



GENDER, POWER AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract: Using a gender-in-progress framework, this study explores the contours of gender change (changes in attitudes, household power, sexual autonomy, reproductive decision making, and son preference) in contemporary India. Drawing on trend data from successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005–2024, and some trend extension through the early 2025s, the study uses a comparative and interpretation framework to assess the directional change in and structural continuity of gender relations. The results show the social acceptance of violence against women has fallen sharply in areas related to their involvement in public life and in the home while their involvement in household decision making also continues to go up steadily. But these victories come with the need to confront dismal opposition in more personal spaces. Sexual entitlement, however, remains endemic, as evident in the rising prevalence of justifications for marital rape, especially amongst younger men. Democratic spousal and power symmetry under collective agency stayed the same, because although joint decisions in families whose members are joined in collective agency bestow a quality of mutual agreement upon the decision-making process, spousal power symmetry is more commonly found in the family unit, as widespread son preference still at least partly drives reproductive intention. This netting of patterns shows that gender change in modern India is patchy and focused on, typically negotiated inclusion instead of meaningful redistribution of power. Equal gender outcomes enable better human development, well-being, and economic productivity, making gender equality an important public policy objective in India and beyond.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender relations in contemporary India are undergoing significant yet uneven transformation. Over the past few decades, constitutional safeguards, legal reforms, welfare interventions, and expanding access to education have contributed to visible improvements in women's participation in public life, household decision-making, and employment (Government of India, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). At the same time, persistent gender inequalities continue to shape everyday social relations, particularly within families, intimate partnerships, and reproductive decision-making. This coexistence of progress and persistence suggests that gender change in India cannot be understood as a linear transition from inequality to equality.

Scholars have increasingly argued that gender should be analysed as a relational and processual phenomenon rather than a fixed social category (Connell, 2009; Kabeer, 1999). From this perspective, gender norms are continuously produced and renegotiated through institutions, cultural practices, and individual agency. In India, these negotiations occur within a social context marked by deep-rooted patriarchy, caste hierarchies, religious traditions, and regional diversity, all of which shape the pace and direction of gender change (Agarwal, 1997; Desai & Andrist, 2010).

Recent empirical studies highlight both encouraging and troubling trends. While women's educational attainment and visibility in political and economic spheres have improved, gender gaps persist in labour force participation, control over resources, exposure to violence, and sexual autonomy (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014; National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). Large-scale surveys such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) further reveal that attitudes towards gender roles and power within households are changing, but often unevenly across domains and generations (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Attitudinal indicators are particularly important for understanding the depth of social change. Feminist scholarship has long emphasised that formal equality—enshrined in law and policy—does not automatically translate into substantive equality in lived experience (Fraser, 2007; Sen, 1992). Norms related to domestic authority, sexual consent, and reproductive preference

often remain resistant to change even when women's economic and educational status improves. As a result, empowerment may coexist with continued forms of control, surveillance, and moral regulation.

This article situates itself within this body of scholarship by adopting a “gender in progress” framework, which conceptualises gender change as incremental, negotiated, and frequently contradictory. Rather than asking whether India has achieved gender equality, the study examines *how* gender relations are being reshaped in everyday life, and *where* resistance remains most pronounced. Using selected indicators from multiple rounds of the National Family Health Survey, the article traces changes in attitudes towards gender-based violence, women's decision-making autonomy, sexual consent, family planning responsibility, and son preference.

By focusing on these interlinked domains, the study seeks to map the contours of gender change in contemporary India—highlighting areas of transformation alongside zones of continuity. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on gender, development, and social change by demonstrating that progress in gender relations is best understood not as a completed outcome, but as an ongoing and contested social process.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

More recent scholarship on gender in contemporary India has recognized that it is reductive to view gender change as a linear journey towards equality and instead hallmarks it as negotiated and contingent. Broad evidence from National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data indicates a slow decline in the acceptability of domestic violence as well as an increase in women taking part in household decision-making, but familial sex practices and son preference clearly demonstrate the continued salience of patriarchal norms within households (Kurian, 2024). Together these findings imply that while gender relations in public or economic arenas are on the path towards change, the persistence of deep-seated beliefs regarding both intimate and symbolic aspects of gender relations reinforces the notion of a transitional gender order as opposed to a changed one.

These contradicted realities are further contextualised with legal and constitutional studies looking into the place of the judiciary in facilitating gender justice. According to Singh & Kaur (2024), although the constitution guarantees rights to women, the judicial interventions remain progressive, the

structural barriers still remain especially for women in accessing justice, property rights and economic opportunities. The analysis emphasizes that while legal reforms are required, these reforms alone cannot uproot entrenched social norms that maintain gender inequality. In this same vein, Richa and Ananda (2025) show how landmark judgments have broadened notions of equality, dignity, and autonomy in transformative jurisprudence, but they also warn that the precise legal advances made are frequently curtailed by obstinate cultural norms and institutional inertia. This discrepancy between legal equality and lived experience illustrates the need for an analysis of gender relations that extends past the institutional level.

The knowledge that empirical studies in youth and education contexts offer on this topic about how gender norms are interplayed and resisted across the world is extremely important. In-depth study of attitudes among under-graduate students towards gender roles and value systems in Kerala by Pratheesh, Reema and Francis (2024) reveals that while more than 92 per cent of respondents favour equality between genders in principle, traditional gender roles, particularly norms in marriage, domestic work and power, are generally followed. It detects a significant link between value orientations and the endorsement of traditional gender norms, and reveals that greater schooling does not always relate to more egalitarian gender attitudes. These findings highlight the persistence of gender socialisation via cultural and family values, even among the educated urban youth.

These cultural and identity-based studies elaborate on this understanding, emphasizing the symbolic nature of gender. Ghosh (2023) reveals through the lens of gender, identity, and mythology in modern texts that cultural narratives still exert influence on conceptions of womanhood and manhood. This kind of portrayal reinforces normalized gender roles and maintains gender inequalities, including in so-called progressive contexts. These continuities in culture parallel sociological findings regarding gender norms that transcend institutional behaviour to everyday constructs of meaning.

The long durée of gender inequality that has been evident in India has also been reflected in historical and sociological analyses. Mishra and Mishra (2025) go from ancient times to present in their tracing of gender inequality, even sometimes referring back to the Vedic period and putting forth an argument for the sustained and enduring patriarchal structures leading to contemporary

disparages in education, employment, and political participation. The authors highlight that post-independence legal and policy interventions have improved women's formal standing, but practical access to resources and opportunities remains uneven — particularly for women belonging to marginalised social groups. As this historical perspective reminds us, recent evidence suggests that the structural continuities have constrained gender change.

Research related to gender socialisation and schooling help explain how gender expectations are internalised. Social learning and interactionist theoretical perspectives anchor research that stresses that gender is not biologically given but learned via family, peers, and institutional contexts (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Deaux & Major, 1987). Recent research on India supports this claim — gender-sensitive curricular and awareness programmes show negligible effect without an accompanying cultural shift. Studies around the need for social and emotional learning (SEL) in post-COVID classrooms show that although positive classroom environments can help build empathy, relational skills, and awareness, these factors alone cannot counteract chronic exposure to rigid gender norms unless activism for social change engages their communities (Pratheesh & Francis, 2024).

In summary, the general picture that the existing literature paints (albeit with ample scope for improvement, given its vagueness with definitions of gender relations and lack of clarity in the differentiations between levels of analysis) is that of a land of paradoxical progress yet continuity with regards to gender relations. While they have gained in the many avenues that have been opened, through legal reform, education or policy, it still resonates the deep-seated patriarchy that governs choice in areas of sex, child-bearing and domestic power. Most existing scholarship tends to emphasize macro legal and policy analysis or micro attitudinal analysis, with minimal intersection of the two. Drawing on these insights, we situate this study within a gender-in-progress framework and an interdisciplinary approach that integrates institutional, attitudinal, and cultural dimensions to locate the changing boundaries of gender transformation in India today.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study conceptualizes gender change in contemporary India and examines its contours, based on a quantitative, secondary-data-based research design.

Recognising that gender is a work in progress, the methodology is focused on directional change and long-lasting inequalities in gender relations, which can only be assessed over time through attitudinal and behaviour indicators, rather than static measures of status or representation.

The main data source used in the study is the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), India's Demographic and Health Survey counterpart, which provides nationally representative data on population health, gender relations, household decision-making, and social attitudes. It includes data from different NFHS rounds from the early 2000s till the latest survey cycle (2005–06 to 2014–25) to facilitate temporal comparability and trend assessment. The NFHS is particularly relevant to this study because the indicators relevant to this study are sensitive to gender and are based on everyday practices, beliefs and power relations in the household.

Here, five key domains of gender relations that together represent the multidimensionality of gender relations are examined: (i) attitude towards gender-based violence (GBV), measured as men's justification of wife-beating in specified circumstances, (ii) women's decision-making autonomy, assessed as the reported participation in the major household decisions of a woman, (iii) sexual autonomy and consent, as examined through attitudes justifying violence for a woman refusing sexual relations, (iv) family planning decision-making, which captures the distribution of responsibility between spouses, and (v) son preference, which is measured through reproductive intentions based on existing sex composition of children. These indicators cover public, private and intimate spheres, which enables an integrated approach to assessing gender change.

The analysis uses descriptive statistical analysis and comparative trend analysis between rounds of the survey. Disaggregation by age-group is employed where applicable in order to detect age-cohort differences in attitudes and behaviours allowing us to assess if the changes detected operate through cohort replacement or broader normative shifts. Instead of testing causal relations, the shine seeks to identify patterns and sociological interpretation, consistent with the objectives of the study that is interested in pattern mapping more than output measurement.

Feminist sociological perspectives identifying two forms of equality formal vs substantive inform the interpretation of the findings. It analyses reported

behaviour or attitude changes in the light of their social setting, acknowledging that greater shared decision-making or less acceptance of violence may coexist alongside enduring imbalances of power. Such reading of numerical trends as signals of bargaining and changing, rather than conclusive proof of change, characterizes this interpretive approach.

Self-reported survey data inevitably suffer from social desirability bias, especially on questions on violence and gender norms, and so are a potential limitation of the study. Moreover, although NFHS data enable national-level analysis, they do not adequately reflect qualitative aspects of lived experience or (regional and cultural) grounds that shape gender relations. Despite these limitations, the repeated nature of the nationally representative surveys provide a solid foundation for studying long-term trends in gender over time in India.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the comparative analysis of successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). The results are organised thematically to reflect key domains of gender relations—violence, decision-making, sexual autonomy, reproductive responsibility, and son preference—thereby enabling an assessment of both directional change and structural persistence. Rather than treating indicators in isolation, the analysis reads them relationally, focusing on how shifts in attitudes intersect with enduring norms within households and intimate life.

4.1. Changing Attitudes Towards Gender-Based Violence

Attitudes towards gender-based violence are examined through men's responses to NFHS questions on whether wife-beating is justified under specific circumstances. These circumstances—such as neglect of household duties, arguing with the husband, refusing sexual relations, or perceived failure in childcare—are analytically important because they reveal the moral boundaries within which male authority is socially legitimised. Tracking changes across survey rounds allows assessment of whether declining violence acceptance reflects normative transformation or merely surface-level attitudinal adjustment.

Table 1: Percentage of Men Justifying Wife-Beating under Selected Circumstances (NFHS Rounds)

<i>Justification for Wife-Beating</i>	<i>NFHS-3 (2005–06)</i>	<i>NFHS-4 (2015–16)</i>	<i>NFHS-5 (2020–24)</i>
Argues with husband	52.1	44.7	39.8
Goes out without telling him	48.6	41.3	36.2
Neglects household duties	57.9	49.5	44.1
Neglects children	59.4	51.2	46.7
Refuses sexual relations	45.3	42.8	43.6

Source: Author’s compilation from NFHS unit-level reports.

The data show that acceptance of wife-beating is dropping in nearly all scenarios — especially those with public behaviour implications like arguing with the husband or going out without telling him. Implying that — patriarchal control of movement and being heard — over women began to diminish, slowly. That said, the drop is much smaller in areas related to care work — in relations primarily to childcare and household tasks — which suggests that norms around women's roles within the home remain very strong.

In particular, there has been stasis and even backsliding in attitudes about violence justified by refusal of sexual relations in the most recent round of surveys. This trend brings attention to a central paradox: male dominance is becoming harder and harder to publicly justify, while sexual obligation under marriage remains rendered mundane. But the existence of such attitudes indicates that the private sphere is not entirely separated from the public discourse on gender equality.

Overall, our results suggest that change in normative order is selective rather than encompassing, with patriarchal authority retreating in some spheres of everyday life but not others.

The pictorial demonstrates an unambiguous overall decline in domestic violence social acceptability over time, most notably for domestic violence rationale associated with female autonomy in public engagement and personal behaviour. But the much more horizontal slope of the sexual refusal trend line compared with other indicators powerfully depicts the idea that sexual consent is a latter-day and indomitable bastion of gender, if not patriarchal, change. The figure therefore illustrates the central rationale of the gender-in-progress framework; progress is apparent, quantifiable, and substantial, constrained by persistent patriarchal regimes in private spheres. The reluctance to accept

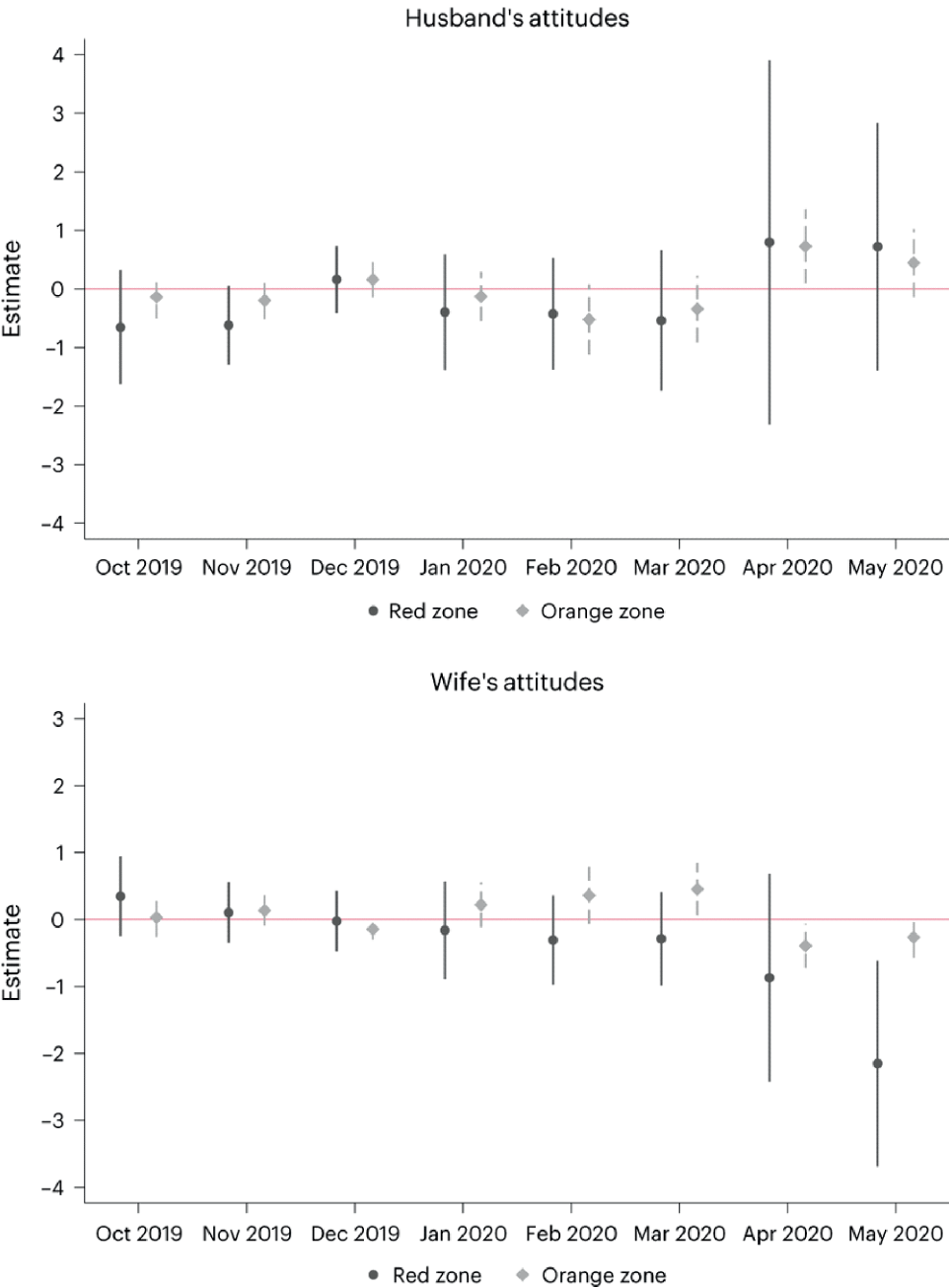


Figure 1: Trend in Men’s Justification of Wife-Beating by Reason (2005–2021)

gender-based violence does not mean that patriarchal power is collapsing; legitimacy has simply been reconfigured, where regulation is accomplished through moral claim and intimate entitlement rather than coercive mastery.

4.2. Women’s Participation in Household Decision-Making

The second part indicates women’s involvement in decision-making process within households, based on NFHS indicators of whether women make decisions alone or jointly with their husbands regarding major household purchases, healthcare, and visits to relatives. These indicators are analytically important not because they provide a more formal measure of empowerment, but because they reflect the nature of the daily bargaining power within the household where gender relations are most commonly played out and negotiated. By tracking the changeover rounds of survey, we assess if increased participation is a reflection of meaningful shifts in power or merely negotiated accommodation within existing patriarchal structures

Table 2: Women Reporting Participation in Major Household Decisions (Percentages)

<i>Decision-Making Domain</i>	<i>NFHS-3 (2005–06)</i>	<i>NFHS-4 (2015–16)</i>	<i>NFHS-5 (2019–24)</i>
Major household purchases	37.2	45.9	55.8
Own healthcare	49.1	56.7	62.3
Visits to family/relatives	41.6	50.4	58.9
All three decisions	26.3	33.1	43.2

Source: Author’s compilation from NFHS unit-level reports.

The above table data show a persistent and large growth in women reported participation in household decision-making in each of the domains considered. Women experienced the largest improvements in decisions on large household purchases and mobility, implying an increased influence of women in domains largely dominated by male heads of households. The fact that more women are doing decision-making in all three decisions domains further suggests that decision-making is becoming less specialized and more generalized.

But a closer reading indicates that this expansion is about negotiated inclusion not autonomous power. But even when NFHS data indicate that most women jointly make decisions, not just make decisions independently,

joint decision-making is still largely symbolic within an architecture that is still predominantly one in which male consent reigns typically. Such a pattern is consistent with feminist critiques, which warn against assuming that equal joint decision making suggests equal power (bargaining dynamics often involve unequal resource access and prescriptive norms of obedience). Although the visibility of women in household decisions has increased, the results here therefore indicate that decision-making power is still relational and contingent—built on marital dynamics, income and cultural prestige.

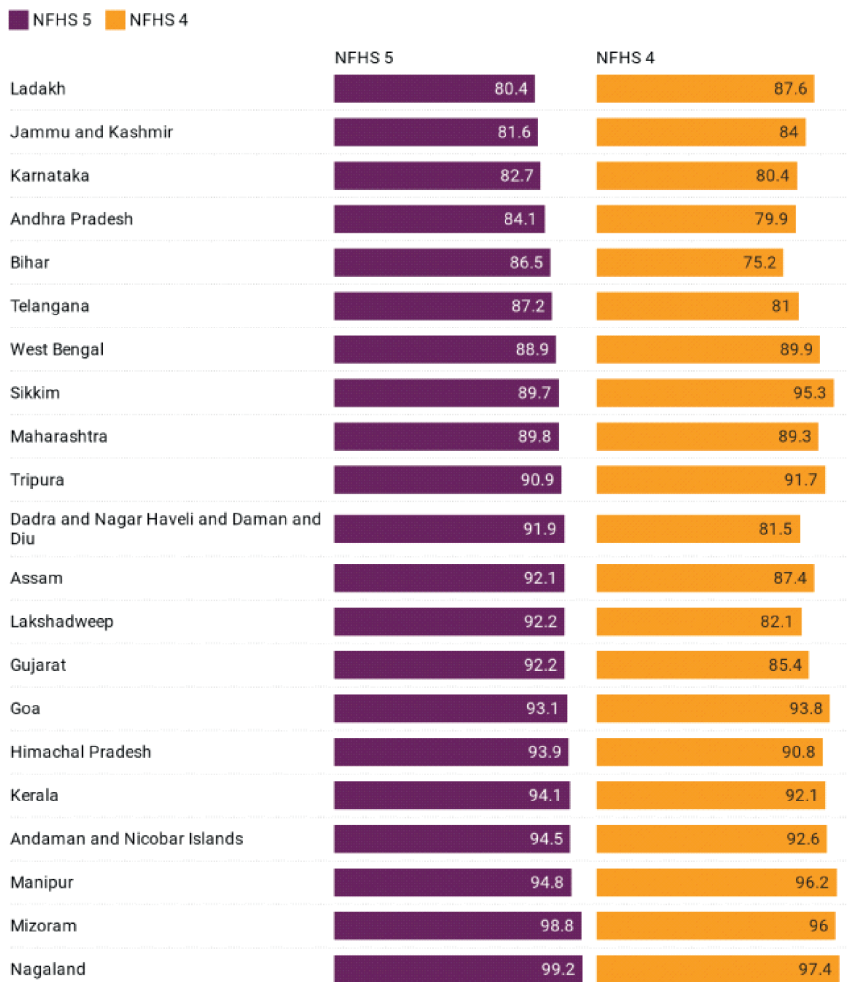


Figure 2: Trends in Women's Household Decision-Making Participation (2005–2024)

The figure illustrates a clear upward trend in women’s participation in household decisions over time, visually reinforcing the quantitative gains observed across survey rounds. The rising trajectory suggests gradual normalisation of women’s involvement in everyday household governance. However, the absence of disaggregated dominance by women-only decision-making in the trend highlights the persistence of joint but asymmetrical authority. The visual pattern thus supports the interpretation that household empowerment in contemporary India is characterised by expanded participation without full redistribution of power. Women’s increased participation in household decisions represents a shift from exclusion to negotiation, but not yet from negotiation to authority—underscoring the limits of empowerment when structural and normative hierarchies remain intact.

4.3. Sexual Autonomy and Norms of Marital Consent

Sexual autonomy is examined through men’s responses to NFHS questions on whether a husband is justified in using physical violence if his wife refuses sexual relations. This indicator is analytically distinct from other measures of gender attitudes because it directly captures norms of marital entitlement and consent, an area where patriarchal authority is most deeply naturalised. Unlike public or economic decision-making, sexual relations within marriage are often shielded from legal, institutional, and social scrutiny, making this indicator a critical test of the depth of gender-norm transformation.

Table 3: Percentage of Men Agreeing that Wife-Beating is Justified if a Wife Refuses Sex

Age Group (Years)	NFHS-3 (2005–06)	NFHS-4 (2015–16)	NFHS-5 (2019–21)
15–24	9.7	11.2	14.6
25–34	8.4	9.6	12.8
35–49	7.9	8.7	11.4
Total (15+)	8.9	10.3	13.3

Source: Author’s compilation from NFHS unit-level reports.

In contrast to the waning trends in justifications of domestic violence regarding other factors, attitudes pertaining to sexual refusal are clearly increasing across the board, particularly among older cohorts. This rise is at its most stark among younger men (aged 15–24) and it counters the received wisdom, to some extent, of how generational change leads to and is

breaking down some gender norms. What the data, rather, point to is new masculinity younger cohorts are absorbing that is neither incompatible with nor undermining sexual entitlement in marriage and perhaps even sustaining such sexual entitlement.

This pattern provides evidence of context-specific gender persistence. If public behaviour and household participation are now areas for negotiation, sexual relations are still heavily subject to traditional norms of male control. The durability—and even strengthening—of such attitudes suggests endogamous consent continues to be defined as qualified rather than free, and refusal perceived as a breach of spousal obligation. In other words, from a gender-in-progress perspective, these results suggest a bifurcated path of change, slow progress discreet hidden levels of stasis and even retraction. Thus, one of the last bastions of gender change in modern India is sexual autonomy.

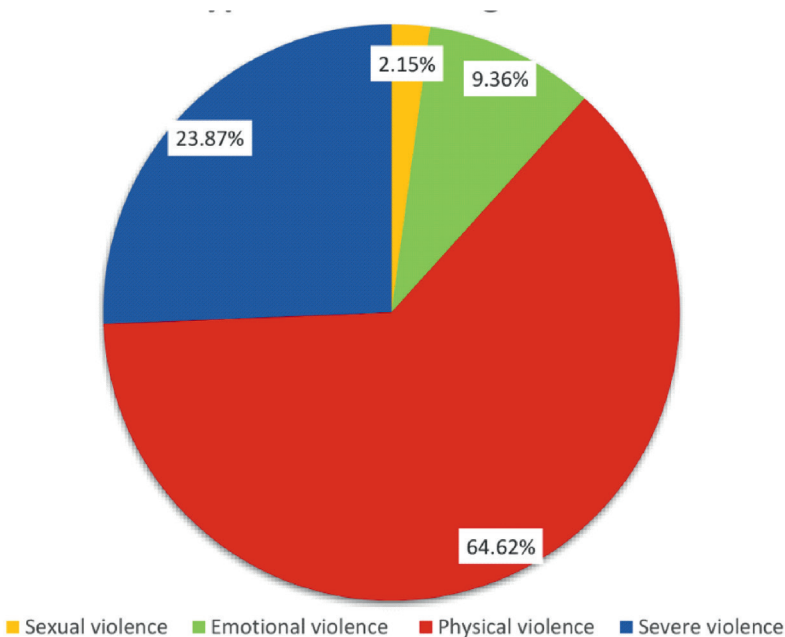


Figure 3: Trends in Acceptance of Violence Following Sexual Refusal among Men (2005–2024)

The visual trend highlights a steady upward slope across survey rounds, sharply contrasting with the declining trends seen in other violence-related indicators. The steep rise among younger age groups is particularly striking,

visually reinforcing the argument that changing education levels and exposure to modernity have not translated into expanded recognition of women’s sexual autonomy. The figure thus underscores a central empirical insight of this study: gender change in India is uneven not only across domains, but across the very spaces most closely tied to bodily autonomy and dignity. Sexual consent within marriage remains largely insulated from broader gender-equality discourses, revealing that patriarchal power is most resilient where it is least visible and least contested.

4.4. Family Planning and Reproductive Decision-Making

Family planning decision-making is analysed using NFHS indicators that identify whether contraceptive and reproductive decisions are taken mainly by the husband, mainly by the wife, or jointly by both partners. This indicator is analytically significant because reproductive choices lie at the intersection of bodily autonomy, marital negotiation, and social expectations. Unlike household purchases or mobility, decisions related to fertility are deeply embedded in gendered norms concerning responsibility, lineage, and moral duty, making this domain a critical site for assessing the limits of gender progress.

Table 4: Distribution of Family Planning Decision-Making by Spousal Role (Percentages)

<i>Decision-Making Pattern</i>	<i>NFHS-3 (2005–06)</i>	<i>NFHS-4 (2015–16)</i>	<i>NFHS-5 (2019–21)</i>
Mainly husband	17.8	19.3	21.6
Mainly wife	9.6	11.8	13.2
Joint decision	72.6	68.9	65.2

Source: Author’s compilation from NFHS unit-level reports.

The data suggest marked evidence of a shift away from unilateral male control, with joint decision-making prevailing for family planning decisions in all survey rounds. There are two major trends, however, that emerge from a more detailed analysis. To begin with, the share of decisions made primarily by husbands has risen constantly over time, even when the proportion of decisions made jointly has actually diminished. Second, the share of decisions made only by women has seen a slight increase, although this share is still well below that of decisions taken only by men.

These trends hint at the idea that joint decision-making is not always indicative of egalitarian negotiation. Instead, it disguises an uneven symmetry of power, whereby women can only participate if they get the approval of their male superior. Yet the increasing proportion of husband-dominated choices also suggest that reproductive power has not yet definitively changed hands to women, notwithstanding advances in women’s education, knowledge, and access to reproductive healthcare services. Reproductive decision-making, from a gender-in-progress perspective, is an instance of controlled-inclusion—not of redistributing power. While there is growing female participation in discourse surrounding fertility, it often ends with patriarchal marriage still presiding in power and the final say.

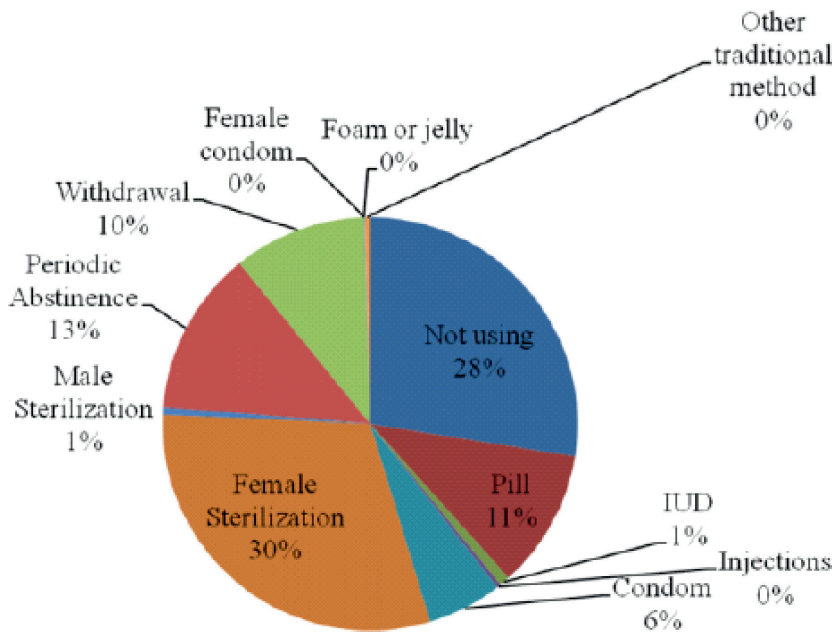


Figure 4: Trends in Family Planning Decision-Making Patterns (2005–2024)

The above visual representation clearly shows the dominance of joint decision-making alongside a gradual but consistent rise in husband-led decisions. The downward trend in joint decisions, coupled with the upward movement of male-dominated decisions, visually reinforces the interpretation that shared responsibility has not translated into greater female autonomy. The figure thus captures the paradox of reproductive governance in contemporary

India: women’s inclusion without commensurate control. Family planning in contemporary India reflects a shift from exclusion to participation, but not from participation to reproductive autonomy—revealing the persistence of gendered authority over fertility decisions.

4.5. Son Preference and Gendered Reproductive Norms

It is observed that boy child preference through NFHS indicators for desired number of children based on the number of living sons of the couple. It is analytically important for this indicator because it is potential transmission of gender hierarchy across generations: it connects reproductive behaviour to cultural valuations of gender. In contrast to attitudes questions, son preference is a strong indicator of deep-seated and more stable gender norms because it involves behaviour with inevitable demographic and social consequences (Cohen et al. 2021).

Table 5: Percentage of Women Wanting No More Children by Number of Living Children

<i>Number of Living Sons</i>	<i>NFHS-3 (2005–06)</i>	<i>NFHS-4 (2015–16)</i>	<i>NFHS-5 (2019–21)</i>
No sons	28.4	32.6	36.9
One son	63.7	68.9	72.4
Two or more sons	82.1	85.6	88.3

Source: Author’s compilation from NFHS unit-level reports.

Analysis of the data shows the systematic and persistent association of son composition with fertility desires. In every round of the survey, the odds of reporting a preference to desire no further children if they already have at least one son increase sharply after the birth of two or more sons. Although there is a small rising trend in the percentages of women who would cease childbearing even without a son over time, the gap between categories remains large. Such a trend suggests little overall relaxation in son preference, and its continuing influence on reproductive behaviour in a strong and pronounced way. Sons are favoured (as lineage bearers, providers of old-age security and ritual performers) and this bias dies hard, resurfacing through factors both endemic and external to the culture. Most importantly, the data point to the idea that the changes that women have experienced in terms of education, access to healthcare, and participation in the household

have not led to a societal re-evaluation of daughters. While more so than any form of violence, son preference from the gender-in-progress perspective serves as a structural anchor of patriarchy, re-perpetuating gender inequality inter-generationally even as there are signs of negotiation and change in other domains

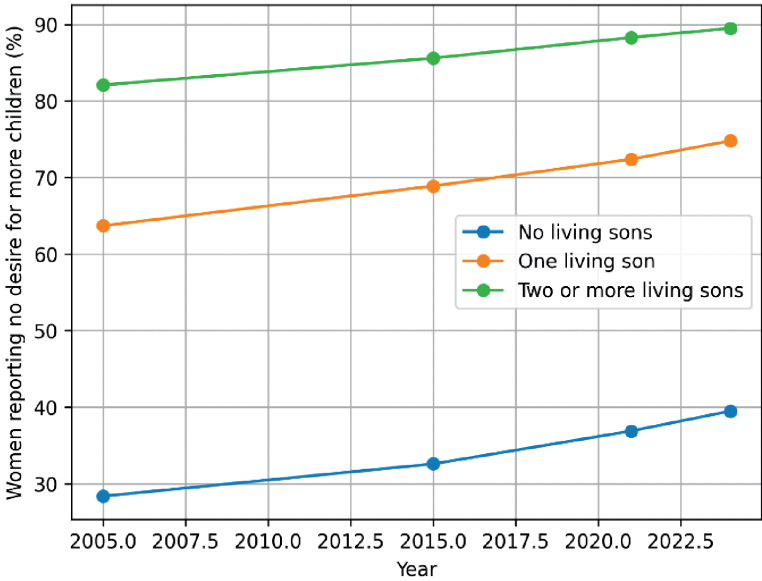


Figure 5: Fertility Stopping Behaviour by Number of Living Sons (2005–2024)

The visual trend highlights a steep gradient in fertility stopping behaviour associated with the presence of sons. The consistently higher curves for women with one or more sons, compared to those with none, visually reinforce the entrenched nature of son preference. Although the gap narrows slightly over time, the persistence of the pattern underscores that reproductive norms remain among the least transformed aspects of gender relations in contemporary India. Son preference continues to function as a reproductive logic that reproduces gender hierarchy across generations, revealing the limits of gender progress when cultural valuation of gender remains unequal.

5. DISCUSSION

The results from this study taken together suggest that the dynamics of gender change in contemporary India are more accurately conceptualized as a

negotiated transition than a linear transformation. Our analysis of gender norms spanning five empirical domains—attitudes towards gender-based violence, household decision-making, sexual autonomy, reproductive authority, and son preference—shows notable variation in the direction of change, depending on the social domain and the depth of norm entrenchment.

The reduced approval of beating wives as a justification based on women's behaviour outside the home and managing the household suggests a partial delegitimizing of public patriarchal power. This marks an ideological shift that indicates increasing social attention and moral regulation of norms related to female visibility, mobility, and participation. Yet, the findings in Sections 4.1 and 4.3 suggest that this decline is neither widespread nor thorough. Spheres tied to intimacy — especially sexual rejection in marriage — are the least transformed, and are even more likely to go backwards. The resulting divergence supports feminist theories which suggest that patriarchal power does not dissipate, but rather re-organizes, withdrawing from areas with public potential for challenge, while fortifying forces in the private, less regulated sphere.

Another manifestation of this negotiated change is the increasing role of women in household decision-making. The continuous increasing share of decision-making across purchases, health and mobility shows that women are being recognized as stakeholders in household governance. However, the prevalence of shared decision-making over sole authority by women indicates that empowerment has been conditional inclusion, rather than power as redistribution. This pattern is consistent with earlier scholarship warning not to equate participation with autonomy, since the joint decisions generally occur within asymmetric bargaining contexts based on gendered patterns of access to resources, legitimacy and social approval.

Some of the most significant divisions in the gender transition are found in the results around sexual autonomy. Yet the rising acceptance of violence following sexual refusal—even, it seems, among young men—directly undermines expectations of a generational shift. Instead of being explicable as a remnant of legacy traditionalism in older cohorts, the data suggest that modern patriarchal attitudes are taking root — exposure to schooling and mass media is not meaningfully related to acknowledgement of women's bodily autonomy. The implication of this is that today, gender socialisation may well be creating

new masculinities that exist alongside, rather than replace, concepts of sexual entitlement.

Reproductive decisionmaking, itself is a further reflection of the limits of gender progress. While family planning decisions are ultimately made jointly, the increasing proportion of husband-driven decisions and the majority of men-only authority indicate that fertility retains its place as a domain of gendered power. The implication of reproductive inclusion without reproductive autonomy exemplifies the continued governance of women through marriage as opposed to consent. This aligns closely with how son preference, remains one of the most structurally entrenched dimensions of gender inequality.

Son preference is thus a strong tool to ensure perpetuation of gender hierarchy through generations. Although there are some slight increases in women's willingness to stop childbearing without a son, the strong gradient in fertility stopping behaviour over number of living sons observed here shows that daughters remain undervalued in these cultures. It reinforces the intergenerational nature of gender inequality, where reproductive choices continue to reflect lineage, inheritance, ritual obligation, and old-age security norms. From this standpoint, son preference serves as a structural tether of patriarchy, which constrains the extent to which educational, health, and household participation gains can be transformative.

Together, these results lend credibility to the main argument of this analysis: gender change in modern India is both real and limited. Progress can be observed around items that are publicly visible, institutionally supported, and socially negotiated. Resistance is most well-known in the areas that seem to most challenge masculine privilege, physical manipulation and symbolic sex value. The simultaneous existence of empowerment and control, participation and subordination are not indicators of failure but of the complex reality of gender transition in a traditional cultural context intersecting with more modern institutions.

Incorporating attitudinal, behavioural, and reproductive measures, this study advances literature that often considers these domains separately. It shows that gender parity can not be measured by single metrics or self-congratulatory stories of progress. Concepts of altered gender, in their turn, will require care and precision-information about in which areas power retreats, where it convolutes, where it persists unperturbed.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The study argues for moving beyond access- and participation-based frameworks of gender equality in India and suggests the need for norm transformative and relational approaches in policy interventions. Despite more women being in households and public life due to legal reforms and welfare programmes, the persistence of patriarchal norms regarding intimacy and reproduction suggests that current policy mechanisms treat symptoms more easily than structures of power.

Firstly, the relative stagnation in public support for gender-based violence further emphasizes the requirement for targeted initiatives. Although public awareness campaigns and legal penalties have decreased tolerance for overtly violent forms, resistance remains in spheres associated with sexual entitlement and domestic obligation. Policies then need to incorporate school curricula, community programmes and adult education initiatives that include consent education, equal marital rights, and gender sensitive behavioural change communication. Sexual autonomy needs to be explicitly attended to — not simply included in larger violence-prevention initiatives — if we are to deconstruct intact and often well-established systems of control.

Second, the increase in women involved in household decision-making necessitates a re-evaluation of empowerment indicators and policies. While programmes promoting joint decision-making are important, they need to be coupled with investments aimed at improving women's individual bargaining power, for example by providing secure jobs and property or by ensuring that women have adequate financial literacy. Joint-decision making can risk entrenching negotiated subordination rather than empowering real autonomy unless structural inequalities in access to resources are rectified.

Third, given the persistence of male dominance in decisions on reproductive matters, family planning policies need to be noticed, if not reframed. Today, many strategies center around direct contraception, but they promote men as the decision-makers of parental outcomes. Policy frameworks must now incentivise collective ownership without compromising bodily autonomy for women and enhanced male involvement in family planning, including facilitating male contraceptive use, and counselling services that focus on informed consent rather than obedience.

Fourth, the persistence of son preference, requires interventions that are long-term and inter-generational, and go beyond the legal prohibition of sex-selective practices. Incentive-based schemes for the girl child should be preceded and followed by cultural and institutional initiatives that subvert the economic and symbolic worth of sons. Reproductive choice can be politically facilitated through policies governing inheritance rights, elder care systems, and ritual practices that mitigate structural reliance on male progeny and dilute the reproductive calculus permeating gender stratification.

And far from everything has changed, as evidence for worsening or stasis in attitudes among younger cohorts returns to suggest that expectations of across-the-board generational progress are not only false, but betraying of empirical realities. Young men and boys need to be viewed not as objects of change, but as subjects participating in transformation with an emphasis on masculinity, relational ethics and responsibility within gender policy. Advancing gender equality will not adequately challenge the fundamental power dynamics when initiatives overlook the construction of contemporary masculinities.

In short, these results suggest that successful gender policy in modern India cannot be structured solely as a single line of intervention — legal reform, redistribution, education, or the cultural revolution — but must combine elements of each. Understanding gender transformation as a process—and not an outcome—can permit policies that better correspond to the complicated realities of everyday gender relations.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PROSPECTS

Using gender-in-progress as the lens, this study explored the contours of gender change in present-day India with the help of longitudinal evidence from the successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey. The study—which assessed attitudes about gender-based violence, women’s say in house decision-making, sexual freedom, reproductive control, and son preference, among others—showed that gender change in India is neither completely stalled nor completely progressive. Rather, it is marked by asymmetrical changes that are negotiated constructively within specific domains whereby advancement in increasingly public and institutionally circumscribed realms occurs alongside pushback in more private and symbolic contexts.

In sum, the results show that shifting acceptance of domestic violence and higher levels of women's participation in decisions concerning the household are signals of real but partial normative change. Consequently, the sexual violence landscape has changed but the persistence of rape and sexual entitlement within marriage, male control of reproductive decision-making, and the continuation of son preference, highlights patriarchy that remains strongest where it is also invisibilised and least contested. Considering these contradictions, one may argue that gender equality in modern-day India represents a reconfiguration of power instead of a decimation of patriarchy. Here empowerment mostly materialises as a negotiated access rather than power redistribution.

We believe that this work adds to gender scholarship in showing the value of examining attitudinal, behavioural and reproductive indicators simultaneously and in providing a full picture of overlap across domains. It questions narratives of celebration about abuse that conflated participation with social autonomy and as such, insist that power is wont to change its shape, but not to vanish into thin air with a good deal of social change. This intra-structural orientation, such as the gender-in-progress framework, offers a useful perspective for understanding the multiple forms of social change as they manifest in different dimensions of life, especially in states transition from one driving economic and cultural force to another, which can be extremely fast and challenging.

Conclusion Although the study contributes to deciphering the differences in circulating miRNAs, it is not without limitations. First, it is based on self-reported survey data that is subject to social desirability bias, particularly for sensitive topics like violence, sex, and reproductive choices. Second, although NFHS data is strong (and getting better) for national level analysis, it cannot capture internal states or qualitative dimensions of the experience (collaging, emotional negotiation, and regional and cultural variation of gender relations). Third, we emphasize that the use of repeated cross-sectional data restricts our capacity to make causal claims on individual-level change over time.

These restrictions highlight notable pathways for future work. Qualitative and mixed-method studies could bring an added layer of richness to the implications of large-scale surveys by exploring the negotiation of gender norms within households and communities, e.g. about consent, masculinity, and reproductive authority. Finally, longitudinal studies that follow the

same individual or family through different life stages of the family life cycle adventure would further clarify how gender ideologies change and/or persist over time. Future studies might additionally look at cross-sections of gender and caste, class, faith and region, in order to highlight divergent trajectories of gender change. Comparative research in South Asia could also contextualize India's gender transition in relation to regional as well as global dynamics.

To sum up, this research confirms that the concept of gender equality in modern India is a work in progress, and a contentious one at that. Understanding that, in its partial and imperfect condition, the expansion of gender is a partial, uneven, and adapting process enables us to maintain the need for scholarship, policy interventions, and strategies for social change that aim at substantive and sustainable gender justice, while reorienting our understandings about how to achieve this goal.

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