encourage labour intensive sectors. The revival in construction, notification of new labour codes, and some recent FTAs opening opportunities for exports in labour intensive manufactured goods should help, but labour demand will likely remain a challenge for India for the foreseeable future.

Fig 63 – Employment structure of males improving very slowly; still high informality





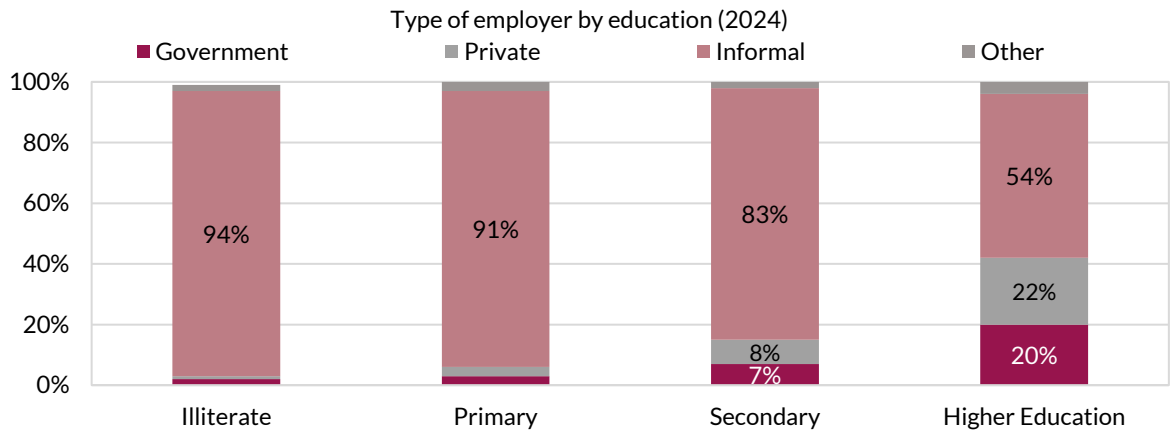
Source: PLFS, Axis Bank Research

Fig 64 – India's employment (15-64 years) (% of population): at a headline level not low vs. peers

Metric	Total	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Neither looking for work nor in education	**29**	**5**	**52**	**25**	**31**
In education or training	15	16	14	14	16
Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)	56	79	34	61	53
Unemployed	5	5	6	4	7
Self-employed	50	47	56	61	40
Wage-employed	45	48	38	35	53

Note: Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–23, in % for the 15–64 age group; numbers are rounded to the nearest integer. The calculations use the 'current working status' (CWS) variable.
Source: ***Table 16.1, Accelerating India's Development by Kartik Muralidharan***

Fig 65 – More than half of Indian graduates are employed in the informal sector



Source: PLFS, sourced from Data for India (link)

Women disadvantaged by structure of job market; education to help

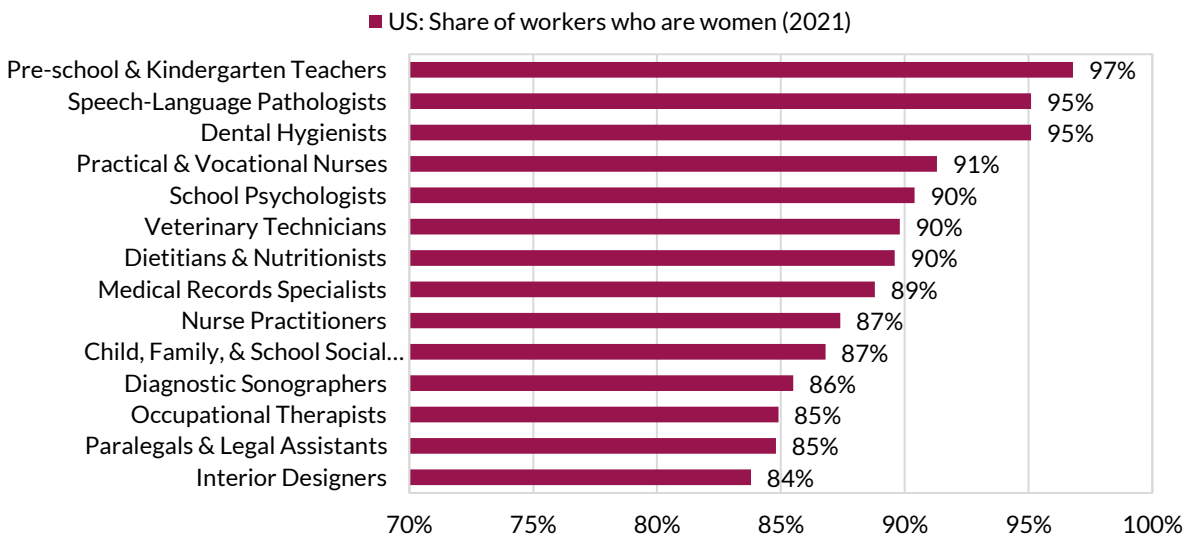
In addition to the overall shortage of quality jobs, specifically for women's participation, a bigger challenge lies in creation of near-home, non-agricultural jobs that align with their constraints and preferences.

Too few jobs in India in women-driven occupations

Across economies, there are common sectors where employment tends to be dominated by women. For example, 97% of pre-school and kindergarten teachers in the US are women, as

are 91% of nurses and therapists (Fig 66). It is reasonable to think that the female-male split in jobs would be consistent across economies.

Fig 66 – Women in the US dominate occupations related to health and education



Source: US Department of Labor, Axis Bank Research

But in India, jobs in healthcare and in business and administrative activities, which are often dominated by women are too few compared to the US, and those in construction and trade, which are male dominated, too many (Fig 67).

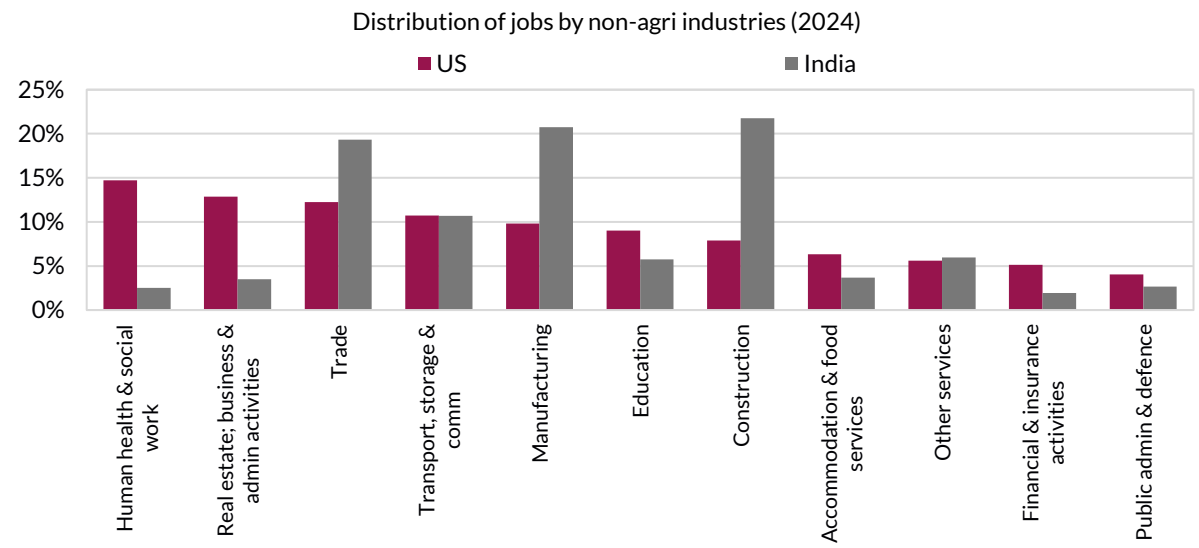
Under-representation of women in female dominated sectors

A second concern is that even within sectors that are female-dominated, the share of women is too low, for example in education,

India still has a higher marriage penalty than in developed markets

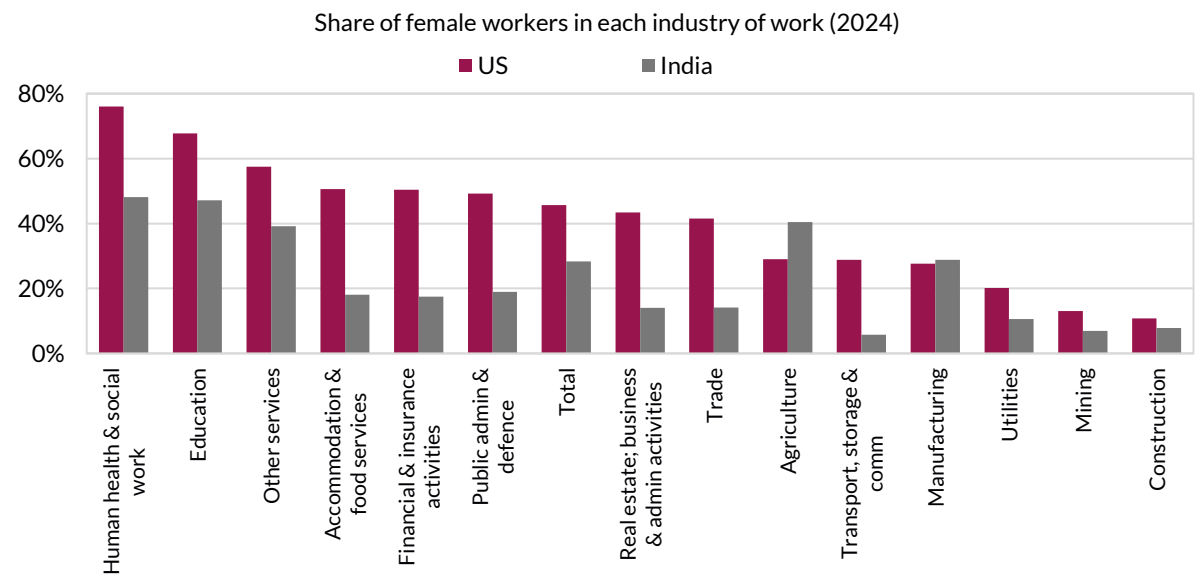
70% of workers in the US are women, vs. only 50% in India. As discussed in Chapter 3, India has a higher marriage penalty than in the US, but the motherhood penalty is comparable to the US.

Fig 67 – India has too few jobs in industries which hire more women (health/education/admin)



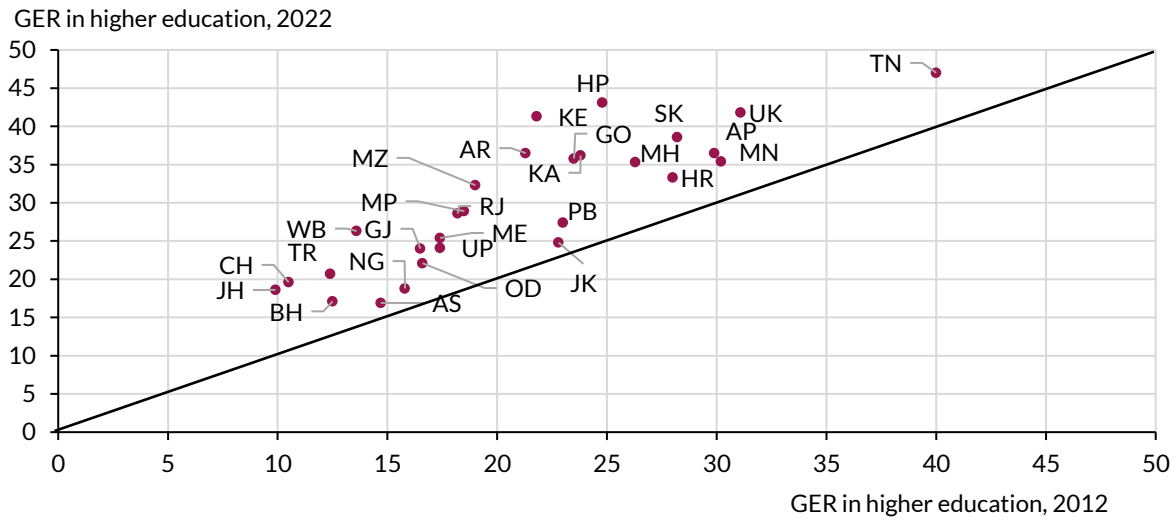
Source: ILO Modeled Estimates, Axis Bank Research

Fig 68 – In India, women are relatively under-represented in the female-dominated sectors



Source: ILO Modeled Estimates, Axis Bank Research

Fig 69 - Several states have improved higher education GER by more than 10pp between 2012 & 2022

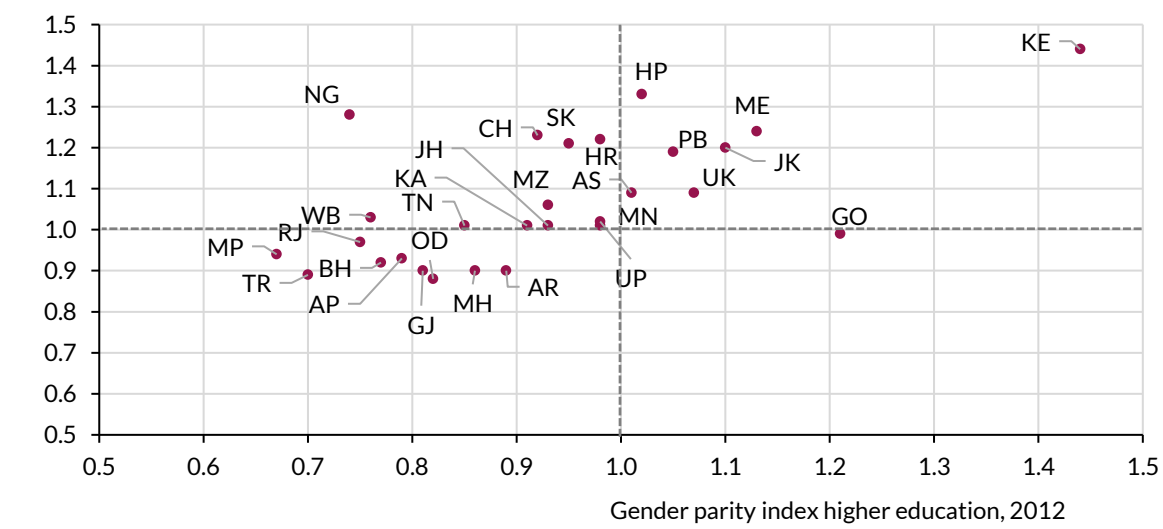


Source: AISHE (2012, 2022), Axis Bank Research

Improving gross-enrolment ratio in higher education to help

As discussed in Chapter 3, the best corrective step for marriage penalty is education. In India, gross-enrolment ratios (GER) in higher education have risen meaningfully from 2012 to 2022 (Fig 69). Several states saw a 10-13pp rise in GER, and most have achieved gender parity (ratio of female GER to male GER, Fig 70).

Fig 70 - Yet many states haven't reached the gender parity in higher education GER



Source: AISHE (2012, 2022), Axis Bank Research

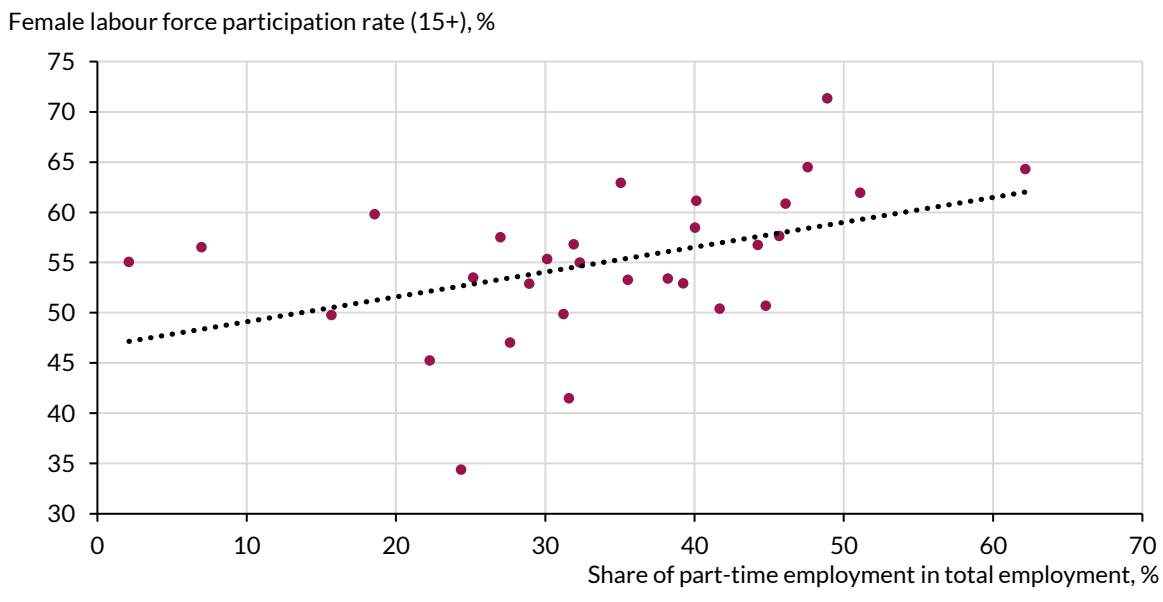
Gainful part-time employment/flexible working options help female participation

Women dominate the part-time work force in most countries, as it helps them balance motherhood and other care responsibilities. There is a large body of research conducted in developed markets that shows part-time work helped raise workforce participation of women.

However, after a few decades of such policies some limitations have emerged as well: it does not close gender inequalities (as 'greedy work' is not available part-time), reinforces stereotypes and can limit progress in careers where it is difficult to shift from part-time to full-time roles.

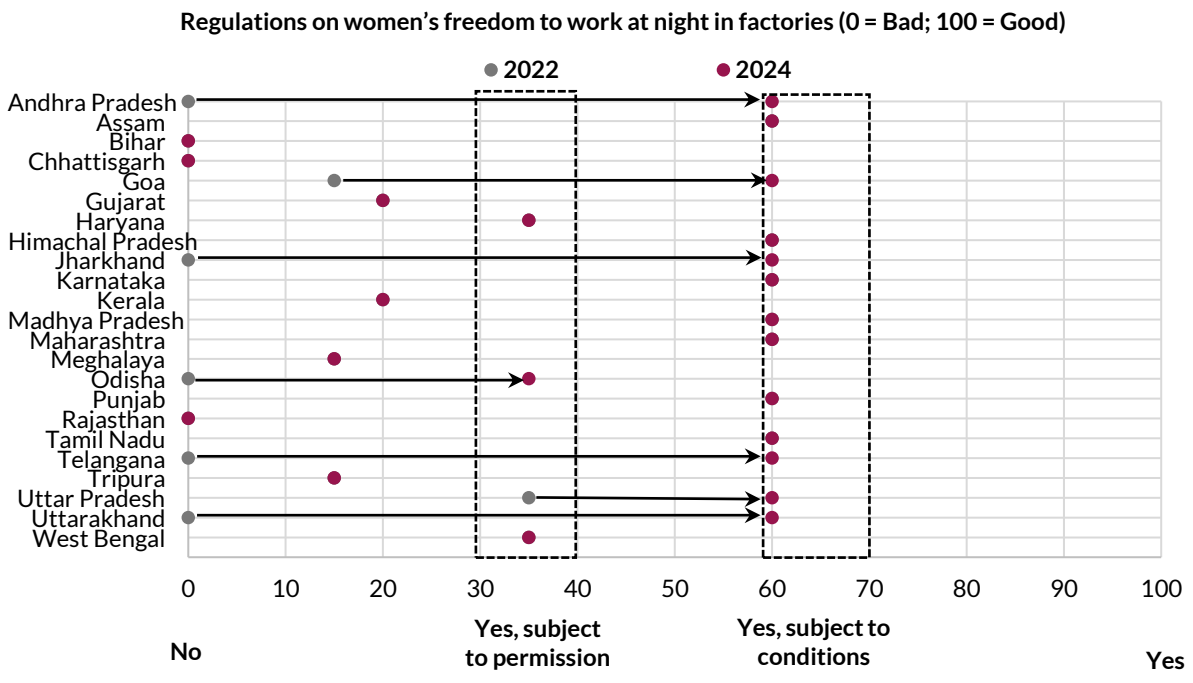
Given the extent of the gender gap in India, and the urgent necessity of utilizing the demographic dividend as well as the aspirations of women (as seen in our survey too), structural reforms formalising part-time employment (better quality jobs with flexibility in working arrangements) are an important first step to unlock women's workforce potential in India. If nothing else, this can help change norms that women can be employed when they have young children or have other care responsibilities.

Fig 71 – Cross-country analysis suggests a positive relationship between part-time work and FLFPR



Source: ILO Modeled Estimates, Axis Bank Research

Fig 72 – States updated regulations to allow women to work in factories at night between 2022 & 2024



Note: Only one marker for a state means no change
Source: State of Discrimination Report, Prosperiti

Legal constraints on women's work: some progress of late

India's regulatory framework has had meaningful restrictions limiting women's ability to participate in the labour market.

Prosperiti, a not-for-profit organization, highlights more than 150 labour laws that prohibit or constrain women's employment.

These include restrictions on employing women in night shifts, manufacturing and services activities deemed hazardous, jobs that require lifting of heavy loads (e.g., even in a cellphone assembly plant, they were restricted from using forklifts), or working in liquor establishments. In a classic example of over-regulation, there were different restrictions for migrant women, for women on contract, and the rest.

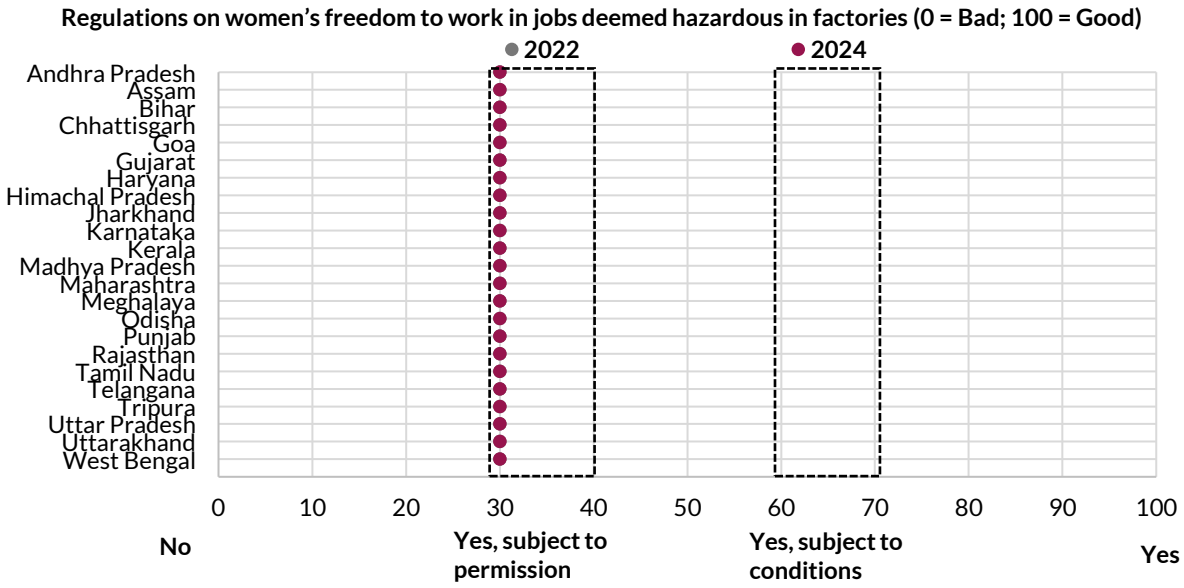
Last year, many states amended their Shops and Establishments Acts or passed ordinances to allow women to work night shifts, though these still have restrictive safety/consent conditions.

While change is underway, the regulatory approach still reflects a condescending mindset in which the state decides which jobs are safe for women, rather than allowing women and their employers to make informed choices.

Just as legal restrictions on women's work were gradually dismantled in the United States and other developed markets, India too needs a systematic process of dismantling outdated regulations. If women can serve in the armed forces, there is little rationale for the state to impose categorical bans in civilian industries.

Just as legal restrictions on women's work were gradually dismantled in the United States and other developed markets, India too needs a systematic process of dismantling outdated regulations. If women can serve in the armed forces, for example, there is little rationale for the state to impose categorical bans in civilian industries in 'hazardous' activities.

Fig 73 – All Indian states are heavily regulating women's participation in jobs deemed hazardous



Note: Only one marker for a state means no change
Source: State of Discrimination Report, Prosperiti

Lack of leadership role models in corporations and politics

The presence of female role models, both within households and in workplaces, has a meaningful influence on women joining the workforce; as they help shift the 'norms' discussed in Chapter 2. Like victories of Haryana sportswomen brought many young girls to even sports like boxing and wrestling in a conservative state.

But there is low representation at executive levels in India, even as board-level participation has improved due to regulatory mandates. This mirrors global evidence of a "leaky pipeline" (discussed in Chapter 2). In politics, only 14% of MPs in the Lok Sabha are women, vs. Asia average of 22% and global average of 27%.

However, the trend shows improvement: as per LinkedIn's economic graph data, the share of women hired in leadership roles rose by 5.4pp to ~24% between 2016 and 2023, raising their share of senior leadership roles by 2pp to ~19%.

The women's reservation bill (2023), that reserves 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha, will help, but it only becomes effective after the next census and the delimitation exercise.

Can (better) urbanization be a catalyst?

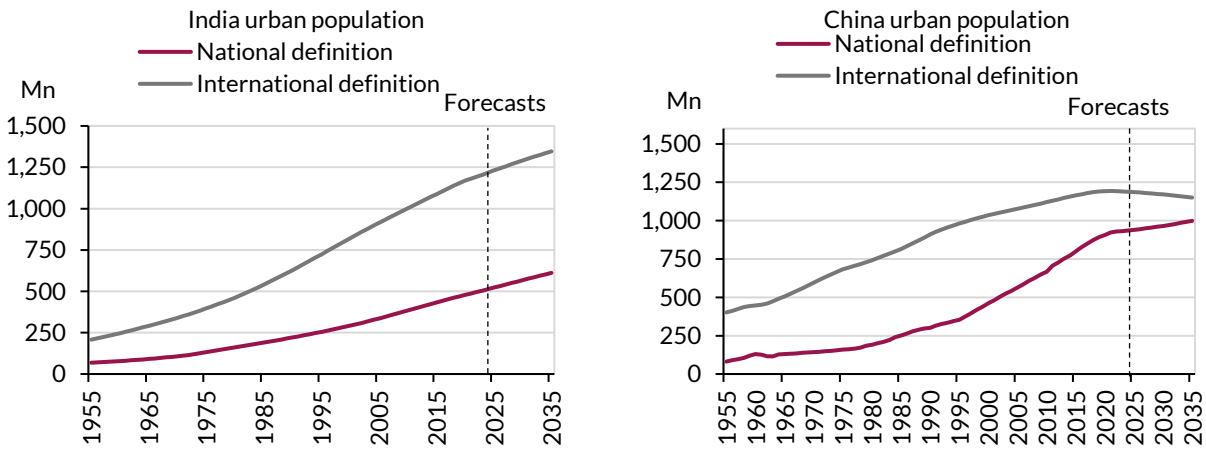
Globally, urbanization is positively correlated with FLFPR, though research on causality has shown mixed results.

Urban centers create suitable and accessible jobs outside agriculture with higher wages. Higher wages raise the opportunity cost of home production, boosting FLFPR. Cultural norms also permit urban women to enjoy greater social, economic, and political freedoms than their rural counterparts.

However, research on India shows barriers to women's participation (like safety) remain widespread in urban areas. Outcomes vary by state, but the better rise in participation from women from poor households and those from poorer states suggest that at least currently job opening are still the driving force, not norms.

The women's reservation bill, passed in 2023, that reserves 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha, should help with political representation, but it will only become effective after the next census and the delimitation exercise.

Fig 74 - As per the international definition, India's urban population could be larger than China



Source: UN World Urbanization Prospects (2025), Axis Bank Research

As per the UN World Urbanization prospects (2025), India's urban population is nearly 2.5 times the official number, and larger than in China. However, even the official estimate includes habitations called 'census towns' that have the characteristics of a town but is governed as a village. If India can improve its cities, FLFPR can improve meaningfully.

A childcare ecosystem, better safety, and Returnship programs are necessary

Childcare: As discussed in Chapter 3, FDR's childcare schools inadvertently helped women stay in the workforce. Investments in the care ecosystem can yield large GDP multipliers and boost female labour supply.

This is particularly so in India where ~90% of women graduates, who are in their 30s, stay out of the workforce because of the domestic and care burden. The ILO estimates that 708 million women worldwide are outside the labour force primarily due to care duties.

Enable mobility and safety for women: Proximity to work and the ability to travel safely are among the strongest determinants of female labour-force participation in urban settings. This is also visible in our survey. In India, this constraint is especially acute: when the cost (financial, physical, or psychological), of daily commuting exceeds the perceived benefits of paid work, labour-supply falls. This aligns with global evidence that identifies mobility and safety as an essential precondition for converting women's latent desire to work into actual participation. Many of these changes are under the purview of the city administrations, but we see positive momentum overall.

Returnship programs also help. They influence more than just individual hiring outcomes; they also contribute to shifting organizational attitudes towards career breaks. By creating clear, formal mechanisms for reintegration, these programmes help dismantle the negative perceptions and structural challenges that typically hinder women's return to paid work.

Cluster non-farm jobs in second-tier towns and rural growth corridors: Job creation close to home is pivotal to bring women out of agriculture in rural areas. Industrial sheds, service hubs, and formalized home-based value chains (e.g., food processing, apparel, care services) can expand the "female-appropriate" demand set.

Vocational and skills training: 3/4th of Indian women have not received any vocational or technical training. This is mostly because there are not enough jobs, i.e., a demand problem, and less about supply of skilled workers.

However, skills programs do help women overcome entry barriers. Evidence indicates many women who want to work also report lacking skills needed for their desired roles (e.g. in tailoring/ textiles, food processing, or animal husbandry).

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