

**Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality: a review of status of women in
India**

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XII

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Introduction

Gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. It does not mean that men and women become the same, it means that they have access to life chances and opportunities without being dependent on nor constrained by either sex. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and addressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives¹. This paper focuses on status of women across selected states in India with reference to their decision making power and access to resources both in public and private spheres across rural and urban areas.

It is a truism that gender inequality exists in India and varies by extent across states and between rural and urban areas. Gender inequality in India refers to health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women in India. Gender inequalities, and its social causes, impact India's sex ratio, women's health over their lifetimes, their educational attainment, and economic conditions. In order to unpack the term gender inequality, it is important to understand the term gender. Gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. In most societies, being a man or a woman is not simply a matter of different biological and physical characteristics. Access to resources, power relationships within and outside of households, autonomy and decision making power are all influenced by one's gender.

Methodology

Source of data

Information and data for this paper come from the latest round of National Family and Health Survey (NFHS 2019-20). The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, GOI is responsible for conducting National Family Health Surveys. The Institute of Population Sciences in Mumbai The fifth series of NFHS collected data on population, health, and nutrition for India and each state/union territory (UT). All women aged 15-49 and men aged 15-54 were interviewed from a selected approximate sample of 610,000 households on household characteristics, socio-economic conditions of the households, nutrition, fertility preferences and gender roles and attitudes.

Sample selection

Detailed survey results and state reports are available online for 18 states. This paper is based on selected 10 states. The states have been selected to broadly represent north, south, east, north east and western regions of the country (Table 1).

¹ https://www.ripublication.com/ijhss17/ijhssv7n1_02.pdf

Table 1: Sample size of selected states

State	Number households	Number of women	Number of men
Andhra Pradesh	11346	10975	1558
Assam	30119	34979	4973
Bihar	35834	42483	4897
Gujarat	29368	33343	5351
Himachal Pradesh	10698	10368	1147
Karnataka	26574	30455	4516
Kerala	12330	10969	1473
Maharashtra	31643	33755	5497
Telangana	27351	27518	3863
West Bengal	18187	21408	3021
Total	233450	256253	36296

Information for this paper comes from interviews conducted with 256253 currently married women aged 14-49, 36296 currently married men aged 15-54 from 233450 households across 10 states².

Scope of study

NHFS-5 has information on women's autonomy and decision making, employment and control over cash earnings, gender roles and attitudes, ownership of assets. In order to assess gender equality and women's empowerment, this paper compares men and women on indicators such as paid employment in the last 12 months preceding the survey, decision making on one's own health, participation in decisions regarding major household purchases, asset ownership such as land and house. The paper also explores what proportion of women has a bank account and owns a mobile phone.

Analysis

The unit of analysis are women and men between the ages of 14-54. Excel has been used to generate tables and graphs. Where relevant inter-state comparisons are highlighted, however the focus is more on gender differences across India. Therefore all the selected 10 states are treated as a single unit to represent India.

² NHFS-5 2019-20 available at <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/index.shtml>

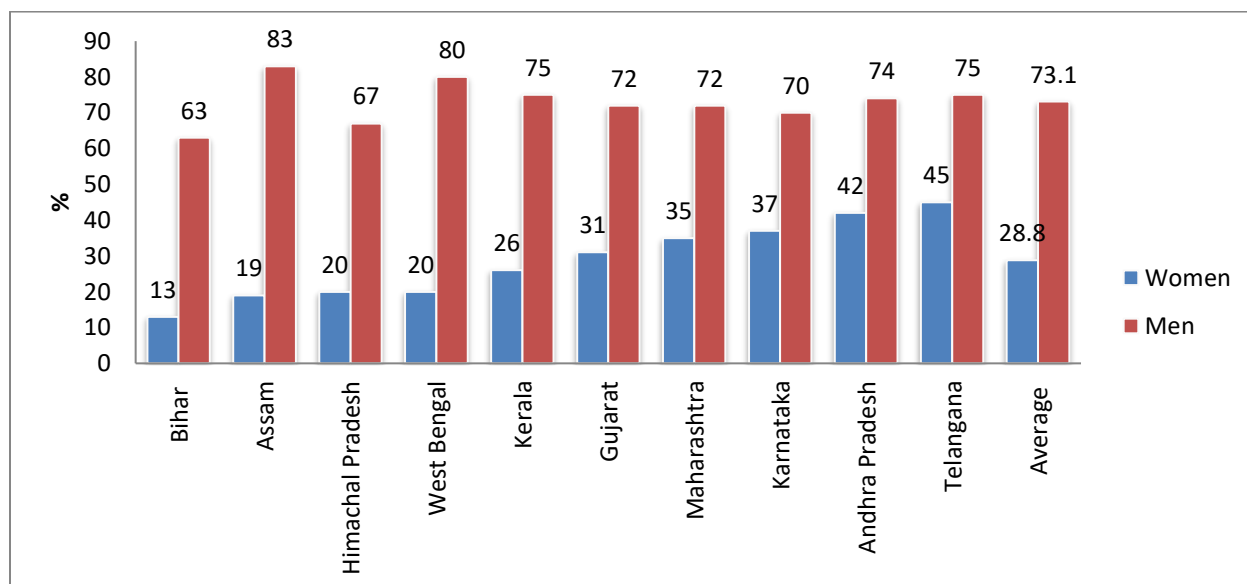
Results

Gender equality is closely linked to sustainable development and is vital to the realization of human rights for all. The SDG5 emphasizes elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women in the public and private spheres and to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources and access to ownership of property. The gender equality is very essential to achieve the goal of women empowerment. The overall objective of gender equality is a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions, interests and talents; share responsibility for the home and children and are completely free from coercion, intimidation and gender-based violence both at work and at home.

Paid work in the last 12 months

Women's work force participation particularly in paid employment is low compared to men. On an average, only 28 % of women aged 15-49 were engaged in paid employment 12 months preceding the survey compared to 73% of men. Bihar has the lowest proportion of women who worked and paid in cash. Telangana takes the lead; with 45 % women aged 15-49 years involved in paid work, followed closely by Andhra Pradesh (42.2%). The gap between men and women engaged in paid work is the highest in Assam where the proportion of women involved in paid work is 19% whereas over 80% of men are involved in work and are paid in cash (Figure 1).

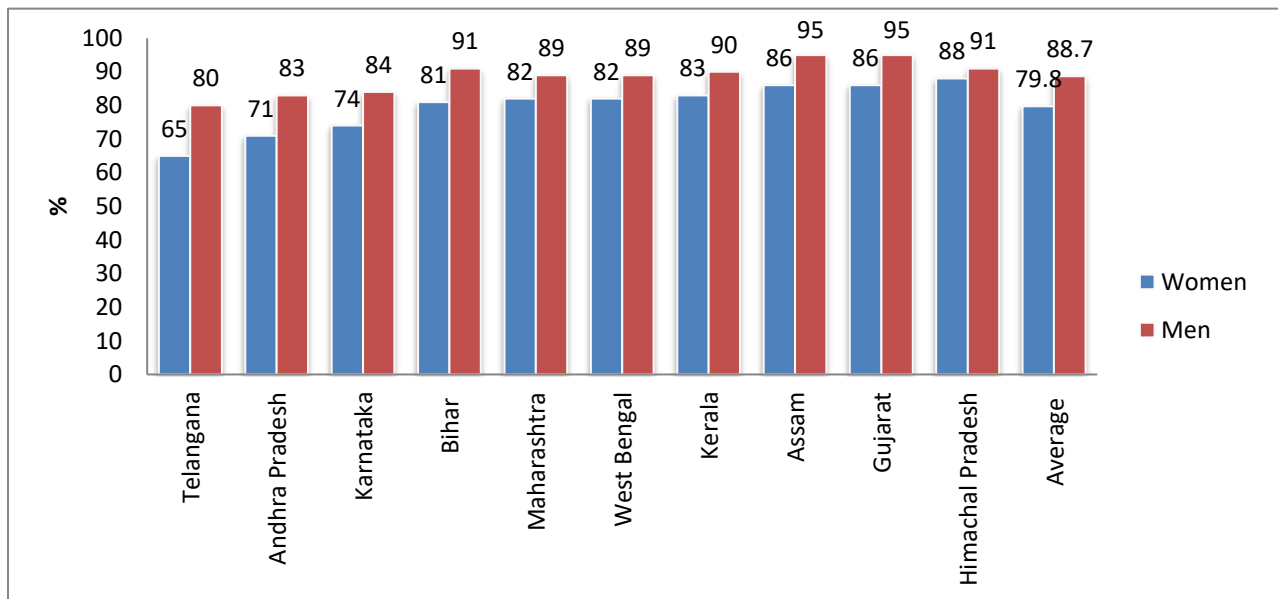
Figure 1: Proportion of currently married women and men who were engaged in paid work in the last 12 months



Participation in decision making

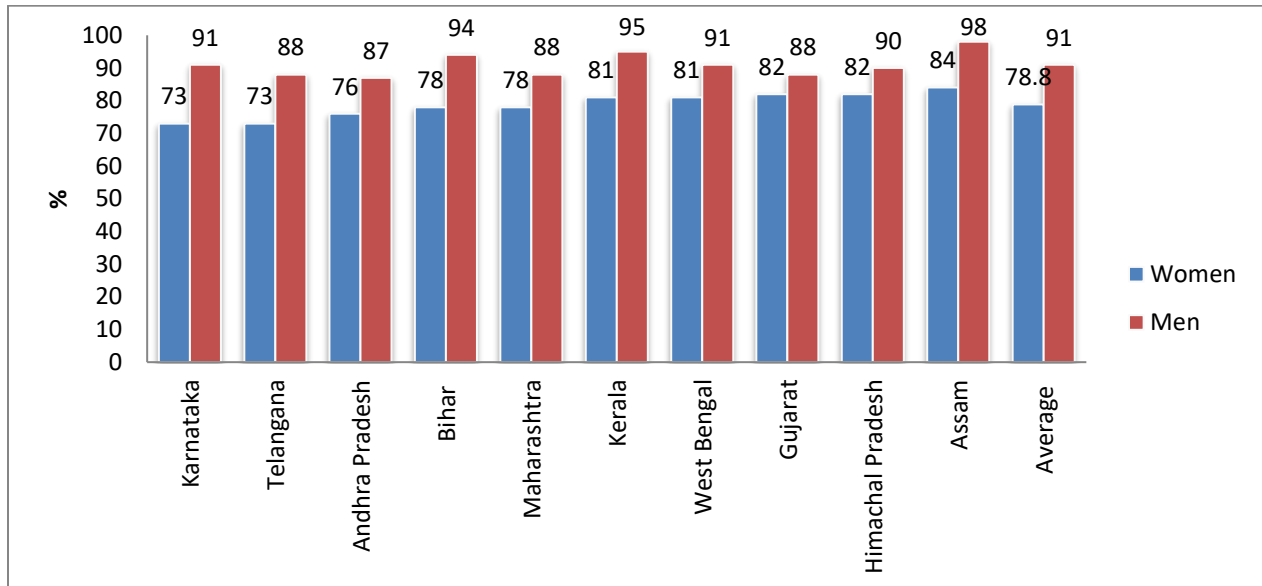
Participation in decision making points to power relations within a household which in turn are influenced by gender roles and expectations. Currently married women and men were asked who makes decisions regarding their own health care and major purchases. Results indicate that women are less likely to participate in decisions regarding their own health care compared to men across all selected states. On average 80% women and 89% men participate in decisions regarding their respective health care. In Himachal Pradesh, there seems to be certain amount of gender equality in decision making regarding one's health care unlike other states (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportion of currently married women and men who participate in decisions regarding one's own health



With regard to decision making about major household purchases, men are more likely to report that they participate in such decisions compared to women. In Karnataka and Telangana less than 75 % of currently married women reported that they participate in decisions regarding major household purchases (Figure 3).

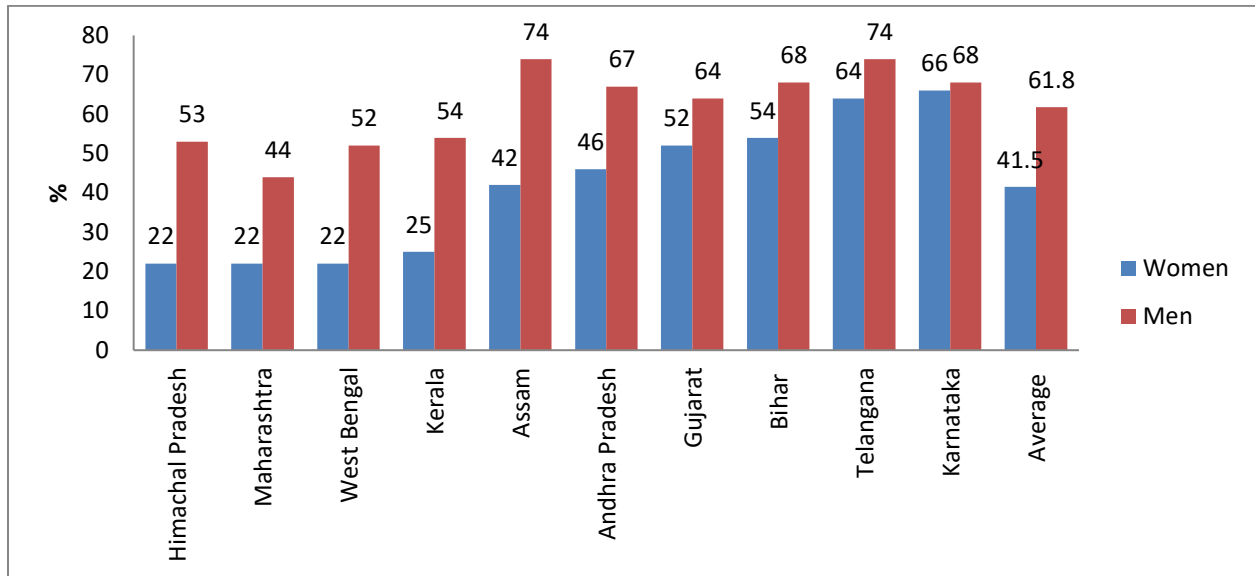
Figure 3: Proportion of currently married women and men who participate in decisions regarding major household purchases



Ownership of house and land

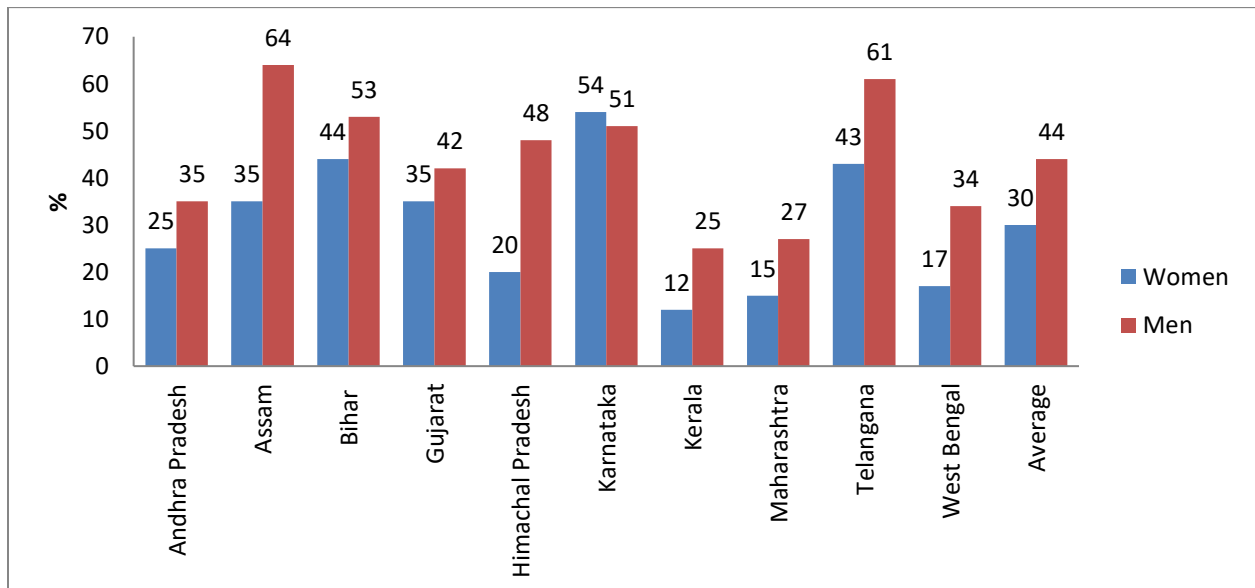
Women have equal rights under the law to own property and receive equal inheritance rights, but in practice, women are at a disadvantage. Across the selected 10 states, on average ownership of a house alone or jointly with someone else is less among women. For instance, only 42 % of currently married women own a house as compared to 62 % of men. Except in Karnataka, the gap between the proportion of women owning a house and men is gaping reflecting lack of access to assets among women in India. Although the Hindu Succession Act of 2005 provides equal inheritance rights to ancestral and jointly owned property, the law is weakly enforced, especially in Northern India. The denial of property rights hinders the economic empowerment of women (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Proportion of currently married women and men who own a house alone or jointly with someone else



In general, land ownership is very low both among men and women. Less than 50 percent of men own land and the proportion of women owning land are lower. Karnataka has the highest proportion of women who own land and the proportion of men owning land is slightly lower in this state (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Proportion of currently married women and men who own land

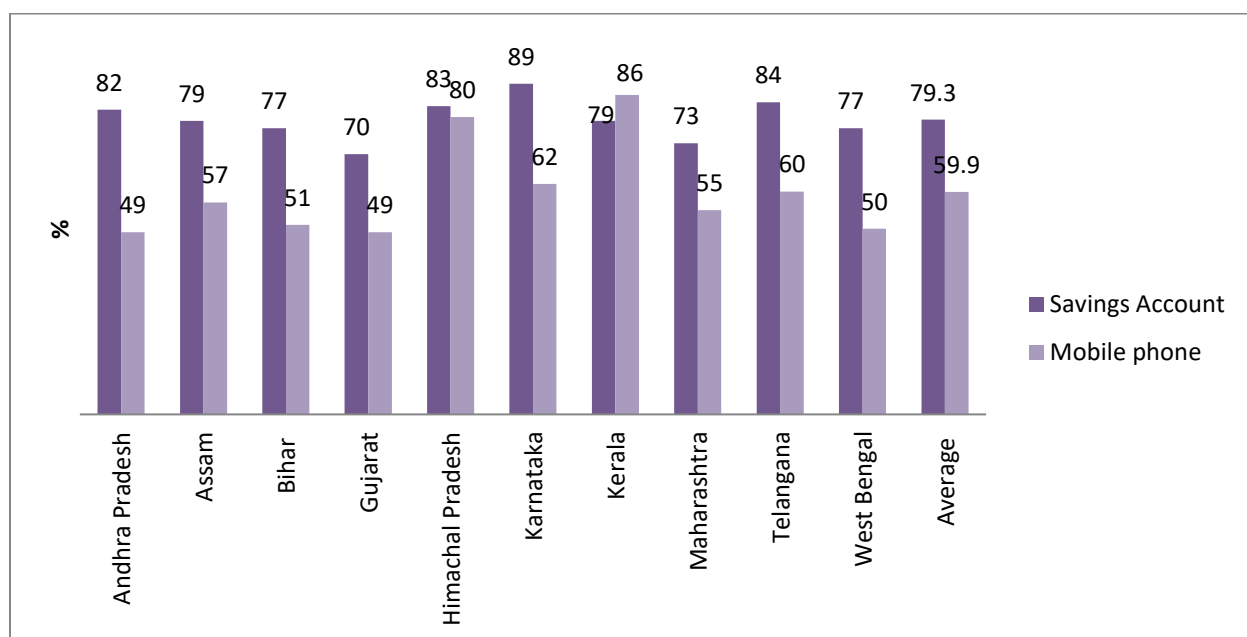


Mobile and savings bank account ownership among women

Smartphone sales worldwide as well as in India have increased in the last decade and 60 % of women own the mobile phones they use. The lowest proportion of women owning mobile phones is in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat (49%). Eighty-percent of women own the mobile phone they use in Himachal Pradesh.

Having one's own bank account is crucial for access to loans and credit. Financial inclusion is crucial for gender equity. Interestingly, a higher proportion of women have a savings bank account that they solely are in charge of than owning mobile phones. In Karnataka, 89% of women have a savings bank account. Among the selected sample of states, Gujarat has the lowest proportion of women with a savings bank account. Since 2014, Indians have opened 40 crore bank accounts under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana; more than 50% of these account-holders are women (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Proportion of currently married women who own a mobile phone that they use and a savings bank account



Conclusion

Despite rapid economic growth, the explosion of microcredit programs and self-help groups, and laudable efforts to increase women's political participation, gender disparities have remained deep and persistent in India. The UN Gender Inequality Index has ranked India below several sub-Saharan African countries³. The latest NFHS 5 2019-20 results clearly highlight how pronounced gender inequalities are in India. Women lag behind men in access to resources, asset ownership and in participation of household decisions. These inequalities further impact women's well being, their reproductive rights

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2012/09/27/gender-disparities-india>

and health, their political and economic participation and overall empowerment. The lack of access to secondary education, and to sexual and reproductive health services for girls and women is a key reason of gender inequality⁴. Moreover, entrenched patriarchal norms, son preference and preferential treatment given to men in social, political and economic spheres set road blocks for women's access to equal opportunities and empowerment.

It is important to note that both men and women are influenced by gender roles and expectations. For instance, societal norms and practices about "masculinity" and expectations of men as leaders, husbands or sons create demands on men and shape their behavior. Men are too often expected to concentrate on the material needs of their families, rather than on the nurturing and caring roles assigned to women. Socialization in the family and later in schools promotes risk-taking behavior among young men, and this is often reinforced through peer pressure and media stereotypes.

Suggestions

In order to promote gender equality in socio economic development, some of the following measures can be considered:

- Expansion of women's participation in policy decision-making processes
- Reconsideration of social systems and practices and raise awareness from a gender equal perspective
- Promotion of understanding of the significance of gender equality for men
- Promotion of understanding of gender equality from childhood
- Securing equal opportunities and treatment between men and women in employment
- Promotion of equal and balanced treatment aimed at equal wage for work of equal value
- Promotion of prevention of spousal violence and protection for victims
- Comprehensive policy development for women's lifelong health
- Health support that corresponds to gender difference
- Enhancement of education and learning to promote gender equality and facilitate diversity of choice
- Gender equality in Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) and other academic fields
- Expansion of women's participation in policy and decision-making processes in all fields in society
- Prohibition of gender discrimination during all stages of employment and management
- Promotion of measures to secure equal opportunities and treatment between men and women in employment