



Badalte Khwaab

Women's Aspirations in a Changing India

A study on aspirations among rural women

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Above all, this study belongs to the 6,092 women across fifteen states who gave their time, their patience on the phone, and their answers. Their aspirations are its subject and its purpose.

An Overview

Situating the study

The measure of progress for women and girls is a mix of what they have 'achieved', as well as whether they are free to want, choose and pursue lives of dignity on their own terms. A woman's aspirations are therefore neither private preferences nor secondary indicators of development. They reveal the possibilities she can see, the rights she feels able to claim, and the constraints that shape her choices. They influence what she is willing to work towards, save for and pass on to her daughters and sons. A survey that records only what women have achieved therefore captures only part of the development story. It risks overlooking where aspirations remain high but opportunities are blocked, where women are negotiating meaningful change, and where prolonged exclusion has narrowed the imagination of the possible for some sections of society.

The key findings below concern women's control over their savings, education, citizenship, property, a voice in the gram sabha, and rights enshrined within the Indian Constitution. The right to vote without interference sits under Articles 325 and 326; the freedom to move and reside anywhere in India, tested by this study's mobility findings, is protected under Article 19(1)(d) and (e); ownership and control of property, the subject of Section E below, is a constitutional right under Article 300A; a woman's authority over her bodily autonomy and health draws on the expansive reading of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21; and her place in local self-government, the subject of the leadership findings in Section C, has been constitutionally guaranteed by the 73rd Amendment's reservation of one-third of panchayat seats for women (Article 243D). Article 15(3) permits the State to make special provisions for women precisely because formal equality under Article 14 has not, on its own, closed these gaps. From this perspective, an aspiration gap measures more than unmet wants. In several domains, it also reflects the distance between formally guaranteed rights and women's ability to exercise them in everyday life.

The study draws upon a broader intellectual lineage. It follows Amartya Sen's capability approach and Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework of resources, agency and achievements, that defines empowerment as an important process where a woman is actually able to choose and control her life. It draws on the economics of aspirations directly: In Ray's framework (2006) aspirations act as a reference point drawing from the lives of others; Genicot and Ray (2017) indicate how aspirations, income and inequality shape each other over time; and Dalton, Ghosal and Mani (2016) on the aspirations-failure trap, where systematically low aspirations become a self-reinforcing form of poverty rather than a failure of will.

In the Indian context specifically, Beaman, Duflo, Pande and Topalova (2012) showed how female leaders in village councils act as powerful role models, raising aspirations of adolescent girls resulting in narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment. The study also adapts Bernard and Taffesse's (2014) Ethiopian-validated framework and uses phone interviews to evaluate ten different life domains. Each domain covers three layers: what a woman ideally wants, what she expects, and what she considers feasible. In particular, it refers to a study by Kosec et al (2022) in Kyrgyzstan about how development programmes boost women and girls' aspirations. The qualitative foundation of the study builds on Arjun Appadurai's (2004) views that the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed and includes Naila Kabeer's cautionary note that contentment could mask constraints, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional framework that throws light on how different parts of a person's identity – caste, religion, marital status, and community – interact with each other to create unique forms of discrimination and disadvantage.

Decades of feminist scholarship and policy practice have resulted in "women" not being seen as one single group or a homogeneous category. This study tracks five distinct life stages of women, rather than reporting on a single national average, which would flatten the unique experience of a sixteen-year-old and a sixty-year-old into one. The study findings are being analysed at a moment when interest in youth-centred development is high, and where there are rising expectations about what could advance the concept of "women-led development". It is a significant moment for the development sector to reflect upon the depth of aspirations that the study highlights and not merely focus on enhancing access to options and opportunities.

The study draws on two related propositions. First, aspirations are not fixed personal traits. They are socially formed reference points, influenced by what women observe, what they are told is possible, and what they have the freedom and resources to pursue. Second, empowerment cannot be judged only by the goods, services or opportunities made available to women. It is about women making meaningful choices, exercising control over resources and decisions, acting individually and collectively, and living with dignity and freedom from discrimination.

Expressed contentment can therefore reflect genuine fulfilment, but it can also reflect adaptation to unequal and constrained circumstances. These states may appear identical unless aspiration and attainment are measured separately. The study reads them together across life stage, caste and place, while recognising that these dimensions intersect to shape women's opportunities and constraints.

As has been mentioned earlier, several of the domains examined – independent voting, control over resources, bodily autonomy, mobility and public participation – concern women's ability to exercise their rights and citizenship in everyday life. The findings therefore speak to wellbeing, and equally to the gap between formal entitlement and lived agency, highlighting several barriers. The study is not a legal audit; its purpose is to see the larger picture where women experience a distinct gap in their life's journey most sharply.

The study combines a large-scale telephonic survey of over 6,000 rural women across 15 states along with a review of the qualitative and empirical literature. Findings are read across five life stages, from adolescent girls and young women to older women, alongside social locations of caste, religion, ethnicity and geographical location.

Study at a glance

- 6,092 women surveyed by telephone (CATI)
- 15 states, spanning the south, west, centre, north, east, hills and north-east
- Rural and peri-urban respondents (443 peri-urban)
- Five life-stage cohorts, from unmarried girls (15–19) to women aged 51–65
- Ten personal aspiration domains, each rated on importance and attainment
- Two community-voiced domains: marriage choice and fertility timing
- One life ladder: where a woman places herself today, and in five years
- Findings read across life stage, caste, religion, geography, education and SHG membership

How the aspiration gap is measured

For each domain, women answered two matched questions on a four-point scale:

- Importance — how much this matters to her
- Attainment — how true this is of her life today

Aspiration gap = importance – attainment

A small gap can mean either that the aspiration has been achieved, or that the aspiration itself has narrowed. The two look identical in one number — which is why the study examines wanting and having separately rather than reading the gap alone.

Financial independence was asked only as a present-status question, with no matching importance item. It is reported separately throughout and is not included in the composite aspiration-gap index.

The central finding: The most urgent gap is among youth

The one critical finding is that: the biggest gap between dreams and reality with the highest stakes is, among young women in rural India. The average gap is highest in the youngest cohort at 23% reducing slightly to 16% among the oldest. The more revealing finding lies beneath this average: 38 per cent of unmarried girls and women place themselves at the very bottom of the study's life ladder today, compared with roughly one-quarter of women at mid-life and 22 per cent of the oldest women.

The aspiration gap narrows across the life course

Girls & young women, 15–19		23%
Married, under 25, no children		21%
Age 20–34, child under 10		19%
Age 35–50, children 10+		18%
Age 51–65		16%

The overall gap narrows with age — but this can reflect higher attainment, lower aspirations, or both (see below, and Section D).

Young women express especially high aspirations in education, mobility and several dimensions of agency, while also reporting the widest overall distance between what they value and what they have been able to achieve.

They are also, currently, the most optimistic cohort in the sample about their own future – 71 per cent expect their lives to improve over the next five years, against 50 per cent among the oldest women. That combination of **high want, high hope, and comparatively low attainment** is not a contradiction; it marks a finite window. It signals both a demand for rights and a risk of their continued denial. Whether young women's aspirations translate into greater freedom will depend on whether institutions, programmes, families and social environments expand their real opportunities to learn, move, work, own, decide and participate.

Indicator	Girls & young women, 15–19	Women aged 51–65
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Indicator	Girls & young women, 15–19	Women aged 51–65
Place themselves at the bottom of the life ladder	38%	22%
Expect their lives to improve within five years	71%	50%

Present position and future optimism, youngest versus oldest cohort.

The experience of older cohorts offers an important caution. narrower aspiration gaps may reflect greater attainment in some domains, but they may also reflect the gradual contraction of expectations in others.

Among the small group of women, across all ages, who see no improvement ahead, the most common reason cited is not poverty or family opposition – it is simply no longer being interested in anything more.

The life-cycle framing is therefore central to the study. Policy and programmes must engage women while their aspirations are still expanding, rather than waiting until constrained opportunities have become internalised as limited expectations.

A. What women value, aspiration as a right

Before asking what women lack, it is important to recognise what they value and claim for themselves. Aspiration is after all an expression of personhood, entitlement and self-determined priorities.

Control over one's own health and bodily integrity emerged as a highly valued aspiration in the study – with 73 per cent of women rating it as very or most important – holding remarkably steady across every life stage. There are variations however: 83 per cent among Scheduled Tribe women, and 63 per cent among Scheduled Caste women. This variation might reflect the nature of unequal social conditions that shape what women are able to imagine, articulate or claim. Aspirations are formed within structures of power; they cannot be separated from women's prior experiences of discrimination, surveillance, violence, dependence or exclusion.

What women value	Share rating it very / most important
Control over her own health and body	73%
Moving freely around her own village	59%
Reaching her desired level of education (unmarried girls, 15–19)	80%

Educational importance was asked only of women aged 25 or under, since older women's schooling choices were made years earlier.

Moving independently around one's own village has seen progress and is valued by roughly six in ten women through their life cycle. Education is valued greatly but narrows down with age – around eight in ten unmarried girls/young women rate it as highly important, falling to about half among women with young children. This indicates that the aspiration shifts while the door remains open, not just when they are fulfilled. What women want is not a preamble to what they lack; it is a finding in its own right. Women's desires stand on their own, and we ask what social, economic and institutional arrangements would be required for those aspirations to become actionable choices.

B. The gap, and who carries it

The gap, at a glance

19% — average composite aspiration gap across all women

1 in 5 — women whose gap is below 10%, reporting little distance between what they want and what they have

13%–24% — the range across states, from Odisha (lowest) to Rajasthan (highest)

The average aspiration gap is 19% on a standardised scale, while modest in aggregate terms, it is real and unevenly distributed.

About one in five women report almost no gap at all, while the gap varies nearly twofold across states, from 13% in Odisha to 24% in Rajasthan. Regional differences persist even after accounting for age, education, caste and marital status, a sign that local contexts shape what can be realised, independent of who the woman is. This variation indicates that women's opportunities are shaped both by her own characteristics, and equally by the institutional and social environments in which they live. State systems, local governance, community norms, service availability, labour markets, transport, safety and collective organising all influence whether rights can be exercised in practice.

Barely one in ten women in the first four cohorts feel that most of their hopes have been met. As women age, their aspirations shift.

The key interpretive risk is therefore to treat a declining gap as evidence of progress without asking what has changed. Has attainment increased? Have institutions become more responsive? Or have aspirations narrowed in response to repeated disappointment? These are substantively different pathways with very different implications for policy.

C. Agency and Voice: wanting is not having

Several items listed below are not optional amenities but fundamental, legal rights that women already formally hold – the right to vote, build savings under her own control, and assert her voice in the gram sabha. While around two-thirds of women place value in deciding their own vote, just over half feel they can exercise it independently. The gap widens within a public setting: about a third of women would value being heard in a village forum, but fewer than one in five feel they actually would be heard.

Domain	Values it	Reports achieving it
Deciding her own vote independently	66%	52%
Being heard in a public meeting (gram sabha)	36%	18%

Domain	Values it	Reports achieving it
Contesting a local election	28%	22%
Controlling her own savings	62%	48%

What women value — and what they report experiencing — across four dimensions of agency and voice.

With regards to holding formal political office – it is the least-valued of the leadership aspirations that were tested thus far, thereby suggesting that aspiring for elected office is not high among many women. This is not simply about social and institutional barriers that they face, it is also about experiencing an enabling environment that is safe, respectful and accessible to diverse women. This finding should not be read as a lack of interest or leadership capacity among women. Rather, it suggests that structural exclusion operates before the point of formal representation. When women have limited access to information, public spaces, networks, mobility and collective voice, elected office may not yet appear to be a legitimate or attainable possibility.

The policy challenge is therefore larger than enabling women to participate once they arrive at the ballot box or gram sabha. It is to transform the conditions under which women can develop political consciousness, articulate demands, dissent from decisions, influence institutions and act collectively. Voice is not merely attendance; it is the ability to be heard and to shape outcomes.

D. Caste and intersecting structural constraints

Historically marginalised women from the SC community experience intense disadvantages and are located at the bottom of the agency story. They are least likely to report financial independence, realise asset ownership, or access health services as compared to other groups. They also expressed *lower* aspirations in the study: 47 per cent rated asset ownership as very or most important, as against 56–61 per cent elsewhere. Read against the study's qualitative foundations, this indicates a systemic and structural pattern that is consistent with communities that have historically had limited access to platforms and institutions, even to imagine, let alone demand, their rights.

	SC women	Other social groups
Rate independent asset ownership as very / most important	47%	56–61%

This pattern repeats across several domains — voice, savings, leadership and health — not just asset ownership; the significance lies in the repetition, not any single figure.

Interpretive caution

This is the study's most important caution. In the regression predicting the composite gap, Scheduled Caste women show a statistically narrower gap than otherwise comparable General-category women. Read in isolation, this could appear to indicate a better outcome. It does not. The narrower gap is driven by lower expressed aspiration, rather than higher attainment, and should not be interpreted as evidence of reduced need or greater empowerment.

A different route to a smaller gap: self-help group members

Self-help group members make the contrast precise: they report both higher aspiration and higher attainment, with achievement rising even faster than what they want. This is a more promising pathway — collective platforms can expand women's expectations while also strengthening their access to resources, solidarity, information and bargaining power.

The pattern is not, however, a clean hierarchy. Scheduled Tribe and OBC women often report both higher aspiration and higher attainment than General-category women, particularly in mobility, health and leadership. Caste disadvantage is structural, but its effects are mediated by context, domain and collective power. Analysis and action must therefore be intersectional rather than based on a single linear ranking of communities.

E. Assets and Income: access to infrastructure by itself may not lead to empowerment

Asset ownership rises with age, but remains unrealised for most women

Youngest cohort (15–19)		24%
Oldest cohort (51–65)		42%

Share reporting they own, or expect to own, assets in their own name — against a stable aspiration held by 56% of women throughout the life course.

Wanting land, a house, gold or savings in one's own name are widely held aspirations (56 per cent). It barely softens with age, yet in real terms, asset-ownership is a long process for women, from 24 per cent among the youngest women to 42 per cent among the oldest — it is among the largest unmet aspiration. Ownership matters partly because assets provide economic and social security. It matters because ownership can strengthen bargaining power, reduce dependency, increase resilience to violence and crisis, and expand the range of choices available to women. However, nominal ownership is not enough. The relevant question is whether women can use, control, inherit, transfer and benefit from assets without coercion or mediation by others.

Financial independence tells a related but distinct story: only about 37 per cent of women report a steady income of their own, a figure that barely moves across the life cycle — the one domain that does not build with age the way most others do, and one that tracks education closely (22 per cent among women with no schooling, against 51–66 per cent beyond school). Low incomes should not be mistaken for low ambition: even among women without independent monetary earnings, roughly half still place high value on control over savings and assets. The study is careful to separate financial *inclusion* from financial *empowerment* — an account or a thin, irregular income is infrastructure, not agency in itself. Scheduled Caste women trail here too, at 33 per cent against 39–40 per cent among ST and OBC women — the same group that trails on voice and assets also trails with regard to earnings.

Financial independence

37% — of women overall report a steady income of their own

22% — among women with no formal schooling

51–66% — beyond school

Financial independence is reported as a status only and is not included in the aspiration-gap index (see box above).

One further caution: it is women in peri-urban areas, and not any single caste-based group, who carry the widest gap of any characteristics in the study, once other factors are held constant. This seems to be concentrated among a smaller group of women, who want considerably more than they have been able to access - a question the study would like to flag for further research rather than can be answered with the current data base.

Not all gaps mean the same thing

A large gap can signal blocked opportunity, calling for removing barriers or building infrastructure. A small gap can mean real progress — as among self-help group members — or it can mean a woman has learned not to expect very much, as the evidence indicates for Scheduled Caste women. Interpreting a narrow gap requires understanding whether it reflects genuine progress or aspirations that have narrowed in response to persistent constraints

Pattern	What it looks like	What it means
Large gap	High aspiration, low attainment	Opportunity is blocked, or institutions have yet to respond
Small gap — pathway 1	High aspiration, high attainment	Genuine progress (e.g. self-help group members)
Small gap — pathway 2	Low aspiration, low attainment	Aspirations have narrowed in response to sustained constraint (e.g. SC women, older women)

The same summary number can mean opposite things. Programme design should ask which pathway it is looking at before treating a narrow gap as success.

What this means for the sector

The findings of this study suggest that the development sector must move beyond measuring women's achievements alone towards understanding the aspirations that shape those achievements. Aspirations are neither fixed nor individual; they evolve across the life cycle and are influenced by institutions, social norms, collective action and unequal access to opportunity. Measuring aspirations alongside outcomes offers a richer understanding of women's agency and provides an opportunity to identify where progress is constrained, where it is emerging, and where expectations themselves may have adapted to persistent disadvantage.

Recommendations for Policy

The findings point to five priorities for public policy to enable women to move beyond participation towards leadership, economic opportunity and decision-making.

- Create local earning opportunities for young women, particularly during the transition from education to work, when aspirations are highest but financial independence remains lowest. This should include strengthening local entrepreneurship, skills linked to local economies and pathways into decent work.
- Move beyond financial inclusion by strengthening women's ownership and control over productive assets, including land, housing, enterprise assets and savings. This requires improving women's access to asset ownership, joint land and housing titles, enterprise finance and productive infrastructure that supports long-term economic security.
- Strengthen meaningful participation in local governance for women and youth. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) should work together to make Gram Sabhas and other community institutions more accessible, inclusive and responsive to the voices of women and young people, moving beyond elected representation to meaningful participation in local decision-making.
- Recognise that women at different life stages have different aspirations and constraints. Programmes for adolescent girls, young women, newly married women, mothers, single and older women, including for survivors of gender-based violence should therefore be designed differently, rather than treating rural women as a single beneficiary group.
- Strengthen convergence for young women's leadership across government systems. MWCD could anchor an inter-ministerial platform bringing together MoPR, MoRD, MYAS, MSME and MSJE to advance women's leadership, economic opportunity and the inclusion of young women in policy spaces, while creating structured mechanisms for listening to diverse voices and recognising that women begin from unequal social and economic starting points.

Recommendations for NGOs and Development Practitioners

The findings suggest that NGOs and development practitioners have an important role in moving beyond service delivery towards strengthening women's voice and agency across their life cycle.

- Create safer spaces where women and youth can articulate their aspirations, build confidence and strengthen their collective voice.
- Support collective platforms such as Self-Help Groups and other community institutions that build solidarity, peer learning and local leadership.
- Connect women to livelihoods, markets, finance and public institutions so that aspirations are linked to tangible opportunities.
- Design age-specific interventions that recognise the different aspirations and constraints of adolescent girls, young women, mothers and older women.
- Prioritise SC and ST women and other historically marginalised communities, where lower aspirations may reflect long-standing structural exclusion rather than lower need.

Recommendations for Financing/ Philanthropy

The findings reinforce the importance of investing in the enabling conditions that allow women to realise their aspirations and moving beyond immediate programme outputs towards long-term systems change.

- Invest in women's collectives, youth collectives, local livelihood ecosystems, leadership development, asset ownership, safe spaces, and locally rooted institutions that enable aspirations to translate into sustained agency.
- Provide long-term support for programmes and research that generate evidence, strengthen institutions and sustain change beyond project cycles.
- Support innovation, learning and models that strengthen young women's economic opportunities while addressing the social norms and institutional barriers that continue to limit women's choices, participation and leadership.
- Urgently look at youth and quality educational, economic inclusion and norm change work that centres adolescents and young women.
- Scale supportive ecosystems and masculinities work.

Recommendations for the Research, Learning and the Evidence Ecosystem

The study highlights the importance of moving beyond conventional indicators of programme coverage and service delivery to better understand women's lived experiences and inform more responsive policy and programme design.

- Deepen research on women's aspirations and agency across the life cycle, examining how they are shaped by caste, geography, collective institutions and other intersecting forms of exclusion, and what enables women to translate aspirations into meaningful achievements.
- Strengthen evidence through mixed-methods research and implementation learning, combining quantitative evidence with qualitative enquiry to better capture lived experiences and generate actionable insights for policy and programme design.
- Build stronger bridges between research, policy and practice by fostering partnerships among researchers, governments, women's rights organisations and grassroots institutions to strengthen knowledge exchange, mentoring, leadership development and implementation learning.
- Draw on feminist insights and evidence to address structural barriers, bridge implementation gaps, and generate evidence that informs greater investment in women's collective organising and community-led institutions.
- Expand evidence on transforming gender norms, including research and learning on engaging young boys and men as allies, promoting co-parenting, and strengthening positive masculinities to support more equitable gender relations.

Methodological note

The composite aspiration-gap index combines the importance-weighted difference between importance and attainment across ten personal areas, two areas framed around "women like the respondent" in her community, and the life ladder. The index runs from 0 (valued aspirations fully met) to 1 (the largest possible gap). An alternative index excluding the ladder closely tracks the main index, correlating at 0.93. Financial independence is reported as a status only and is not part of the index.

The full report presents detailed findings by topic, supporting analysis, regional and intersectional breakdowns, and the survey instrument in full.

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Acronyms

CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interviewing
DIU	Development Intelligence Unit
OBC	Other Backward Class
OLS	Ordinary least squares
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG	Self-help group
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TRI	Transform Rural India

Part 1. What the study asked and why

1.1 Why aspirations matter

A woman's aspirations are not a soft or secondary thing to measure. What she wants for herself sets what she is willing to work towards, save for, argue for, and pass on to her daughters. A girl kept in school a year longer, a woman who opens a bank account in her own name, a mother who insists her daughter marry later, each of these decisions rests on a woman first believing the better outcome is worth reaching for and within reach. When that belief is absent, effort does not follow, and a programme that offers the opportunity finds few takers. Aspiration is the hinge between what is on offer and what is taken up.

This is why a survey that records only what women have, their income, their schooling, their assets, misses half of what a programme needs to know. Two women with the same assets can sit in very different places: one content, one straining for more, and they will respond to the same scheme in opposite ways. Measuring what women want, alongside what they have, shows where rural women fall short, where their own hopes are highest, and where they have given up wanting. Both tell a programme something, and only one of them shows up in a standard welfare survey.

There is a further reason, particular to the women this study covers. Aspiration is not evenly distributed. The chance to want more is itself shaped by caste, by what a woman has seen other women around her achieve, and by whether anyone like her has done the thing she might hope for. Where that chance has been narrow, low expressed demand can look like contentment when it is really constraint. A programme that reads low demand as low need will withdraw from exactly the women whose horizons have been most limited. Measuring aspiration directly is how that trap is avoided.

The design turns on two questions. First, of the things a woman might want, which does she value, and how far does her life deliver them. Second, whether the answer follows a pattern set by her caste, her life stage, her faith, her membership of a village group or the kind of place she lives. The second question matters because a programme that treats low demand as low need will pull back from the women whose wants have already been narrowed by what they can get.

1.2 The theory the study builds on

The measure draws on the economics of aspirations. Ray (2006) treated aspirations as reference points a person takes from the lives of others she sees as comparable, and argued that effort rises and then falls with the size of the gap. A woman with no gap has nothing to reach for. A moderate gap draws effort, because the goal is in view. A gap far past reach turns to frustration and effort drops away. So a gap is not good or bad on its own; what matters is where on that curve a woman sits, and the report keeps that distinction in view.

Genicot and Ray (2017) formalised how aspirations, income and inequality shape one another across a society over time, so that some groups settle into satisfied, self-sustaining trajectories and others into frustrated, stagnant ones. Dalton, Ghosal and Mani (2016) modelled the resulting behavioural poverty trap, in which those facing systematically low aspirations under-invest relative to what they would choose with wider horizons, a self-reinforcing loop rather than a failing of individual will. In India, Beaman, Duflo, Pande and Topalova (2012) showed the mechanism at work in the field: exposure to female village leaders raised the aspirations of adolescent girls and their parents, and narrowed the gender gap in schooling, through example alone.

On measurement, Bernard and Taffesse (2014) established that aspirations can be captured reliably in a survey across several dimensions, each weighted by how much it matters to the respondent, an approach this study adapts to phone interviewing. Kosec and colleagues (2022) applied a similar design to women's decision-making outcomes in Kyrgyzstan, the closest precedent to this study's method.

1.3 The qualitative foundation

The quantitative measure sits on a qualitative review prepared for this study by Durba Chakraborty, drawing together the interpretive and ethnographic literature on how rural Indian women form and revise aspirations. Three of its points shape the survey directly. Following Appadurai (2004), the capacity to aspire is itself unevenly held, built through exposure to institutions and opportunities, so that the socially marginalised have fewer chances to practise it. Following Kabeer (1999), expressed preferences can be products of constraint, so a woman's stated contentment cannot be read at face value as the absence of a problem. And following the intersectional tradition after Crenshaw (1989), caste, religion, marital status and institutional membership act together rather than singly, so aspiration profiles must be read at their intersections. The review also draws on the Indian qualitative evidence, including Chaturvedi and Sahai (2019) on what rural women in three states say they want, and on institutional material from the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and IWWAGE, to argue that self-help groups are sites where aspirations are formed, not merely served. The full review is a companion document; its threads run through the findings below.

1.4 How the aspiration gap is measured

For each area of life the survey asked two questions on a four-point scale: how much this matters to you, and how true it is of your life today. The first captures importance, the second captures attainment. Where importance sits above attainment, the distance between them is the aspiration gap for that area. Where a woman already has what she values, there is no gap, whatever her material circumstances. The study measures wanting against having, not wealth in itself, and it treats the two questions as equally important throughout: every area in Part 2 reports both, side by side.

This sets up a rule used throughout. A small gap can mean a woman has what she wants, or that she has stopped wanting what she cannot get. The two look the same in one number. Part 4 and the annexure separate them by asking whether a narrow gap comes from high attainment or from low importance.

1.5 The areas of life

The survey covered ten personal areas plus financial independence, and two further areas asked in a community-voiced way. For each personal area a woman rated importance and then attainment for herself. In plain terms the areas are these (the exact question wording for all of them is in Annexure B):

- Education: reaching the level of learning she wants. Importance was asked only of women aged 25 or under, whose schooling is still an open decision, so the importance question does not apply to older cohorts.
- Financial independence: whether she has a job or business earning a steady income of her own. This is a present-status question with no matching importance item, so it is reported as a standalone status rather than as a gap.
- Mobility, in two parts: moving around her own area freely and safely; and travelling outside her area on her own for work or study.

- Agency, in two parts: saving and spending as she decides without needing permission; and deciding her own vote rather than following the family line.
- Leadership, in three parts: holding a responsible post; being heard in public meetings such as the gram sabha; and being able to contest a local election.
- Health: making her own health and body decisions, including reproductive health.
- Assets: owning land, a house, gold or savings in her own name and under her control.

Two further areas, choosing when and whom to marry and the timing of children, are difficult to ask a woman about her own life over the phone, so they were asked about women like you in your community. They are reported alongside the others, and they enter the combined measure with their community framing stated openly in the methodology. Health is asked slightly differently across life stages: women up to their mid-thirties answered for themselves, while women from thirty-five on were asked whether they would grant a daughter or daughter-in-law the same right, capturing the value as it passes to the next generation.

1.6 The five life stages

Because aspirations shift as a woman's life unfolds, the study groups women into five life stages, built from age, marital status and the ages of their children. Every woman falls into exactly one, and the same questions go to all five, so the study can trace how a given hope rises or fades across a life. Women over 65 were not interviewed.

Table 1. *The five life-stage cohorts and their sample sizes*

Life stage	Definition	Women
Cohort 1	Unmarried, aged 15 to 19	756
Cohort 2	Married, under 25, no children yet	753
Cohort 3	Aged 20 to 34, with a child under ten	1,864
Cohort 4	Aged 35 to 50, all children ten or older	1,913
Cohort 5	Aged 51 to 65	806

1.7 Where the study was fielded

The survey covered fifteen states, chosen to span the country's regions rather than to represent any one: Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in the south; Maharashtra in the west; Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in the centre; Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana in the north; Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha in the east; Himachal Pradesh in the hills; and Assam and Nagaland in the northeast. Between 358 and 440 women were interviewed in each, in rural and peri-urban areas. Because the states differ so widely in language, economy and social structure, the patterns that hold across all of them, the life-stage gradient, the caste order, the size of the asset and vote gaps, can be read as features of rural women's aspirations broadly, not artefacts of one place. For the regional comparisons in Part 3, the fifteen are grouped into four analytical belts: the Hindi heartland, the tribal belt, the economically developed south and west, and the east; the membership of each is listed where the belts first appear. Throughout the report, regional readings group these states into the Hindi heartland (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar and Rajasthan), the Eastern states (West Bengal, Odisha and Assam), the tribal states (Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Nagaland), and the bigger economies of the South and West (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra).

1.8 The background details and the ladder

Alongside the areas of life, the survey recorded the facts used to break findings down: age, marital status, number and age of children, caste group (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class or General), religion, the household's main earner and its education, the woman's own education and main activity, and her membership of village groups such as self-help groups. These are the variables against which every result in Part 2 is read.

One question stands on its own. Women were shown a ladder whose bottom rung is a woman with very few hopes met and whose top rung is a woman with most of them met. Each placed herself today, then said where she expects to stand in five years. Those who placed themselves near the bottom and expected no improvement were asked, from a set list, what holds them back. The ladder is the study's single summary of how women rate their own progress and their optimism, and it closes Part 2.

Part 2. What women told us

Every area is reported the same way. Paragraphs come first, on how many women rate the aspiration theme as being important and on how many say it is true of their life now, each pointing out how the cohorts differ. A chart follows, with both questions shown across the five cohorts and an overall-sample column, and a table under it giving the full response breakdown. A second chart and table show the same two questions by caste, and each section closes with the regional picture, two or three paragraphs and a table giving importance, attainment and the gap across the four belts defined in Part 1. Percentages are of the women asked each question; bases are printed in every table.

Part 2 has fifteen sections: eleven for the areas a woman answered about her own life (education, local mobility, travel outside the area, the vote, savings, three leadership arenas, health, assets and financial independence), one each for the two community-voiced areas (marriage in 2.12 and fertility in 2.13), one for the ladder (2.14), and one for the barriers named by women who expect no improvement (2.15). Financial independence and the ladder are reported differently from the other areas, as explained where they appear.

Reference: the questions behind Part 2

Each aspiration thematic below is measured by the questions listed here, reproduced from the questionnaire. Importance items and current-state items both use a four-point scale; refusals are set aside. LDR_1C2 inserts the respondent's own group name, captured earlier in the interview, where the text shows a placeholder. Annexure B gives the same questions with their response options and routing. The sections that follow report the results.

Education

EDU_C1: *"Thinking about the life you want for yourself, or wanted for yourself when you were younger, how much does it matter to you to reach the level of education or learning you most want for yourself?"*

EDU_C2: *"Reaching the level of education or learning that you most want or wanted for yourself: how true is/was this for you today?"*

Mobility, local

MOB_1C1: *"Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to move around your village or neighbourhood freely and safely, including alone after dark?"*

MOB_1C2: *"Being able to move around your village or neighbourhood freely and safely, including alone after dark and in local public spaces, without fear of harassment or violence: how true is this for you today?"*

Mobility, travelling out

MOB_2C1: *"Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to travel outside your village on your own to take up work or higher education or to visit people?"*

MOB_2C2: *"Being able to travel outside your village on your own, using public transport, to pursue higher education, take up a job, or visit friends or relatives, without fear: how true is this for you today?"*

Agency, the vote

AGY_2C1: *"Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to decide whom to vote for by yourself and based on your personal preference?"*

AGY_2C2: *“Deciding who to vote for on your own, without following the family line: how true is this for you today?”*

Agency, savings

AGY_1C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to spend your saved money on yourself or as you decide, without needing anyone's permission?”*

AGY_1C2: *“Being able to save money and spend it on yourself or as you decide, without needing anyone's permission: how true is this for you today?”*

Leadership, group post

LDR_1C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to hold a responsible post where you make decisions on behalf of others?”*

LDR_1C2: *“Being in a responsible position in the organization you are a member of, where you make decisions on behalf of others: 'How possible is it to get such a responsible position?’”*

Leadership, public voice

LDR_2C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to be heard and able to contribute to decisions made in forums such as the gram sabha?”*

LDR_2C2a: *“In public meetings such as the gram sabha or ward sabha, being heard and having others take your views seriously when you speak: how true is this for you today?”*

LDR_2C2b: *“In public meetings such as the gram sabha or ward sabha, being able to contribute to public decisions that affect life in your village: how true is this for you today?”*

Leadership, contest election

LDR_3C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to be able to contest a local election and hold an elected post?”*

LDR_3C2: *“Being able to contest a local election, such as for the panchayat or a ward seat, and to hold an elected post: how true is this for you today?”*

Health

HLT_C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to look after your own health and body and make your own decisions regarding contraception and reproductive health, your own health during pregnancy and after childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of your infant?”*

HLT_C2: *“Being able to look after your own health and body and make health decisions for yourself, including contraception and reproductive health, your own health during pregnancy and after childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of your infant: how true is this for you today?”*

HLT_C3: *“Would you give your daughter or daughter-in-law the right to take care of her own health and body and make her own health decisions, including contraception and reproductive health, her own health during pregnancy and after childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of her child?”*

Assets

AST_C1: *“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to own assets in your own name and that you control?”*

AST_C2: *“Do you have property like land, a house, gold, or bank savings in your name and under your control, or is it likely to happen in your future?”*

Financial independence

WRK_C2: *“Being financially independent, that is, having a job or your own business that earns you a steady income: how true is this for you today?”*

Marriage choice (community)

MAR_C1: *“Do women like you in your society have the right to decide at what age and whom they want to marry?”*

MAR_C2: *“Is it possible for women like you in your society to take their own decisions regarding when to marry and their life partner?”*

Fertility timing (community)

AGY_3C1: *“How much does it matter to you that women like you in your community should have a say in when to have their first child after marriage and how many children to have?”*

AGY_3C2: *“Women like you in your community having a say in when to have their first child after married and how many children to have: for women like you, how true is this today?”*

2.1 Education

Who was asked: Importance asked of cohorts 1 to 3 only (women aged 25 or under); attainment asked of all five cohorts.

The survey measured educational aspiration only among women aged 25 years or younger, asking: “Thinking about the life you want for yourself, or wanted for yourself when you were younger, how much does it matter to you to reach the level of education or learning you most want for yourself?” The question was restricted to younger women because educational choices for older women were largely made many years ago, making current aspirations less meaningful as a measure of future ambition. Among women under 26, educational aspiration is exceptionally high. Four in five unmarried women aged 15 to 19 say reaching their desired level of education is very or most important. This falls to 59 per cent among newly married women and to 51 per cent among women with a young child, suggesting that marriage and early motherhood often shift priorities or constrain educational ambitions. Across everyone asked, the overall figure is 66 per cent; the table base shows the question went to 1,834 women.

Educational attainment was measured separately for all women by asking: “Reaching the level of education or learning that you most want or wanted for yourself: how true is/was this for you today?” Unlike aspirations, this question captures whether women feel they achieved the education they desired. The results reveal a clear generational gradient. Around 68 per cent of the youngest cohort believe they have reached, or are on track to reach, the level of education they wanted, but this falls steadily across successive age groups, reaching only 23 per cent among the oldest women. This pattern reflects more than individual circumstances. Older cohorts came of age when educational opportunities for rural girls were substantially more limited, with lower enrolment, higher dropout rates and fewer secondary schools. The differences therefore capture the rapid expansion of educational opportunity across generations as much as differences in personal success: real progress in girls' education, with the constraints of the past still visible in the older cohorts.

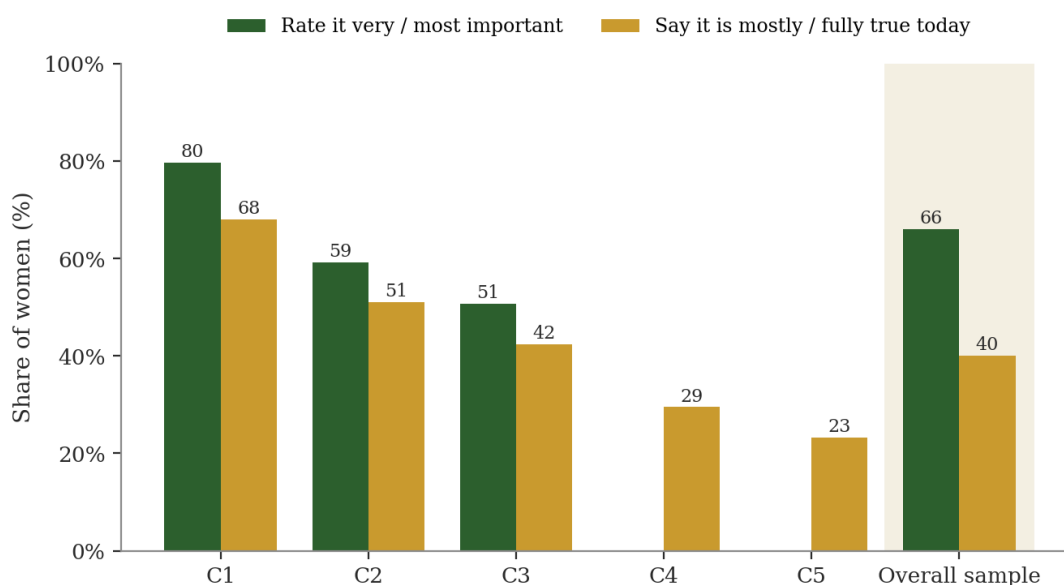


Figure 1. Education: importance (under-26s) and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 2. Education: importance by cohort. Importance was not asked of cohorts 4 and 5. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	35.9%	21.5%	13.7%	–	–	26%
Very important	43.8%	37.6%	37.1%	–	–	40.1%
Somewhat	18.5%	33.8%	38.3%	–	–	28.3%
Not important	1.9%	7%	10.9%	–	–	5.6%
Base (N)	753	752	329	0	0	1,834

Table 3. Education: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	24.7%	9.4%	11.6%	10%	7.7%	12%
Mostly true	43.3%	41.6%	30.8%	19.5%	15.5%	28.2%
Partly true	28.8%	36.7%	38.6%	39.5%	32.4%	36.6%
Not true	3.2%	12.2%	19%	31.1%	44.4%	23.3%
Base (N)	756	752	1,851	1,896	793	6,048

Among the under-26s who were asked, the value placed on education is high in every caste group: 72 per cent of General-caste and 71 per cent of Scheduled Tribe women rate reaching their desired level as very or most important, with Other Backward Class and Scheduled Caste women close behind at 64 and 63 per cent. The differences emerge not in what women want, but in whether they feel they have achieved it.

Only 35 per cent of Scheduled Caste women report that they have fully or mostly reached the level of education they wanted, compared with around 42 per cent among Other Backward Class and Scheduled Tribe women, while General-category women lie between the two at 40 per cent. Scheduled Caste women are also the most likely to say their educational aspirations have been met only partly, suggesting that many have made progress without reaching the level they had hoped for. The evidence therefore points to persistent inequalities in educational attainment rather than in educational aspiration. Across caste groups, women value education similarly, but Scheduled Caste women remain less likely to translate those aspirations into realised outcomes.

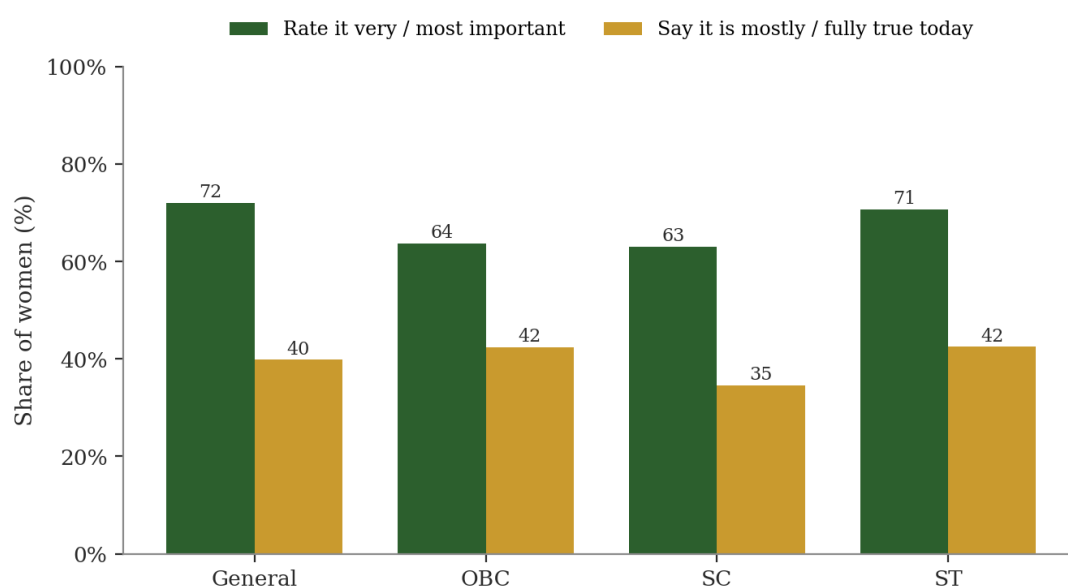


Figure 2. Education: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 4. Education: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	28%	27.2%	19.9%	30.6%
Very important	44%	36.5%	43.2%	40.1%
Somewhat	25%	29.4%	31.3%	23.9%
Not important	3%	6.9%	5.6%	5.4%
Base (N)	332	758	428	297

Table 5. Education: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	11.5%	11.3%	10.2%	17.1%
Mostly true	28.3%	31.1%	24.4%	25.4%
Partly true	36.9%	34.2%	43.1%	33.5%
Not true	23.3%	23.4%	22.4%	24%
Base (N)	1,213	2,564	1,261	958

Educational aspirations are high across all four regional groupings, but their intensity varies considerably. Women in the Eastern states place the greatest value on education, with nearly four in five (79.2 per cent) rating it as very or most important. This is substantially higher than in the Hindi heartland (60.3 per cent), the tribal states (66.3 per cent) and the larger economies of the South and West (63.5 per cent).

Differences in educational attainment are much smaller than differences in aspirations. Between 37 and 44 per cent of women across the four regions report having achieved the level of education they wanted, with the Eastern states recording the highest attainment (44.2 per cent) and the Hindi heartland the lowest (36.6 per cent). The Eastern states' much stronger aspirations mean that they also record by far the largest aspiration gap, at 35 percentage points. In the other three regions the gap is close to uniform, ranging from 23 to 24 percentage points. Women in the Eastern states aspire to substantially higher levels of education than women elsewhere, but these higher aspirations are not matched by a proportionate rise in attainment.

Table 6. Education: importance and attainment by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.

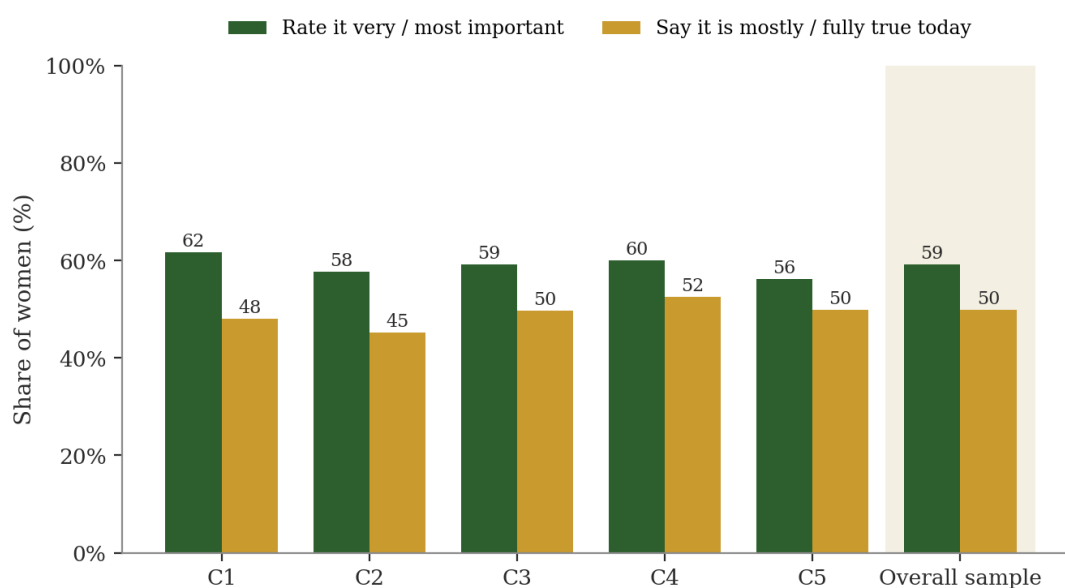
Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	60.3	36.6	23.8	2,470
Predominantly tribal states	66.3	43.5	22.8	1,140
Large economies of South and West	63.5	40.2	23.2	1,250
Eastern states	79.2	44.2	35.0	1,188

2.2 Mobility, moving around the local area

Who was asked: Asked of all five cohorts.

The survey asked women how important it was to be able to move freely and safely within their own village or neighbourhood, including travelling alone after dark. This emerges as a consistently valued aspiration across the life course. Around three in five women (59 per cent) rate it as very or most important, with little variation between cohorts, indicating that the desire for local mobility remains strong regardless of age or life stage.

Half of all women (50 per cent) report that they are mostly or fully able to move freely and safely within their local area. Attainment improves only marginally with age, increasing from 48 per cent among unmarried young women to 52 per cent among women in their late thirties and forties before remaining broadly unchanged. The improvement is driven less by women achieving complete freedom than by a decline in those reporting no freedom at all: the share saying local mobility is “not true” falls from about one in seven among the youngest women to fewer than one in ten among the oldest. Local mobility therefore has one of the smallest aspiration gaps in the study, suggesting that women generally enjoy greater freedom within familiar community spaces than in wider public settings. Even so, only one woman in two feels she has largely achieved the level of local mobility she desires, so meaningful constraints persist.

**Figure 3.** Local movement: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall**Table 7.** Mobility, moving around the local area: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
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Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	16.3%	13%	15.3%	17.4%	16.9%	16%
Very important	45.4%	44.6%	43.9%	42.5%	39.2%	43.1%
Somewhat	30.7%	33.5%	33.3%	34.3%	36.5%	33.7%
Not important	7.5%	8.9%	7.5%	5.8%	7.3%	7.1%
Base (N)	755	753	1,863	1,911	803	6,085

Table 8. Mobility, moving around the local area: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	10.9%	9.6%	11.6%	13.6%	14.2%	12.2%
Mostly true	37.2%	35.7%	38.2%	38.9%	35.8%	37.7%
Partly true	37.1%	38.1%	37.2%	38.6%	41%	38.2%
Not true	14.8%	16.6%	13.1%	8.9%	9.1%	11.9%
Base (N)	755	753	1,862	1,911	805	6,086

The importance attached to being able to move freely and safely within one's own village or neighbourhood varies more by caste than it does by age. Scheduled Tribe women place the greatest value on local mobility, with around seven in ten rating it as very or most important, well above the levels reported by General-category (60 per cent), Other Backward Class (57 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (54 per cent). The stronger emphasis among Scheduled Tribe women may reflect the greater practical importance of independent movement in many tribal communities and settlements.

These differences in aspiration are broadly mirrored in attainment. Scheduled Tribe women are the most likely to report that they can mostly or fully move freely within their local area (54 per cent), while Scheduled Caste women are the least likely (44 per cent). General-category and Other Backward Class women fall between these two groups. The distribution of responses also suggests that Scheduled Caste women experience more partial rather than complete freedom: they are markedly more likely than other groups to say that local mobility is only “partly true” of their lives. One caution applies to reading these figures as empowerment. Among labouring communities, movement is often a matter of work and subsistence rather than choice, so high mobility can reflect the necessity of going out to earn rather than the freer mobility of travel for education or leisure; importance and attainment should be read together for this reason.

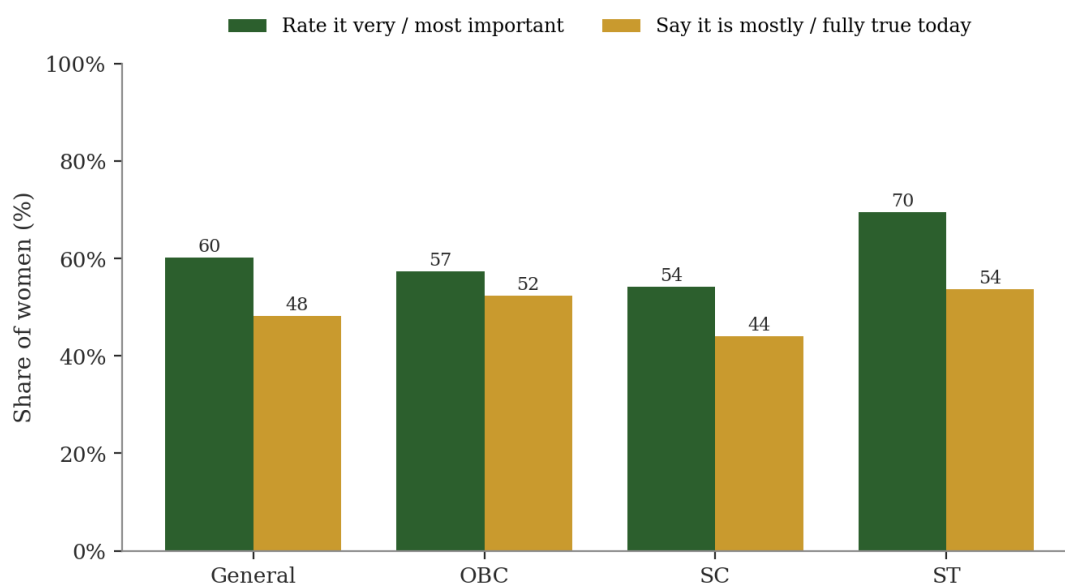


Figure 4. Local movement: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 9. Mobility, moving around the local area: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	14.3%	16.2%	10.9%	24.6%
Very important	45.9%	41.2%	43.2%	44.9%
Somewhat	32%	35%	39.3%	24.9%
Not important	7.7%	7.6%	6.5%	5.6%
Base (N)	1,220	2,568	1,272	971

Table 10. Mobility, moving around the local area: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	12.3%	13.7%	8.3%	13.8%
Mostly true	36%	38.8%	35.7%	39.9%
Partly true	37.1%	35.6%	45.2%	37.4%
Not true	14.6%	12%	10.8%	9%
Base (N)	1,223	2,567	1,271	971

Women's views on local mobility differ markedly across regions. The Tribal belt places the greatest value on being able to move freely and safely within the village or neighbourhood, with nearly three-quarters of women (73.7 per cent) rating it as very or most important. The Hindi heartland records the lowest importance (52.6 per cent), while the South and West (59.2 per cent) and the Eastern states (58.8 per cent) lie in between.

Perceived attainment varies less than aspirations. Women in the Tribal belt are the most likely to report being able to move around freely and safely (56.8 per cent), followed by the Eastern states (50.0 per cent) and the Hindi heartland (49.7 per cent), while the South and West records the lowest attainment (44.0 per cent).

The aspiration gap, however, tells a different story. The Hindi heartland shows an almost negligible gap of just 3.0 percentage points, whereas the Tribal belt (16.9 percentage points) and the South and West (15.2 percentage points) record much larger gaps. This difference arises primarily because women in the Hindi heartland attach considerably less importance to local mobility, not because they experience substantially greater freedom of movement. In contrast, women in the Tribal belt both value mobility more highly and report greater freedom, leaving a larger gap simply because aspirations are much stronger.

Table 11. *Mobility, moving around the local area: importance and attainment by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	52.6	49.7	3.0	2,469
Predominantly tribal states	73.7	56.8	16.9	1,143
Large economies of South and West	59.2	44.0	15.2	1,268
Eastern states	58.8	50.0	8.8	1,206

2.3 Mobility, travelling outside the area

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts.*

The survey distinguished between freedom of movement within the local community and the more demanding task of travelling outside the village or neighbourhood independently. Women were asked how important it was to be able to travel alone, using public transport, for work, higher education or to visit friends and relatives, and whether this reflected their lives today. Unlike local movement, this measure captures women's ability to access opportunities and social networks beyond familiar surroundings. The aspiration is widespread across the life course: 61 per cent of women overall rate it as very or most important. Although the importance attached to independent travel declines with age, from 69 per cent among unmarried young women to 51 per cent among the oldest cohort, though not in a straight line, it remains the majority view in every life stage. The desire for independent mobility is therefore not simply an aspiration of youth but one that persists throughout women's lives.

Attainment, however, changes far less than aspiration. Between 47 and 54 per cent of women across all cohorts, and 52 per cent overall, report that they are mostly or fully able to travel outside their village or neighbourhood alone, with only modest improvement as women grow older. The youngest cohort records the lowest attainment, consistent with the greater restrictions often placed on unmarried girls, but even among older women barely half report achieving the level of independent mobility they desire. The aspiration gap therefore remains material across the life course, narrowing only slightly with age because aspirations soften more than realised mobility improves. Compared with local movement, travelling independently beyond the village remains a far larger constraint on women's freedom of movement and access to education, employment and social participation.

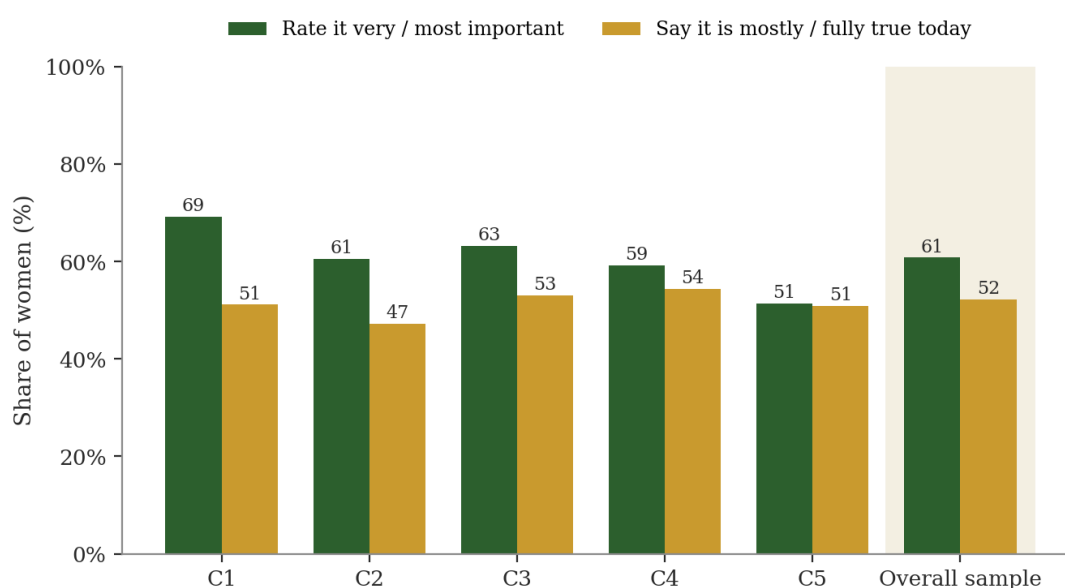


Figure 5. Travel outside the area alone: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 12. Mobility, travelling outside the area: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	23.2%	19%	17.9%	18.1%	16.1%	18.5%
Very important	45.9%	41.5%	45.4%	41.1%	35.3%	42.3%
Somewhat	24%	30.5%	26.8%	30.6%	33.9%	29%
Not important	6.8%	9%	10%	10.2%	14.7%	10.2%
Base (N)	753	752	1,864	1,911	802	6,082

Table 13. Mobility, travelling outside the area: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	11.7%	10.6%	13.4%	15.3%	13.6%	13.5%
Mostly true	39.4%	36.6%	39.7%	39.1%	37.4%	38.8%
Partly true	37.5%	41.6%	35.9%	36.1%	37.6%	37.1%
Not true	11.3%	11.2%	11.1%	9.5%	11.5%	10.7%
Base (N)	751	752	1,862	1,908	803	6,076

Caste differences are more pronounced for travelling independently outside the village or neighbourhood than for local mobility. Scheduled Tribe women place the greatest value on being able to travel alone for work, education or social purposes, with 69 per cent rating this as very or most important. Other Backward Class women follow at 64 per cent, while the corresponding shares are lower among General-category (59 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (51 per cent). Unlike education, where aspirations were broadly similar across caste groups, aspirations for independent travel themselves differ appreciably across communities.

These differences are reflected in realised mobility. Scheduled Caste women are the least likely to report that they can mostly or fully travel outside their local area alone (46 per cent), closely followed by General-category women (47 per cent). In contrast, a majority of Other Backward Class (57 per cent) and Scheduled Tribe women (55 per cent) say they have achieved this level of mobility. Scheduled Caste women are also considerably more likely than other groups to report that this aspiration is only partly realised, suggesting that many experience limited rather than complete freedom of movement. The same caution as for local movement applies: where mobility is high, part of it is the movement of labour and subsistence rather than of choice.

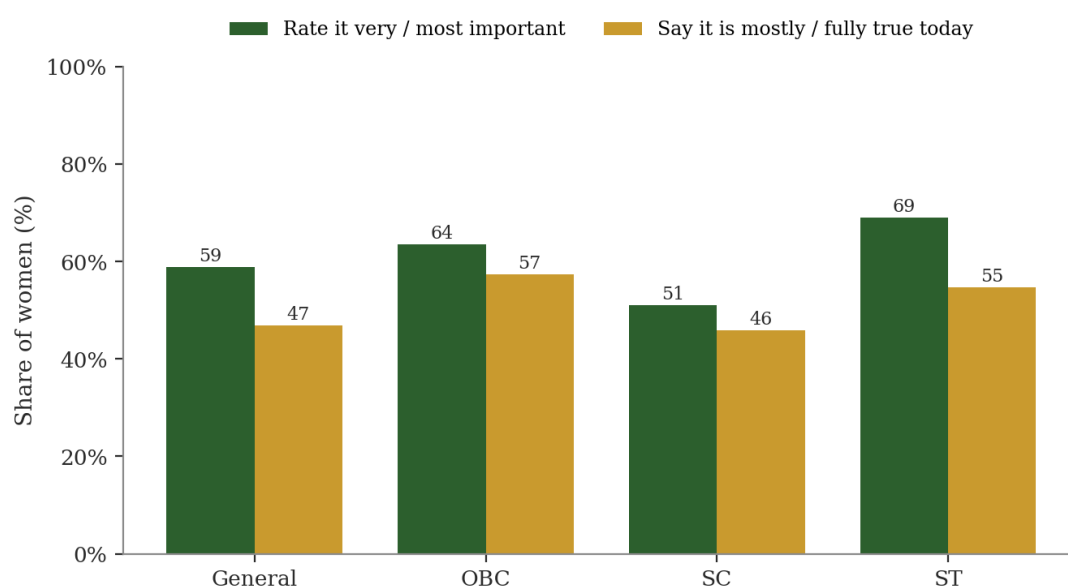


Figure 6. Travel outside the area alone: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 14. Mobility, travelling outside the area: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	17%	19.4%	13.3%	24.6%
Very important	42%	44.1%	37.7%	44.5%
Somewhat	31.3%	24.9%	38.6%	24.5%
Not important	9.8%	11.6%	10.4%	6.5%
Base (N)	1,220	2,568	1,271	969

Table 15. Mobility, travelling outside the area: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	12.2%	15%	10.5%	15.3%
Mostly true	34.6%	42.3%	35.3%	39.4%
Partly true	37%	34.1%	45.2%	33.8%
Not true	16.2%	8.6%	8.9%	11.5%
Base (N)	1,219	2,563	1,273	967

The desire to travel outside the village independently varies more across regions than the ability to do so. Women in the tribal belt place the greatest importance on being able to travel out alone, with 71.1 per cent rating it very or most important, followed by the Hindi heartland (60.8 per cent). Importance is lower in the South and West (55.0 per cent) and the Eastern states (57.1 per cent).

The tribal belt also records the highest attainment, with 61.5 per cent of women saying they are able to travel outside their village independently, while the South and West (47.2 per cent) and the Eastern states (44.5 per cent) lag behind. As a result, the aspiration gap is widest in the Eastern states (12.7 percentage points), reflecting relatively limited freedom to travel despite moderate aspirations. The Hindi heartland shows the narrowest gap (6.5 points), while the tribal belt (9.6 points) and the South and West (7.8 points) fall in between. Independent travel beyond the village remains a greater challenge in the Eastern states than elsewhere, whereas women in the tribal belt combine high aspirations with comparatively higher mobility.

Table 16. *Mobility, travelling outside the area: importance and attainment by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	60.8	54.4	6.5	2,465
Predominantly tribal states	71.1	61.5	9.6	1,142
Large economies of South and West	55.0	47.2	7.8	1,266
Eastern states	57.1	44.5	12.7	1,203

2.4 Agency: the independent vote

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts.*

The survey asked women how important it was to decide whom to vote for based on their own judgement rather than following the family's preference, and whether this reflected their lives today. This measure captures an important dimension of personal agency: the ability to exercise political choice independently within the household. The aspiration for an independent vote is widespread across all stages of life. Overall, 66 per cent of women consider it very or most important to decide their vote for themselves. The proportion rises from 60 per cent among unmarried young women to around two-thirds among married women before easing slightly in the oldest cohort, suggesting that women increasingly value political autonomy as they assume greater responsibilities within the household and community.

The real change, however, lies in attainment. Only 35 per cent of unmarried young women report that they mostly or fully decide their own vote, compared with almost one-half of newly married women and around 55 per cent among women who have children. Much of this improvement comes from a sharp decline in women reporting no autonomy at all: the share saying that deciding their own vote is “not true” falls from 39 per cent among unmarried young women to below 10 per cent in the oldest cohort. Even so, around one in every two older women still does not report fully or mostly exercising an independent vote. This remains the largest aspiration gap among the personal agency measures examined in the study; political autonomy continues to lag behind women's aspirations even as it strengthens over the life course.

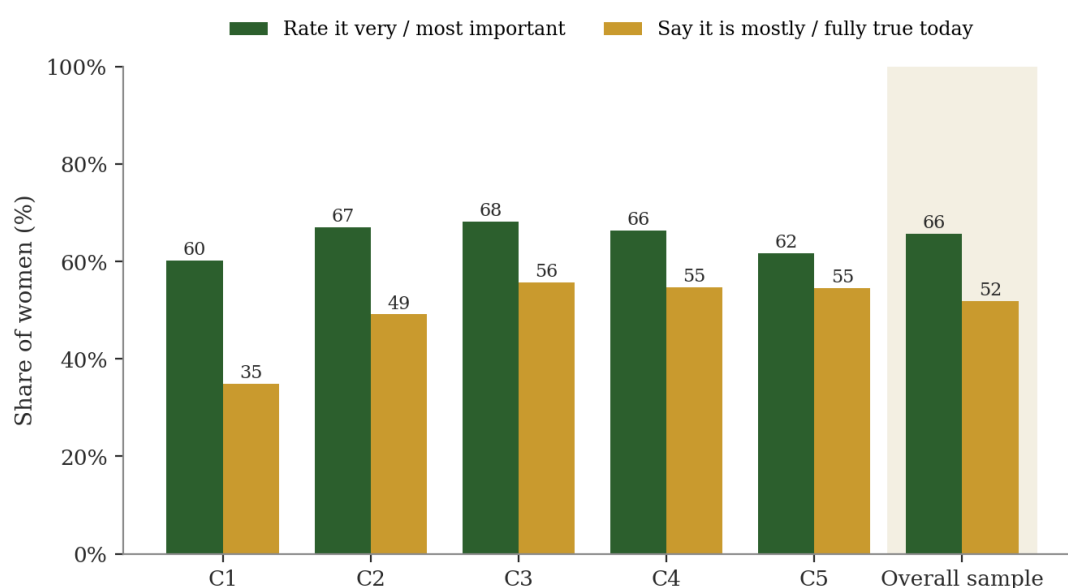


Figure 7. Deciding her own vote: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 16. Agency: the independent vote: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	20.6%	21.8%	20.1%	21%	19.5%	20.6%
Very important	39.6%	45.1%	48.1%	45.4%	42.1%	45%
Somewhat	32.2%	29.6%	27.2%	29.8%	33%	29.7%
Not important	7.6%	3.5%	4.5%	3.7%	5.4%	4.6%
Base (N)	748	751	1,854	1,903	798	6,054

Table 17. Agency: the independent vote: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	12.8%	16.6%	18.9%	20%	18.5%	18.2%
Mostly true	22.1%	32.5%	36.8%	34.7%	36.2%	33.7%
Partly true	26.5%	33%	30.8%	34.1%	35.8%	32.3%
Not true	38.6%	17.8%	13.5%	11.2%	9.6%	15.8%
Base (N)	728	751	1,860	1,905	802	6,046

Women's aspirations to decide their own vote vary across caste groups, although less sharply than their realised autonomy. Scheduled Tribe women express the strongest desire for an independent vote, with 72 per cent rating it as very or most important, followed by Other Backward Class (68 per cent) and General-category women (65 per cent). Scheduled Caste women report the lowest aspiration, at 57 per cent, though a majority still regard independent political choice as important.

Realised autonomy is lower across all caste groups. General-category women are the most likely to report that they mostly or fully decide their own vote (57 per cent), followed by Other Backward Class (52 per cent) and Scheduled Tribe women (51 per cent), while Scheduled Caste women report the lowest level of independent voting (47 per cent). Scheduled Caste women are also the most likely to say that deciding their own vote is only partly true or not true of their lives, indicating that political autonomy remains constrained for many. Although caste differences are evident, they are smaller than the pronounced differences observed across life stages. Taken with the cohort analysis, the findings suggest that women's ability to exercise an independent vote is shaped more strongly by their position in the life course than by caste alone, even though caste continues to influence both aspirations and realised agency.

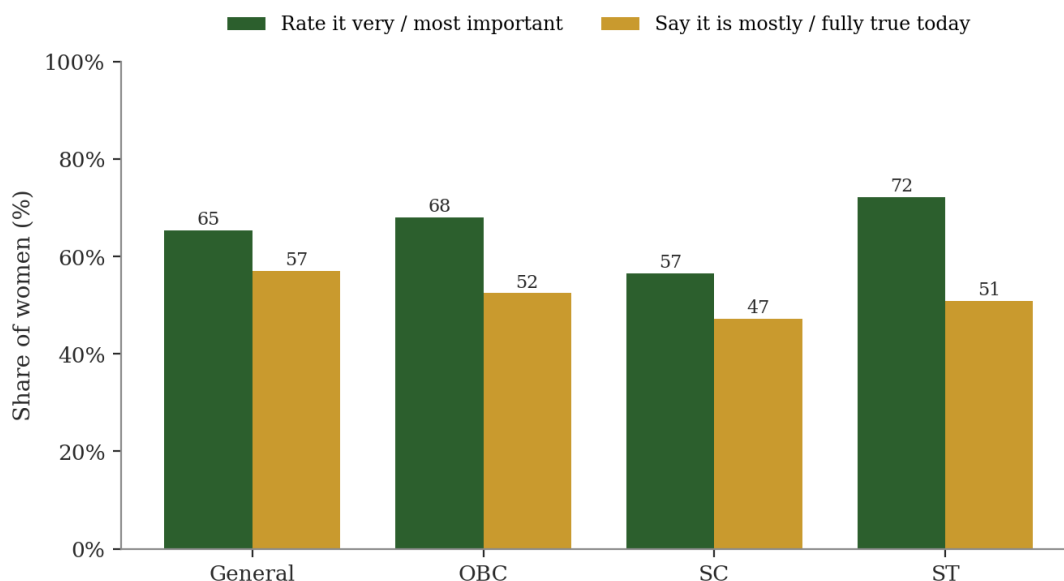


Figure 8. Deciding her own vote: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 18. Agency: the independent vote: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	19.6%	22.8%	16.6%	21.5%
Very important	45.8%	45.3%	39.9%	50.6%
Somewhat	31%	26.9%	37.5%	25.1%
Not important	3.7%	5%	6%	2.8%
Base (N)	1,217	2,557	1,268	958

Table 19. Agency: the independent vote: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	20.1%	18.3%	16%	18.7%
Mostly true	37%	34.2%	31.3%	32.1%
Partly true	29.1%	31.4%	34.8%	34.1%
Not true	13.9%	16.1%	17.9%	15.1%
Base (N)	1,215	2,552	1,263	962

The importance women attach to deciding their own vote varies considerably across regions. It is highest in the tribal belt, where 75.9 per cent say voting according to their own preference is very or most important, followed by the Hindi heartland (65.8 per cent). Women in the South and West (60.6 per cent) and the Eastern states (60.8 per cent) place somewhat lower, but similar, importance on this aspect of agency.

The picture changes when looking at attainment. The Eastern states stand out, with 66.4 per cent of women reporting that they decide their vote independently, substantially higher than the Hindi heartland (48.9 per cent), the South and West (47.9 per cent) and the tribal belt (47.6 per cent), where attainment is remarkably similar. As a result, the tribal belt records the widest aspiration gap (28.3 percentage points), followed by the Hindi heartland (16.9 points) and the South and West (12.7 points). The Eastern states are the only belt where attainment exceeds importance, producing a small negative gap of 5.6 points. In the East, independent voting is more widely practised than women explicitly identify as an aspiration, while in the other regions, particularly the tribal belt, there remains a substantial gap between the value women place on voting independently and their ability to do so.

Table 21. *Deciding her own vote: importance and attainment by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	65.8	48.9	16.9	2,468
Predominantly tribal states	75.9	47.6	28.3	1,134
Large economies of South and West	60.6	47.9	12.7	1,250
Eastern states	60.8	66.4	-5.6	1,194

2.5 Agency: controlling her own savings

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts.*

The survey asked women how important it was to be able to save money and spend it on themselves or as they chose without needing anyone's permission, and whether this reflected their lives today. This measure captures a core dimension of economic agency: control over one's own financial resources. The aspiration for financial autonomy is widespread and consistent across the life course. Overall, 62 per cent of women rate the ability to control their own savings as very or most important. The proportion varies only modestly across cohorts, from 57 per cent among unmarried young women to around 65 per cent among women with young children, indicating that the desire for financial independence is shared across the stages of women's lives rather than emerging only after marriage or motherhood.

Realised financial autonomy, however, increases substantially with age, standing at 48 per cent overall. Only 35 per cent of unmarried young women report that they mostly or fully control their own savings, compared with around half of women in the oldest two cohorts. Much of this improvement reflects a sharp reduction in women reporting no financial control at all: the share saying the statement is "not true" falls from nearly one in five among unmarried young women to around one in seventeen among the oldest. Even so, progress is incomplete. Across every cohort, around four in ten women say they only partly control their savings, suggesting that many women gain greater influence over financial decisions as they move through adulthood without achieving full financial autonomy. The aspiration gap therefore narrows with age, but primarily because women move from no control to partial control rather than from partial to complete financial independence.

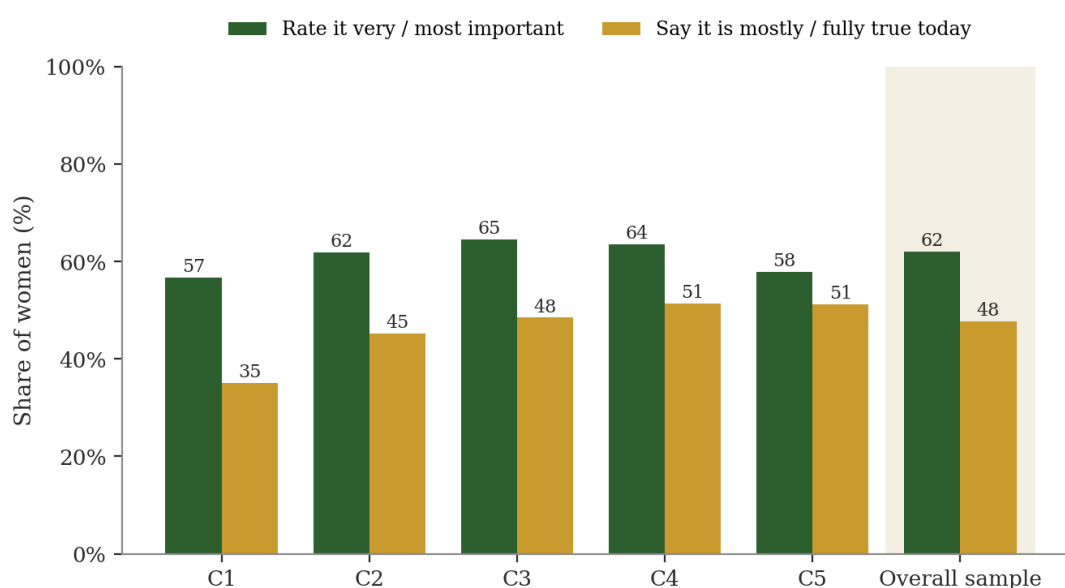


Figure 9. Controlling her own savings: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 20. Agency: controlling her own savings: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	15.1%	18.5%	16.7%	18.6%	15.3%	17.1%
Very important	41.6%	43.4%	47.8%	45%	42.5%	44.9%
Somewhat	34.4%	33.4%	32.2%	33%	38.3%	33.7%
Not important	8.8%	4.8%	3.3%	3.5%	3.9%	4.3%
Base (N)	747	752	1,863	1,911	804	6,077

Table 21. Agency: controlling her own savings: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	11.8%	10.1%	11.9%	14.3%	13.2%	12.6%
Mostly true	23.2%	35.2%	36.6%	37.1%	38%	35.1%
Partly true	45.4%	45.4%	42.4%	42.7%	43.1%	43.3%
Not true	19.5%	9.3%	9.1%	5.9%	5.7%	9%
Base (N)	753	753	1,863	1,909	803	6,081

Caste differences are evident in both aspirations for financial autonomy and women's ability to realise them. Scheduled Tribe women place the greatest importance on being able to save and spend money without needing permission, with around seven in ten rating this as very or most important. Other Backward Class women also report high aspirations (65 per cent), while the corresponding shares are lower among General-category (60 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (52 per cent).

The differences are more pronounced in realised financial autonomy. Only 38 per cent of Scheduled Caste women report that they mostly or fully control their own savings, compared with around one-half of women in the other caste groups. Rather than reporting a complete absence of control, Scheduled Caste women are much more likely to say that financial autonomy is only partly true of their lives: a majority (52 per cent) fall into this intermediate category, well above the corresponding shares for other groups. Many Scheduled Caste women therefore exercise some influence over their own savings while remaining unable to make financial decisions independently. Together with the evidence on independent voting, this points to economic and political agency as domains in which caste inequalities are particularly pronounced.

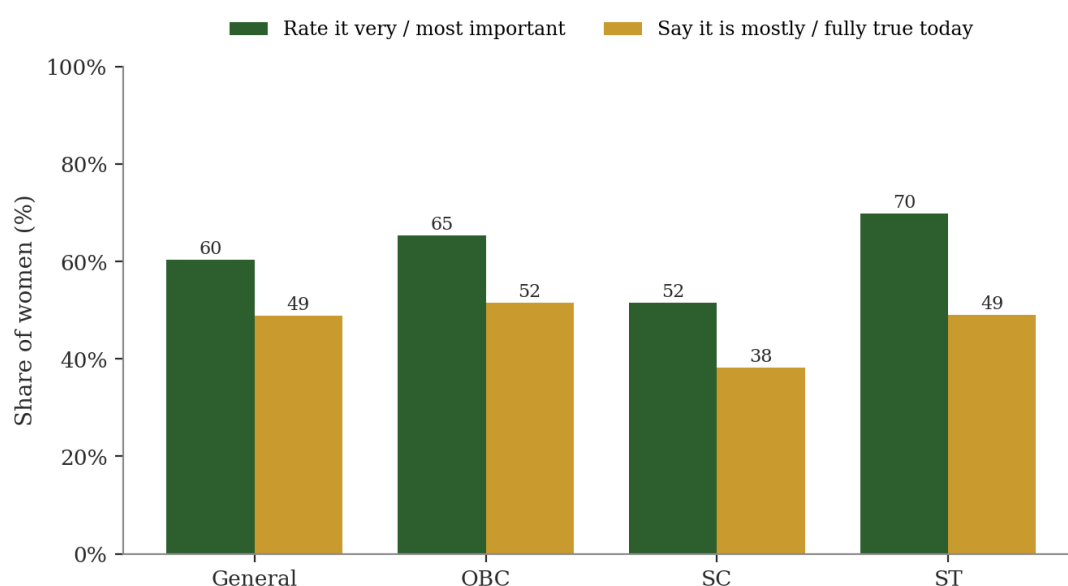


Figure 10. Controlling her own savings: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 22. Agency: controlling her own savings: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	15.5%	18.5%	12%	22.7%
Very important	44.9%	47%	39.5%	47.1%
Somewhat	35.3%	30.4%	43.2%	27.1%
Not important	4.3%	4.2%	5.3%	3.1%
Base (N)	1,221	2,564	1,270	968

Table 23. Agency: controlling her own savings: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	12.2%	13.1%	8.8%	16.8%
Mostly true	36.6%	38.6%	29.4%	32.3%
Partly true	40.6%	40.6%	52.4%	41.3%
Not true	10.6%	7.8%	9.3%	9.6%
Base (N)	1,220	2,567	1,270	970

Women in the tribal belt place the greatest importance on being able to save and spend their own money without needing permission, with 73.6 per cent rating it very or most important. The Hindi heartland follows at 63.6 per cent, while importance is noticeably lower in the South and West (55.8 per cent) and the Eastern states (54.4 per cent).

Attainment is much more similar across regions. Around half of women in the tribal belt (52.3 per cent) and the Hindi heartland (50.2 per cent) report that they are able to control their own savings, compared with 43.2 per cent in the South and West and 42.9 per cent in the Eastern states.

Because aspirations are especially high in the tribal belt but attainment is only marginally higher than elsewhere, it records the widest aspiration gap, at 21.4 percentage points. The Hindi heartland follows with a gap of 13.3 points, while the South and West (12.6) and the Eastern states (11.6) show slightly narrower gaps. Women in the tribal belt express the strongest desire for financial autonomy, but this is not matched by proportionately higher control over savings, leaving the largest unmet need among the four regional groupings.

Table 24. *Controlling her own savings: importance and attainment by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	63.6	50.2	13.3	2,470
Predominantly tribal states	73.6	52.3	21.4	1,142
Large economies of South and West	55.8	43.2	12.6	1,263
Eastern states	54.4	42.9	11.6	1,206

2.6 Leadership: a responsible group post

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts.*

The survey asked women how important it was to hold a responsible position in a village group or organisation where they could make decisions on behalf of others, and how possible they felt it was for them to attain such a position. Together, these questions capture both women's aspirations for leadership and their perceptions of whether leadership opportunities are realistically within reach. Nearly half of all women (49 per cent) rate holding a responsible position as very or most important, making it the most widely valued of the three leadership aspirations examined in the survey. Aspirations vary relatively little across the life course, peaking at 52 per cent among newly married women before declining modestly to 44 per cent among the oldest cohort. Leadership is therefore an aspiration shared across all stages of women's lives rather than one confined to the young or the old.

Women's perceptions of leadership opportunities, however, improve with age around an overall figure of 37 per cent. Only 31 per cent of unmarried young women believe that a responsible position is mostly or fully within their reach, compared with around 39 to 40 per cent from the first child on. Much of this improvement comes from a sharp decline in the share who consider such opportunities entirely out of reach, which falls from 43 per cent among the youngest cohort to around one-quarter among older women. Even so, fewer than four in ten women in any life stage believe that attaining a leadership position is realistically possible. Experience, social standing and community recognition raise women's confidence that they could assume leadership roles, but perceived barriers remain throughout the life course.

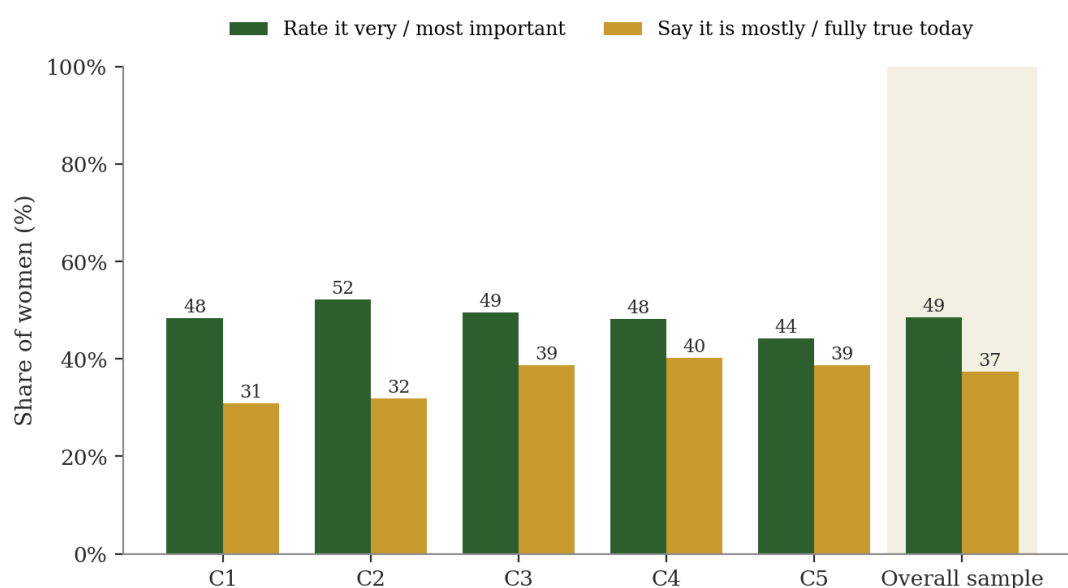


Figure 11. A responsible group post: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 25. Leadership: a responsible group post: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	17.6%	15.7%	14.3%	13.8%	14.8%	14.8%
Very important	30.7%	36.4%	35.2%	34.3%	29.4%	33.8%
Somewhat	25.1%	29.4%	35.3%	36.9%	37.6%	34.1%
Not important	26.6%	18.4%	15.2%	15%	18.2%	17.3%
Base (N)	722	738	1,823	1,869	785	5,937

Table 26. Leadership: a responsible group post: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	7%	5.5%	5.9%	7.2%	6.5%	6.5%
Mostly true	23.9%	26.4%	32.9%	32.9%	32.3%	30.9%
Partly true	26.6%	35.8%	34.8%	37%	36%	34.8%
Not true	42.5%	32.4%	26.5%	22.8%	25.3%	27.8%
Base (N)	715	732	1,817	1,864	787	5,915

Both leadership aspirations and perceived opportunities vary across caste groups, although the differences are less pronounced than those observed for some agency indicators. Other Backward Class women are the most likely to value leadership roles, with just over half (51 per cent) rating a responsible position as very or most important. Scheduled Tribe (50 per cent) and General-category women (49 per cent) report similar levels of aspiration, while Scheduled Caste women are least likely to express leadership aspirations (41 per cent).

Perceptions of leadership opportunities broadly mirror this pattern. Four in ten Other Backward Class (41 per cent) and Scheduled Tribe women (40 per cent) believe that a responsible position is mostly or fully within their reach, followed by General-category women (36 per cent). Scheduled Caste women are the least optimistic, with only 30 per cent considering such positions realistically attainable. They are also markedly more likely than women from other caste groups to report that leadership is only partly within reach, indicating that many perceive opportunities to lead but also recognise substantial barriers to achieving them. Taken with the evidence on political and financial agency, this suggests that Scheduled Caste women face persistent constraints in both aspiring to and perceiving opportunities for positions of influence and decision-making.

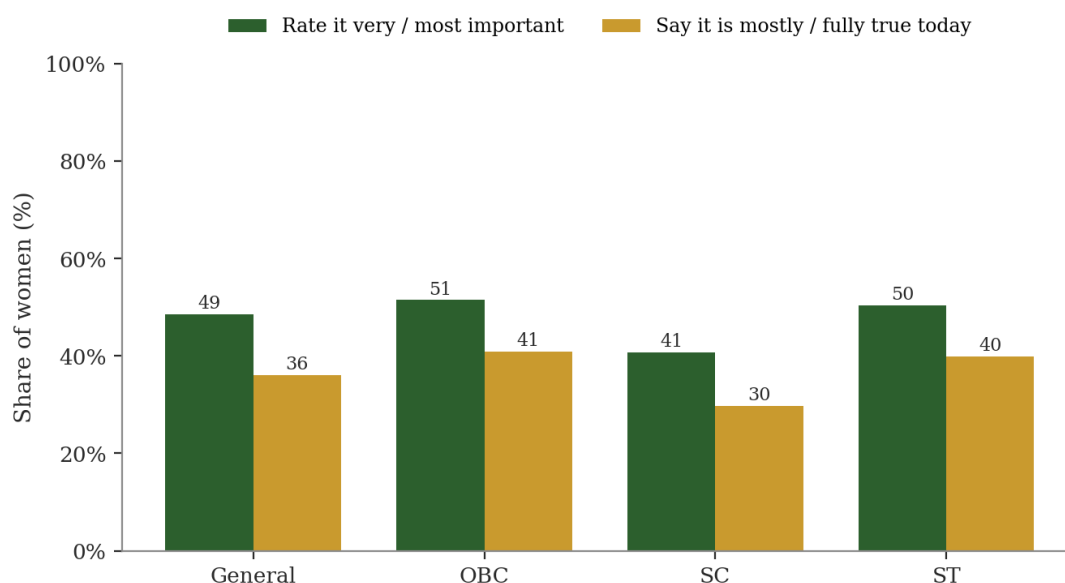


Figure 12. A responsible group post: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 27. Leadership: a responsible group post: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	13.6%	16.7%	12.6%	13.8%
Very important	35%	34.7%	28.1%	36.6%
Somewhat	36.1%	30.5%	40.8%	32.6%
Not important	15.3%	18.1%	18.5%	17%
Base (N)	1,173	2,524	1,246	941

Table 28. Leadership: a responsible group post: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	7%	6.6%	4.9%	7.5%
Mostly true	29%	34.2%	24.8%	32.4%
Partly true	32.8%	32.5%	41.4%	34.1%
Not true	31.1%	26.7%	28.8%	26.1%
Base (N)	1,167	2,512	1,245	939

Interest in holding a responsible position in a community group is highest in the Hindi heartland, where 52.9 per cent of women rate it as very or most important. The other regions are clustered lower, at 47.0 per cent in the South and West, 45.5 per cent in the tribal belt and 44.2 per cent in the Eastern states.

Women in the Hindi heartland (40.1 per cent) and the tribal belt (40.0 per cent) are also the most likely to feel that such positions are within reach, while attainment is somewhat lower in the South and West (36.2 per cent) and lowest in the Eastern states (30.5 per cent).

The relationship between aspirations and attainment differs across regions. The tribal belt has the smallest aspiration gap, at just 5.4 percentage points, suggesting that women's expectations are relatively well matched by their perceived opportunities. The South and West record a moderate gap of 10.8 points, while the Hindi heartland (12.8 points) and especially the Eastern states (13.7 points) show larger gaps. In the East, relatively low aspirations are accompanied by even lower perceptions of opportunity, making responsible leadership positions feel the least accessible of all four regional groupings.

Table 29. *Leadership: a responsible group post: importance and attainment, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	52.9	40.1	12.8	2,441
Predominantly tribal states	45.5	40.0	5.4	1,121
Large economies of South and West	47.0	36.2	10.8	1,161
Eastern states	44.2	30.5	13.7	1,192

2.7 Leadership: a public voice

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts; attainment averages two current-state items (being heard, and contributing to decisions).*

The survey assessed women's aspirations for a public voice by asking how important it was to be heard and to contribute to decisions in forums such as the gram sabha or ward sabha. Women's current experience was measured through two questions: whether others took their views seriously when they spoke, and whether they were able to contribute to decisions affecting their village. Throughout this section, these two items are treated together as one measure of being heard in public decision-making. Among the three leadership dimensions, being heard occupies the middle ground: 36 per cent of women overall consider it very or most important, varying little across the life course, between 33 and 39 per cent across the five cohorts. Fewer women aspire to being heard in public meetings than to holding a responsible group post, but it is valued considerably more than contesting a local election.

Current experience falls well short of these aspirations. Overall, only 18 per cent of women report that being heard in public meetings is mostly or fully true of their lives, and the share moves in a narrow band between 15 and 19 per cent across the cohorts with no clear trend. The share reporting no public voice at all does decline with age, from 47 per cent among unmarried young women to around a quarter among the oldest, but the improvement shows up as women moving from no voice to a partial voice rather than to feeling fully heard. In the attainment tables for this area, women whose two answers differ sit between the labelled levels; they are counted in the base but not in the level rows, which is why the level shares sum below 100.

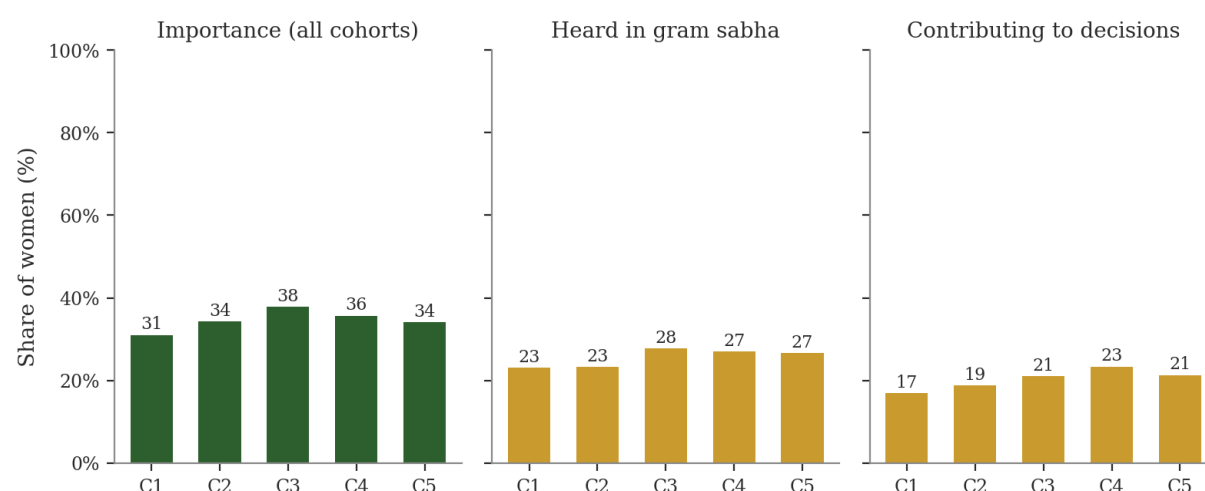


Figure 13. Public voice, three questions by cohort: importance, being heard in the gram sabha, and contributing to public decisions

Table 30. Leadership: a public voice: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	6.5%	7.4%	7.7%	7.6%	8.7%	7.6%
Very important	26%	27.8%	30.9%	29%	26.3%	28.7%
Somewhat	30.8%	37.9%	37.8%	42.6%	42.7%	39.1%
Not important	36.7%	27%	23.6%	20.8%	22.3%	24.5%
Base (N)	720	734	1,824	1,863	786	5,927

Table 31. Leadership: a public voice: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	1.2%	1.6%	2%	2.4%	1.8%	1.9%
Mostly true	10.6%	8.4%	13.4%	13.9%	11.5%	12.3%
Partly true	18.8%	24.9%	27%	31.9%	33.1%	28.1%
Not true	46.5%	37.4%	30.2%	23.8%	24.2%	30.3%
Base (N)	729	738	1,834	1,871	788	5,960

Aspirations for a public voice differ across caste groups. Other Backward Class and Scheduled Tribe women are the most likely to consider being heard in public meetings very or most important, at 40 per cent each, followed by General-category women (33 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (28 per cent). While relatively few women in any caste group place public voice among their highest aspirations, Scheduled Caste women attach noticeably less importance to it than women from other groups.

The differences are equally evident in women's experience of being heard. One in five Other Backward Class women (20 per cent) and 18 per cent of Scheduled Tribe women report that they are mostly or fully heard in public meetings, compared with 16 per cent of General-category women and 15 per cent of Scheduled Caste women. Scheduled Caste women therefore perceive themselves to have the weakest public voice among the four caste groups, while Other Backward Class and Scheduled Tribe women report relatively greater participation in local decision-making.

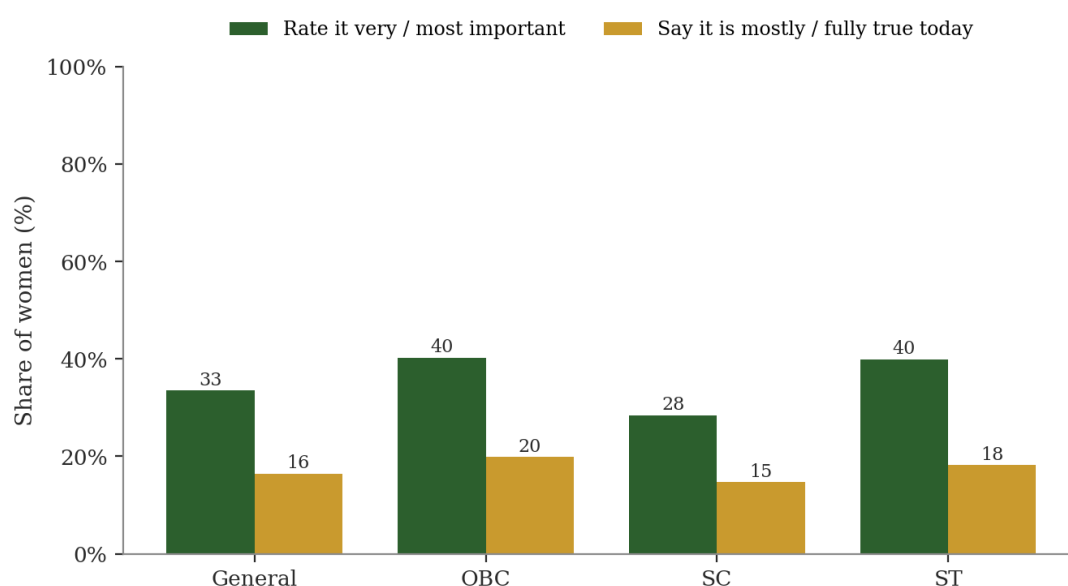


Figure 14. Being heard in public meetings: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 32. Leadership: a public voice: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	7.6%	8%	5.1%	10.2%
Very important	25.9%	32.2%	23.3%	29.7%
Somewhat	40.5%	35.4%	46.8%	36.7%
Not important	26%	24.3%	24.8%	23.4%
Base (N)	1,162	2,531	1,238	943

Table 33. Leadership: a public voice: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	1.8%	2.2%	1.4%	2.1%
Mostly true	10.9%	13.9%	9.9%	13.3%
Partly true	28.2%	23.8%	34.9%	30%
Not true	31.4%	30%	30.5%	29.2%
Base (N)	1,166	2,545	1,254	941

Women in the Hindi heartland place the greatest importance on having a voice in public meetings such as the gram sabha, with 40.9 per cent rating it very or most important. Importance is slightly lower in the tribal belt (38.1 per cent), falls further in the South and West (32.7 per cent), and is lowest in the Eastern states (28.9 per cent).

Across all four regions, however, relatively few women feel that they are actually heard or able to influence public decisions. Attainment ranges from 19.8 per cent in the Hindi heartland to 18.2 per cent in the Eastern states, 17.3 per cent in the South and West, and just 13.4 per cent in the tribal belt.

As a result, the tribal belt records the widest aspiration gap (24.7 percentage points), followed by the Hindi heartland (21.2 points). The South and West show a smaller gap (15.3 points), while the Eastern states record the narrowest (10.6 points), largely because women there express lower aspirations for a public voice. Meaningful participation in local decision-making remains limited across all regions, with particularly large unmet aspirations in the Hindi heartland and the tribal belt.

Table 34. *Leadership: a public voice: importance and attainment, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	40.9	19.8	21.2	2,459
Predominantly tribal states	38.1	13.4	24.7	1,116
Large economies of South and West	32.7	17.3	15.3	1,189
Eastern states	28.9	18.2	10.6	1,196

2.8 Leadership: contesting a local election

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts.*

The survey asked women how important it was to be able to contest a local election and hold an elected position, and whether they felt this was realistically possible for them. Unlike the broader aspiration to hold a responsible position in a village group, this indicator captures women's interest in formal political leadership through elected office. Among the leadership aspirations examined in the survey, contesting a local election attracts the least support. Only 28 per cent of women consider it very or most important, while 39 per cent say it is not important. Aspirations vary little across the life course, increasing modestly among women with children before declining again in the oldest cohort. For most women, formal electoral politics is not a desired personal aspiration, even where informal leadership roles are.

Perceived opportunity is similarly limited. Only 22 per cent of women believe that contesting a local election is mostly or fully within their reach, and this proportion changes very little across life stages. Nearly half of all women (48 per cent) say that the possibility of contesting an election is not true of their lives, while only 4 per cent feel it is fully within reach. The relatively small gap between aspiration and perceived opportunity should therefore not be read as evidence of easy access to political office. It reflects the fact that both aspiration and perceived opportunity are low. Formal electoral leadership remains a distant prospect for many women, constrained by both limited interest and limited confidence that such roles are attainable.

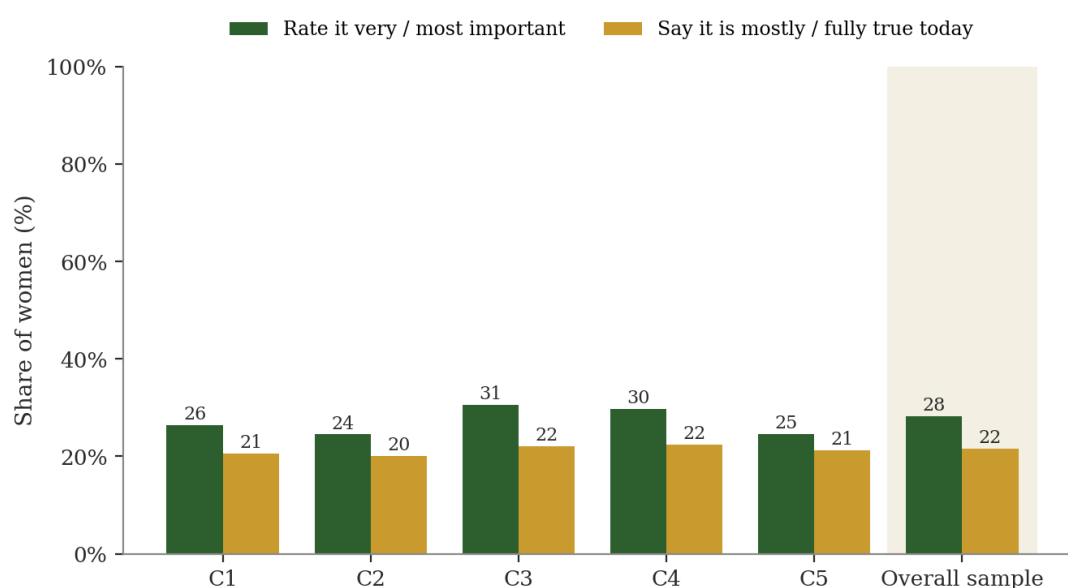


Figure 15. Contesting a local election: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 35. Leadership: contesting a local election: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	6.6%	4.4%	5.2%	5.5%	5.8%	5.4%
Very important	19.8%	20.1%	25.4%	24.3%	18.8%	22.8%
Somewhat	23.1%	32.9%	32.4%	34.2%	36.3%	32.4%
Not important	50.6%	42.6%	37%	36%	39.1%	39.4%
Base (N)	724	735	1,803	1,853	782	5,897

Table 36. Leadership: contesting a local election: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	3.3%	4.1%	4.4%	4.6%	4.4%	4.3%
Mostly true	17.3%	15.9%	17.6%	17.8%	16.9%	17.3%
Partly true	19.6%	28.5%	31.2%	34%	31.7%	30.4%
Not true	59.8%	51.5%	46.8%	43.6%	47%	48%
Base (N)	729	734	1,813	1,853	779	5,908

Interest in contesting local elections is limited across all caste groups, although some variation is evident. Scheduled Tribe women are the most likely to regard contesting an election as very or most important (34 per cent), followed by Other Backward Class women (31 per cent). The corresponding shares are lower among General-category (26 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (20 per cent). In every caste group a substantial share of women report that contesting an election is not an important personal aspiration, which marks out the limited appeal of formal electoral politics.

Perceived opportunities to contest elections are similarly constrained. Only around one in five women in every caste group believe that contesting a local election is mostly or fully within their reach, ranging from 18 per cent among Scheduled Caste women to 24 per cent among Other Backward Class women, with General-category women at 21 and Scheduled Tribe women at 20. Differences across caste groups are therefore modest compared with those observed for other dimensions of agency. Across all communities, nearly half of women feel that the possibility of contesting an election is simply not within reach. The principal barrier to women's participation in electoral politics is not confined to any single social group; contesting elected office is widely perceived as a difficult and relatively inaccessible pathway for women across caste categories.

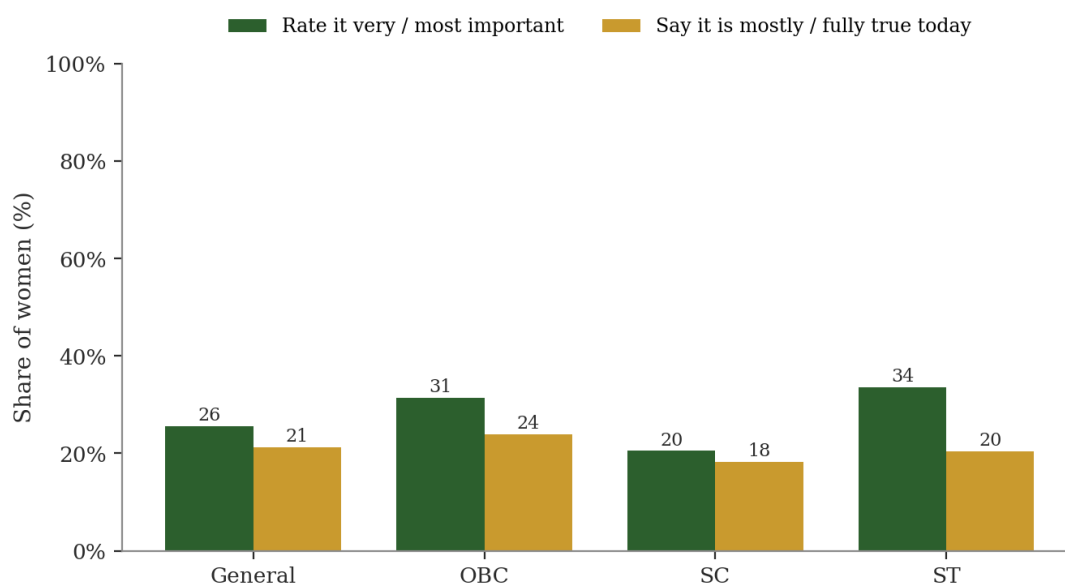


Figure 16. Contesting a local election: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 37. Leadership: contesting a local election: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	5.1%	5.9%	4.9%	5.5%
Very important	20.5%	25.6%	15.6%	28%
Somewhat	38%	29.2%	38.5%	25.7%
Not important	36.5%	39.3%	41.1%	40.8%
Base (N)	1,146	2,521	1,235	943

Table 38. Leadership: contesting a local election: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	4.4%	4.5%	4.4%	3.5%
Mostly true	16.9%	19.5%	13.9%	16.9%
Partly true	30.4%	27.5%	35.1%	31.5%
Not true	48.3%	48.6%	46.7%	48.1%
Base (N)	1,151	2,530	1,241	934

Interest in contesting a local election is modest across all four regional groupings, with relatively little variation. The Hindi heartland records the highest importance, at 29.9 per cent of women rating it very or most important, followed by the Eastern states (28.0 per cent), the tribal belt (27.9 per cent) and the South and West (25.4 per cent).

Perceived ability to contest an election is also low everywhere, ranging from 23.6 per cent in the Hindi heartland to 20.9 per cent in the South and West, 20.7 per cent in the Eastern states and 19.2 per cent in the tribal belt.

Because both aspirations and perceived opportunities are limited, the aspiration gaps are relatively small compared with other leadership dimensions. The tribal belt records the widest gap (8.7 percentage points), followed by the Eastern states (7.3 points) and the Hindi heartland (6.3 points), while the South and West has the smallest (4.6 points). Relatively few women aspire to contest local elections, and only a slightly smaller share believe they could do so, making this one of the least pronounced aspiration gaps in the study.

Table 39. *Leadership: contesting a local election: importance and attainment, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	29.9	23.6	6.3	2,441
Predominantly tribal states	27.9	19.2	8.7	1,112
Large economies of South and West	25.4	20.9	4.6	1,165
Eastern states	28.0	20.7	7.3	1,190

2.9 Health decisions

Who was asked: *Importance asked of all five cohorts. Attainment: self-report for cohorts 1 to 3, projective (about a daughter or daughter-in-law) for cohorts 4 and 5.*

The survey asked all women how important it was for a woman to be able to make decisions about her own health and body, including contraception and reproductive health, care during pregnancy and childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of her infant. For women in the first three cohorts, attainment was measured by asking about their own lives. For the two oldest cohorts, the question was framed in terms of whether a daughter or daughter-in-law would be able to exercise the same autonomy, allowing the study to capture perceptions of the next generation while maintaining comparability across the life course. Control over health and reproductive decisions emerges as the most widely shared aspiration in the study. Overall, 73 per cent of women rate it as very or most important, and the proportion remains consistently high across every life stage, from 68 per cent among the oldest women to 76 per cent among women with young children. Few other aspirations show such broad and sustained agreement across generations.

Perceived attainment is also comparatively high. Overall, 61 per cent of women report that such autonomy is mostly or fully realised, rising from 46 per cent among unmarried young women to around 64 per cent from mid-life onwards. Much of this improvement comes from a sharp decline in women reporting no control at all over these decisions, from 23 per cent among the youngest women to fewer than one in twenty in the older cohorts. The projective questions asked of the two oldest cohorts produce levels of perceived autonomy very similar to those reported directly by younger women, which suggests that older women expect daughters and daughters-in-law to hold broadly the same decision-making authority over health that women in the middle cohorts report themselves.

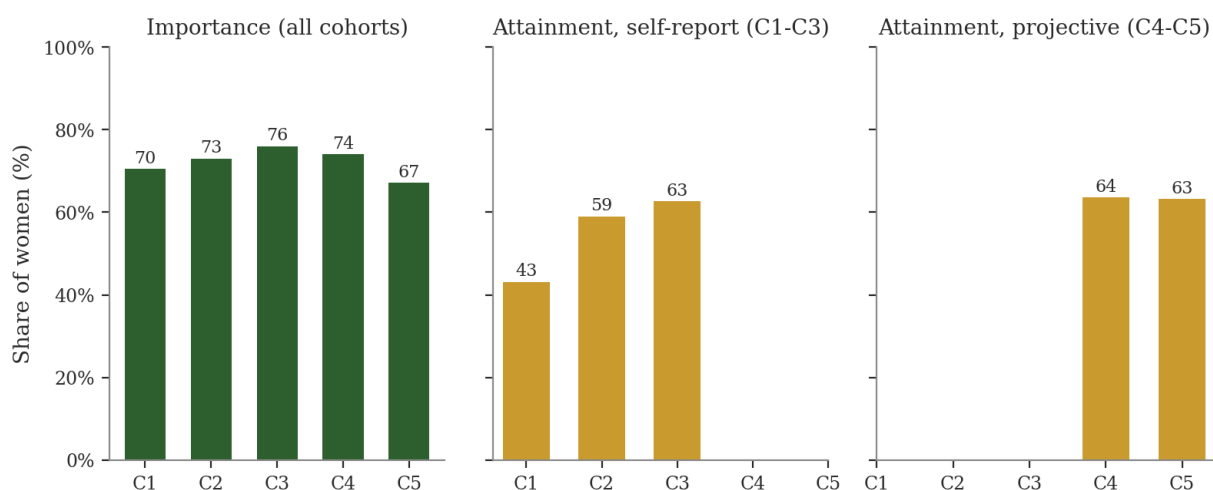


Figure 17. Health, three questions by cohort: importance (all cohorts), self-report attainment (cohorts 1 to 3), and projective attainment (cohorts 4 and 5)

Table 40. Health decisions: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	25.9%	24%	26.8%	27.3%	23.5%	26%
Very important	44.8%	49%	49.4%	46.9%	44.2%	47.3%
Somewhat	25.5%	25%	21.8%	24.2%	29.5%	24.4%
Not important	3.8%	2%	2%	1.6%	2.8%	2.2%
Base (N)	754	753	1,860	1,911	800	6,078

Table 41. Health decisions: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	12.5%	16.2%	19.2%	20.1%	19%	18.3%
Mostly true	33.2%	43.4%	43.9%	43.7%	44.6%	42.6%
Partly true	31.8%	33.4%	31.3%	31.6%	31%	31.7%
Not true	22.5%	7%	5.6%	4.6%	5.5%	7.4%
Base (N)	714	745	1,851	1,907	801	6,018

Substantial differences in health autonomy are evident across caste groups, in both aspiration and reported attainment. Scheduled Tribe women place the greatest importance on controlling decisions about their own health and body, with 83 per cent rating this as very or most important. They are followed by Other Backward Class women (77 per cent), General-category women (70 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (63 per cent). Health autonomy is valued by a majority in every caste group, but the strength of that aspiration varies considerably.

The same pattern is reflected in attainment. Nearly three-quarters of Scheduled Tribe women (72 per cent) report that they mostly or fully control decisions relating to their own health, compared with 65 per cent of Other Backward Class women, 56 per cent of General-category women and 51 per cent of Scheduled Caste women. Scheduled Caste women are also the most likely to report that health autonomy is only partly realised, suggesting that many exercise some influence over health decisions without holding full control. Health decision-making does not follow a simple social hierarchy: Scheduled Tribe women consistently report the highest levels of both aspiration and realised autonomy, while Scheduled Caste women remain the most disadvantaged. This makes health autonomy one of the domains in which caste differences are most pronounced.

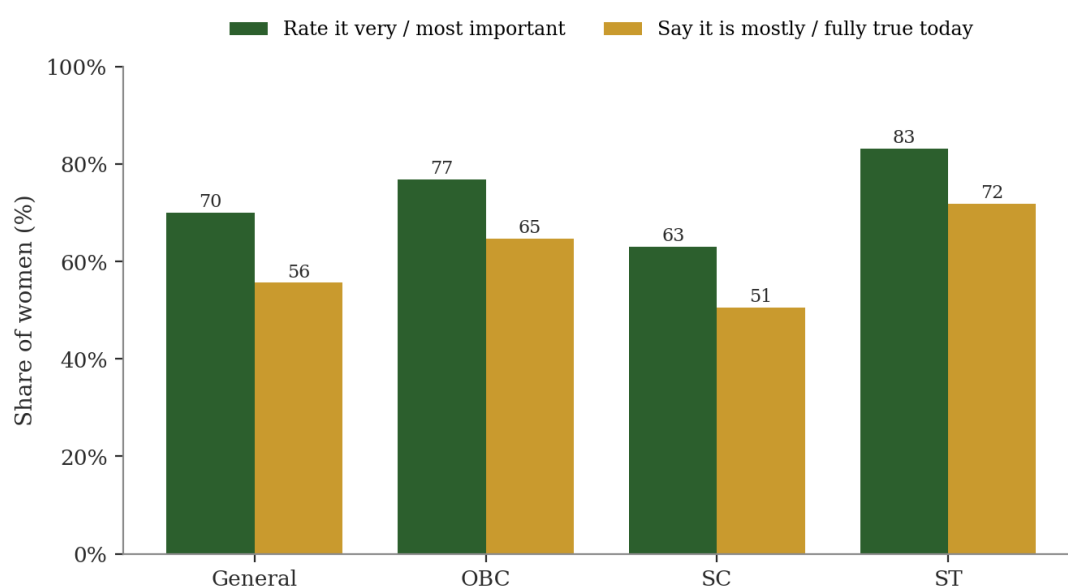


Figure 18. Control of her own health: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 42. Health decisions: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	23.4%	28.5%	21.7%	29.3%
Very important	46.7%	48.4%	41.3%	53.9%
Somewhat	28.1%	20.7%	34.4%	15.2%
Not important	1.8%	2.3%	2.6%	1.7%
Base (N)	1,220	2,566	1,270	969

Table 43. Health decisions: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	15.8%	20.6%	13.9%	21.9%
Mostly true	39.8%	44.1%	36.7%	50.1%
Partly true	34.7%	28.9%	41.1%	21.9%
Not true	9.7%	6.4%	8.3%	6.2%
Base (N)	1,208	2,549	1,259	951

The exact wording matters here, so the three questions are worth quoting. HLT_C1: “Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to look after your own health and body and make health decisions for yourself?” HLT_C2, asked of the three younger cohorts: “Being able to look after your own health and body and make health decisions for yourself, including contraception and reproductive health: how true is this for you today?” HLT_C3, asked of the two oldest: “Would you give your daughter or daughter-in-law the right to take care of her own health and body and make her own health decisions?”

Across the belts, the value placed on health autonomy is highest in the tribal belt (80.4 per cent) and the Hindi heartland (78.0 per cent), and lower in the Eastern states (67.6 per cent) and the South and West (63.5 per cent).

Attainment separates the regions far more sharply. Three-quarters of women in the tribal belt (75.2 per cent) report holding this control, against 59.4 per cent in the Hindi heartland, 56.5 per cent in the East and 54.9 per cent in the South and West. The heartland therefore carries the widest health gap, at 18.5 percentage points, while the tribal belt's gap of 5.2 points is the narrowest for this area; the East (11.0) and the South and West (8.6) sit between.

Table 44. Health decisions: importance and attainment, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	78.0	59.4	18.5	2,463
Predominantly tribal states	80.4	75.2	5.2	1,125
Large economies of South and West	63.5	54.9	8.6	1,231
Eastern states	67.6	56.5	11.0	1,199

2.10 Assets in her own name

Who was asked: Asked of all five cohorts.

The survey asked women how important it was to own assets such as land, a house, gold or bank savings, in their own name and under their control, and whether they already owned such assets or expected to do so. Together, these questions capture aspirations for economic ownership alongside ownership or expected ownership. Asset ownership is an important aspiration for a majority of women. Overall, 56 per cent rate owning assets in their own name as very or most important, and the proportion varies little across the life course, remaining between 51 and 58 per cent in every cohort. The desire for independent ownership is a stable aspiration that neither strengthens nor weakens substantially with age.

Ownership or expected ownership increases steadily over the life course but remains well below women's aspirations. Only 24 per cent of unmarried young women report that owning assets in their own name is mostly or fully true of their lives or likely to become true, compared with 42 per cent among the oldest cohort. Much of this improvement reflects a sharp decline in women reporting that asset ownership is not true at all, from 42 per cent among unmarried young women to fewer than one in ten among the oldest, as inheritance, savings and household asset accumulation become more likely with age. Even so, close to half of women in every adult cohort report that ownership is only partly realised. Asset ownership therefore remains one of the largest unmet aspirations in the study, improving over time but staying well below the importance women attach to it.

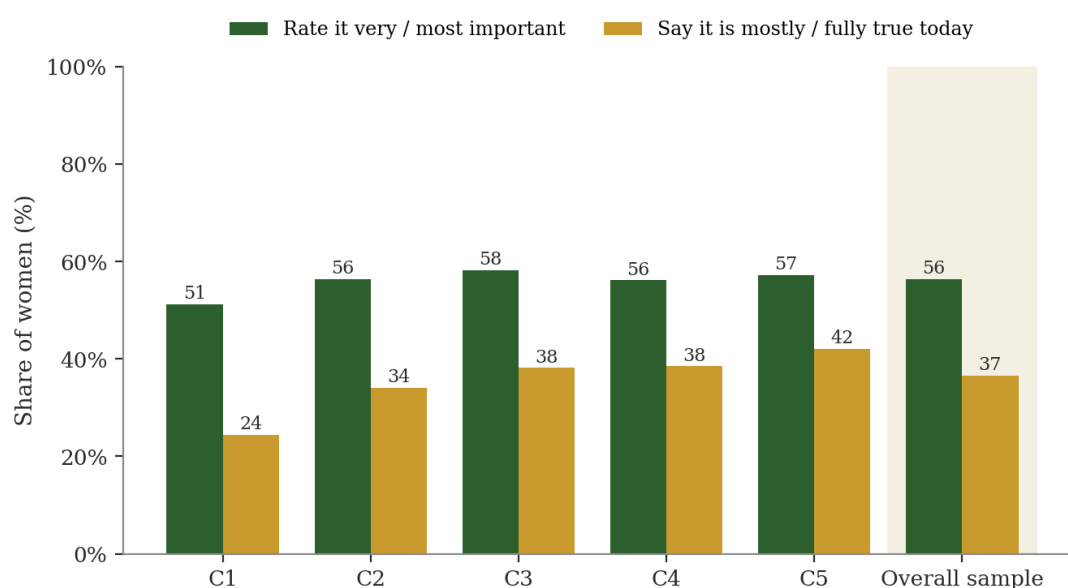


Figure 19. Assets in her own name: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 45. Assets in her own name: importance by cohort. Share rating each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	18%	18.7%	17.2%	17%	15.9%	17.2%
Very important	33.3%	37.7%	40.9%	39.1%	41.3%	39.1%
Somewhat	26.3%	29.8%	31.5%	34.8%	34%	32%
Not important	22.4%	13.8%	10.4%	9.1%	8.9%	11.7%
Base (N)	735	748	1,856	1,896	801	6,036

Table 46. Assets in her own name: attainment by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	8.3%	9%	10.5%	11.4%	10.9%	10.4%
Mostly true	16.1%	25%	27.7%	27.1%	31.1%	26.2%
Partly true	33.2%	50.6%	48.8%	49.8%	49%	47.5%
Not true	42.4%	15.3%	13.1%	11.7%	9%	16%
Base (N)	722	743	1,825	1,866	778	5,934

Both aspirations for asset ownership and ownership or expected ownership vary across caste groups. General-category women are the most likely to regard owning assets in their own name as very or most important (61 per cent), followed by Other Backward Class (59 per cent) and Scheduled Tribe women (56 per cent). Scheduled Caste women report the lowest level of aspiration, with fewer than half (47 per cent) rating independent asset ownership as very or most important.

The differences are more pronounced in ownership. Only 30 per cent of Scheduled Caste women report that owning assets in their own name is mostly or fully true of their lives or likely to become true, compared with 40 per cent among Other Backward Class women and 36 to 37 per cent among General-category and Scheduled Tribe women. More than half of Scheduled Caste women (55 per cent) say that asset ownership is only partly true of their circumstances, higher than any other caste group, which suggests some connection to ownership or an expectation of acquiring assets without secure ownership and control today. Scheduled Caste women face the greatest disadvantage in translating aspirations for economic ownership into realised or expected ownership, and this is the area with the clearest policy handle: titling, joint registration and account ownership would do most exactly here.

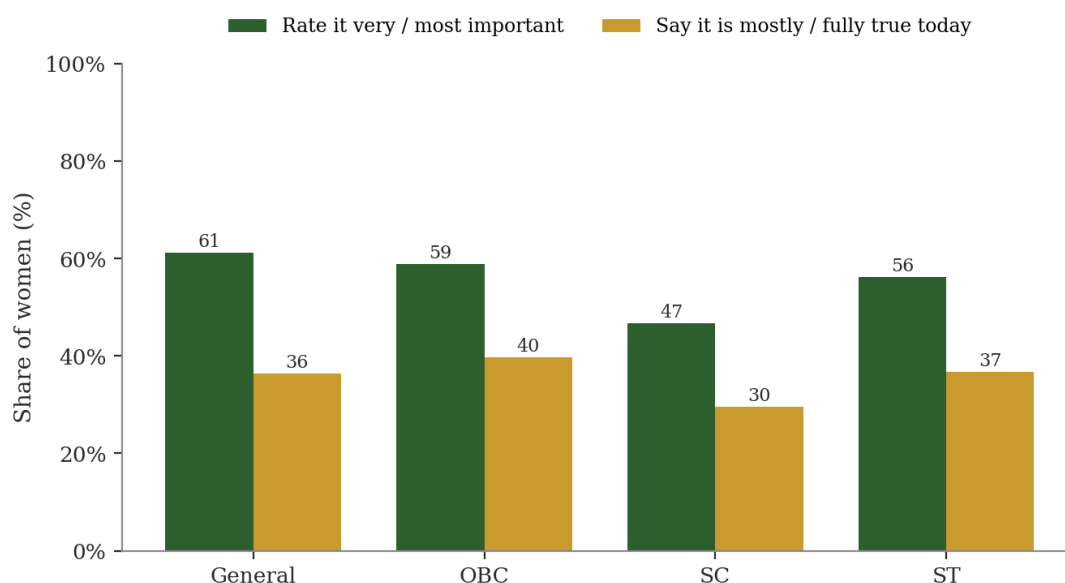


Figure 20. Assets in her own name: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 47. Assets in her own name: importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	19.3%	19.5%	14.2%	12.9%
Very important	41.9%	39.4%	32.6%	43.3%
Somewhat	29.8%	28.5%	40.9%	31.7%
Not important	9%	12.6%	12.3%	12.1%
Base (N)	1,211	2,549	1,263	963

Table 48. Assets in her own name: attainment by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	8.2%	11.7%	7.6%	13.5%
Mostly true	28.2%	28.1%	22%	23.2%
Partly true	44.4%	47%	55.1%	43%
Not true	19.1%	13.2%	15.3%	20.3%
Base (N)	1,197	2,508	1,239	940

The importance women attach to owning assets in their own name varies substantially across regions. It is highest in the Hindi heartland, where 63.4 per cent rate it as very or most important, followed by the Eastern states (57.3 per cent). Women in the South and West (50.8 per cent) and especially the tribal belt (46.1 per cent) place comparatively less importance on asset ownership.

Actual ownership, however, is considerably lower everywhere. The Hindi heartland records the highest attainment, with 42.4 per cent of women reporting that they own or expect to own assets in their own name, followed by the South and West (36.5 per cent), the Eastern states (31.5 per cent) and the tribal belt (29.2 per cent).

The Eastern states record the widest aspiration gap, at 25.8 percentage points, reflecting relatively strong aspirations but comparatively low ownership. The Hindi heartland also shows a substantial gap (21.0 points), while the tribal belt (16.9) and the South and West (14.2) have smaller gaps. Asset ownership remains one of the areas with the largest unmet aspirations across regions, particularly in the Eastern states and the Hindi heartland, where aspirations substantially outpace current ownership.

Table 49. Assets in her own name: importance and attainment, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.

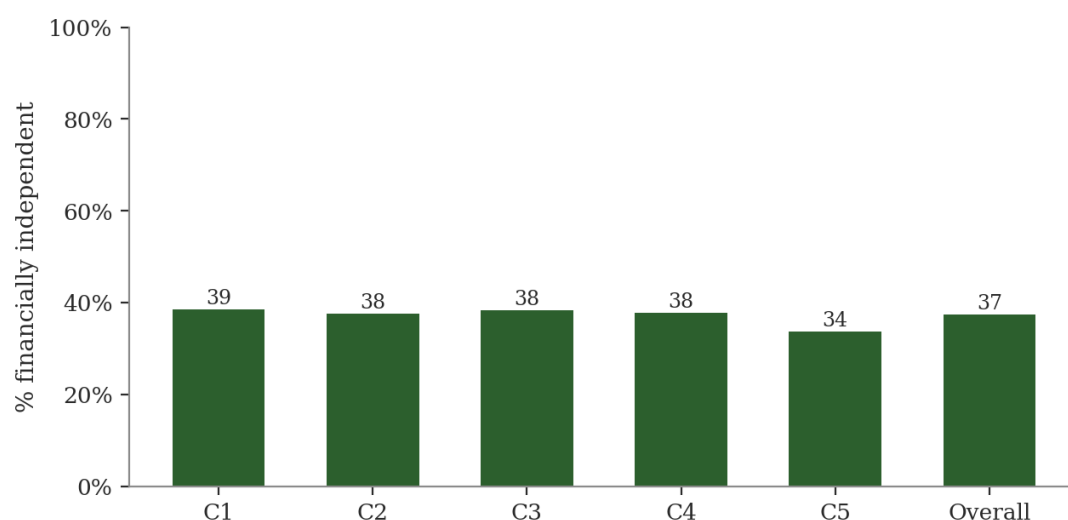
Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	63.4	42.4	21.0	2,442
Predominantly tribal states	46.1	29.2	16.9	1,116
Large economies of South and West	50.8	36.5	14.2	1,197
Eastern states	57.3	31.5	25.8	1,179

2.11 Financial independence

Who was asked: Asked of all five cohorts as a status question, with no importance item.

The survey measured financial independence as a current status rather than an aspiration. Women were asked whether they had a job or business that provided them with a steady income of their own. Unlike the other areas in this part, no question was asked about the importance women attach to financial independence, so the results describe women's economic position rather than an aspiration gap.

Just 37 per cent of women report that financial independence is mostly or fully true of their lives. The proportion changes little across the life course, holding close to 38 per cent through the first four cohorts before falling to 33 per cent among the oldest women. Unlike several other dimensions of agency, financial independence does not build with age; it is low and flat across a woman's whole life, and it is the floor under every other area.

**Figure 21.** Financial independence, by cohort and overall**Table 50.** Financial independence by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	12.7%	10.4%	9.8%	10.8%	9.3%	10.5%
Mostly true	25.9%	27.2%	28.6%	26.9%	24.5%	27%
Partly true	28.6%	37.7%	36.3%	37.8%	37.3%	36.1%
Not true	32.8%	24.8%	25.4%	24.5%	29%	26.4%
Base (N)	749	751	1,862	1,903	797	6,062

Financial independence varies across caste groups, although the differences are less pronounced than for some other dimensions of agency. Other Backward Class women are the most likely to report a job or business providing a steady income, at 40 per cent, with Scheduled Tribe women close behind at 39 per cent and General-category women at 36 per cent. Scheduled Caste women are the least likely to be financially independent, at 33 per cent. They are also the most likely to describe themselves as only partly financially independent, indicating some economic participation without a stable independent income. The group that trails on the vote, savings and assets also earns least on its own, which compounds those gaps.

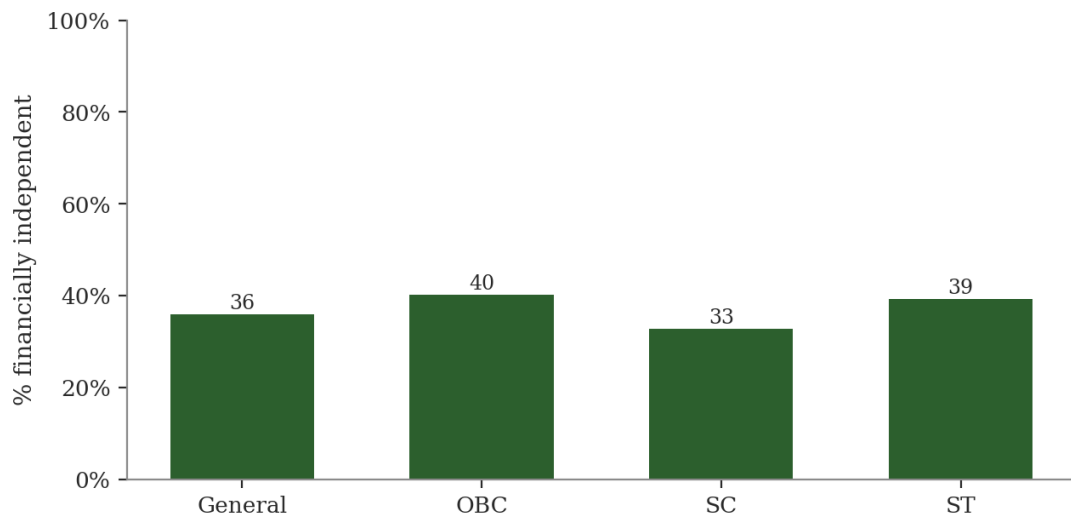


Figure 22. *Financial independence, by caste*

Two things explain why the figure sits where it does. First, it tracks education more strongly than anything else: 22 per cent of women with no formal schooling are financially independent, against 62 to 66 per cent of graduates and postgraduates, and it varies enormously by state, from 15 per cent in West Bengal and 19 per cent in Bihar to 73 per cent in Assam. Second, the four response levels show that the modal woman is not at zero but partway: 26 per cent report no independent income at all, 36 per cent some but not a steady income, and only 10 per cent call themselves fully independent. The problem is less the total absence of earning than its thinness and irregularity.

One reading should be resisted: the low figure does not mean women lack the aspiration to earn. The instrument has no importance question for financial independence, so wanting is unmeasured here, and the adjacent evidence points the other way: even among women who are not financially independent, 52 per cent rate controlling their own savings as very or most important and 47 per cent say the same of assets in their own name. Women without income still want the things income brings. Adding an importance item for earning is a priority for the next wave, so this area can carry a gap like the others.

The battery allows one step further. Three questions asked of everyone sit next to earning: the importance of controlling her own savings, the importance of assets in her own name, and the importance of travelling outside the area, which the questionnaire words as travelling out to take up work or higher education. Read together as a proxy, they mark out the women who want economic agency without having the earning to go with it: 2,500 women, 41 per cent of the sample, are not financially independent yet rate savings or assets as very or most important, and half of these also place high value on travelling out for work. They appear at roughly the same rate in every life stage, so this is not simply young women waiting to start; it is a standing population. The share is lowest among Scheduled Caste women, at 35 per cent, and highest among Scheduled Tribe women, at 44 per cent, the same order the wanting questions show elsewhere. What the proxy cannot settle is whether these women want a job or business itself, or control over money however it arrives; the importance item planned for the next wave will separate the two.

Table 51. *Financial independence by caste. Share at each level, with base.*

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	9.7%	10.6%	7.5%	15.3%
Mostly true	26.3%	29.5%	25.2%	23.9%
Partly true	35.8%	33.3%	41.8%	35.7%
Not true	28.2%	26.6%	25.6%	25.1%
Base (N)	1,217	2,558	1,267	967

Unlike most other areas in the study, financial independence was measured only as a current status. The regional differences are relatively modest, but the Eastern states stand out with the highest share of financially independent women, at 41.4 per cent, followed by the South and West (38.4 per cent), the Hindi heartland (36.2 per cent) and the tribal belt (35.2 per cent).

Although the spread across regions is only about six percentage points, fewer than half of women in any regional grouping report a steady income from a job or business of their own. Given the close links between earning and women's agency, mobility and overall aspirations seen elsewhere in the study, widening women's economic opportunities is a shared challenge across all four groupings.

Table 52. *Financial independence by regional groupings: status only, no importance item, so no gap is defined.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	–	36.2	–	2,468
Predominantly tribal states	–	35.2	–	1,140
Large economies of South and West	–	38.4	–	1,250
Eastern states	–	41.4	–	1,204

2.12 Marriage as a personal choice

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts; community-voiced, about women like the respondent rather than about herself.*

The survey asked women how important it was that women like them in their community should be able to decide when and whom to marry, and whether they believed this was generally true for women like them today. Unlike the earlier questions in this part, these items were framed in terms of women like you in your community rather than the respondent herself. This projective approach was adopted because decisions relating to marriage and childbearing are highly sensitive, and asking about community norms often draws more candid responses than direct questions about personal experience. The findings should therefore be read as women's perceptions of prevailing social norms rather than as measures of their own agency.

Women place a high value on the freedom to marry by choice. Overall, 67 per cent believe it is very or most important that women like them should be able to decide when and whom to marry. The value peaks at 71 per cent among newly married women, who are closest to the decision, and eases to 58 per cent among the oldest cohort.

Perceptions of community practice are less positive. Just over half of women (53 per cent) believe that women like themselves mostly or fully have this say, while 36 per cent feel it is only partly true and 10 per cent believe it is not true. These perceptions vary little across life stages, from 52 per cent among the unmarried young to 55 per cent in the middle cohorts and 50 per cent among the oldest. The gap between the importance attached to marriage choice and its perceived prevalence suggests that many women believe social norms have not caught up with the level of autonomy they consider desirable.

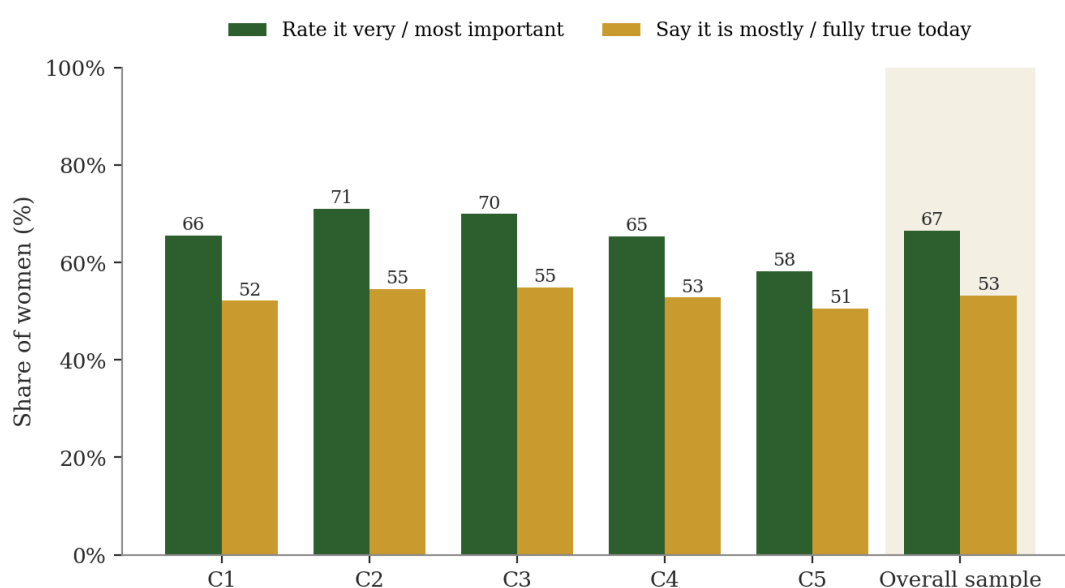


Figure 23. Marriage choice: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 53. Marriage choice, importance by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	26.6%	26.9%	25.7%	25%	22.3%	25.3%
Very important	39%	44.1%	44.3%	40.3%	35.9%	41.2%
Somewhat	28.3%	25.3%	25.3%	28.5%	32.7%	27.7%
Not important	6.1%	3.6%	4.8%	6.2%	9.1%	5.8%
Base (N)	741	750	1,850	1,885	791	6,017

Table 54. Marriage choice, availability by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	14%	14%	13.3%	14.3%	12.8%	13.7%

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Mostly true	38.1%	40.5%	41.6%	38.5%	37.7%	39.6%
Partly true	35.9%	38%	35.3%	37%	35.8%	36.3%
Not true	11.9%	7.5%	9.8%	10.2%	13.7%	10.4%
Base (N)	729	750	1,856	1,898	796	6,029

Perceptions of marriage choice vary noticeably across caste groups. Scheduled Tribe women are the most likely to regard women's ability to choose when and whom to marry as very or most important (76 per cent), followed by Other Backward Class women (67 per cent), General-category women (65 per cent) and Scheduled Caste women (58 per cent). While majorities in all groups support women's autonomy in marriage decisions, the strength of that support is lower among Scheduled Caste women.

Perceived community practice shows an even wider divide. Nearly two-thirds of Scheduled Tribe women (65 per cent) believe that women like themselves mostly or fully have a say in marriage decisions, compared with 56 per cent of Other Backward Class women, 47 per cent of General-category women and only 44 per cent of Scheduled Caste women. Scheduled Caste women are also the most likely to report that such autonomy is only partly available in their communities, indicating that many perceive women's freedom to choose in marriage as constrained rather than fully realised. Perceptions of community norms surrounding marriage remain substantially less favourable among Scheduled Caste women than among other caste groups.

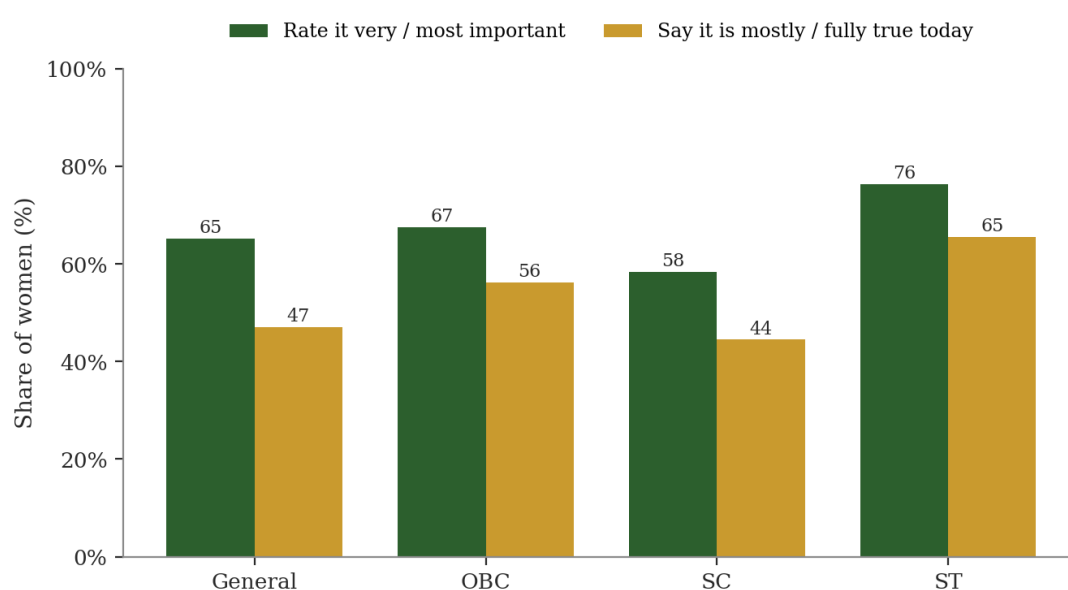


Figure 24. Marriage choice: importance and attainment, by caste

Table 55. Marriage choice, importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	20.7%	29.2%	20%	27.7%
Very important	44.6%	38.3%	38.4%	48.6%
Somewhat	28.5%	26%	37%	18.7%
Not important	6.2%	6.5%	4.6%	5%
Base (N)	1,205	2,545	1,249	967

Table 56. Marriage choice, availability by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
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Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	11.7%	14.2%	9.7%	20.3%
Mostly true	35.4%	42%	34.8%	45.2%
Partly true	40.5%	33.2%	45.6%	26.2%
Not true	12.4%	10.6%	9.9%	8.3%
Base (N)	1,209	2,546	1,259	962

Women's perceptions of the importance of being able to choose when and whom to marry are high across all four regional groupings. The tribal belt records the highest importance, with 70.7 per cent of women saying this right is very or most important for women like them in their community, followed by the Hindi heartland (67.3 per cent). Importance is slightly lower in the South and West (64.7 per cent) and the Eastern states (63.0 per cent).

Perceived availability of this right also varies across regions. Women in the tribal belt are the most likely to say that women in their community can decide when and whom to marry (62.6 per cent), well ahead of the South and West (52.3 per cent), the Hindi heartland (51.4 per cent) and the Eastern states (49.3 per cent).

As a result, the tribal belt has the smallest aspiration gap, at 8.1 percentage points, suggesting that perceived opportunities are relatively well aligned with aspirations. The Hindi heartland records the widest gap (15.9 points), followed by the Eastern states (13.7 points) and the South and West (12.4 points). While the right to choose one's marriage is widely valued across regions, women in the tribal belt perceive it to be substantially more attainable than women elsewhere.

Table 57. *Marriage choice: importance and availability, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	67.3	51.4	15.9	2,441
Predominantly tribal states	70.7	62.6	8.1	1,133
Large economies of South and West	64.7	52.3	12.4	1,254
Eastern states	63.0	49.3	13.7	1,201

2.13 Fertility as a personal choice

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts; community-voiced, about women like the respondent rather than about herself.*

The survey asked women how important it was that women like themselves in their community should have a say in when to have their first child after marriage and how many children to have, and whether they believed this was generally true for women like them today. As with the marriage-choice indicator, these findings reflect women's perceptions of community norms rather than their own personal experiences.

The ability to make decisions about childbearing is widely valued across the life course. Overall, 64 per cent of women consider it very or most important that women should be able to decide when to have their first child and how many children to have. The importance attached to fertility autonomy varies only modestly across cohorts, rising slightly during the childbearing years before easing among the oldest women. Despite these small differences, support for women's role in fertility decisions remains consistently high across all stages of life.

Perceptions of community practice are somewhat less positive but equally consistent. Overall, 53 per cent of women believe that women like themselves mostly or fully have a say over the timing and number of their children, while about one-third (35 per cent) feel this is only partly true and around one in eight (12 per cent) believe it is not true. Unlike several measures of personal agency, perceived community norms show little systematic variation across age groups. Women of different generations hold broadly similar views about the extent of reproductive decision-making available to women in their communities. As with marriage choice, the gap between the importance women attach to fertility autonomy and the extent to which they believe it is realised suggests that social norms continue to lag behind women's aspirations.

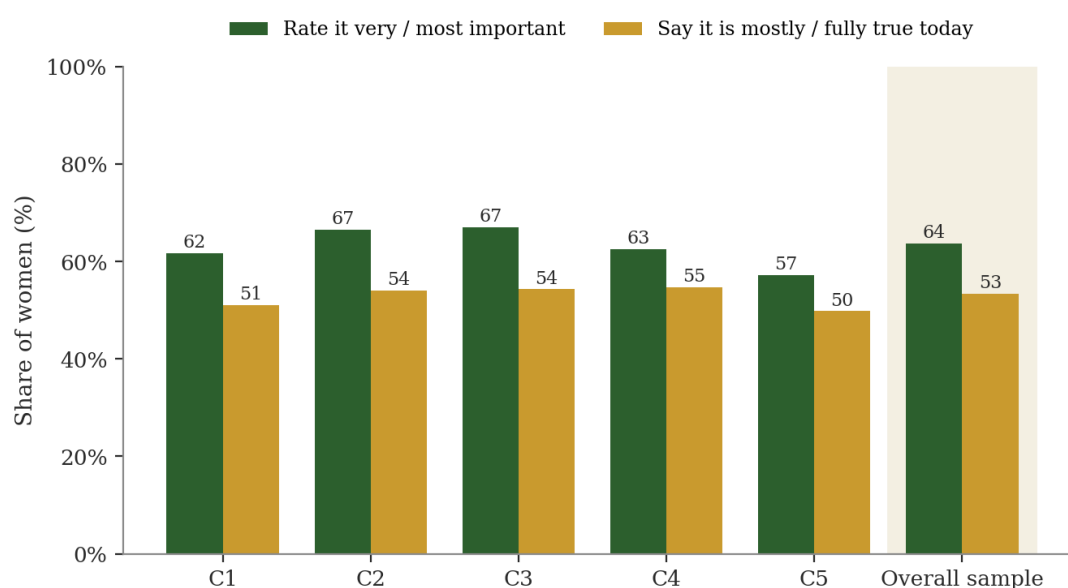


Figure 25. Fertility timing: importance and attainment, by cohort and overall

Table 58. Fertility timing, importance by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Most important	20.5%	24.1%	20.1%	21.1%	15.8%	20.4%
Very important	41.3%	42.5%	47%	41.4%	41.4%	43.2%
Somewhat	23.8%	28.6%	27.4%	31.1%	33.5%	29.1%
Not important	14.5%	4.8%	5.6%	6.3%	9.3%	7.3%
Base (N)	698	748	1,850	1,892	792	5,980

Table 59. Fertility timing, availability by cohort. Share at each level, with base.

Response	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Overall
Fully true	14.3%	15.1%	14.7%	14.8%	10.4%	14.1%
Mostly true	36.7%	38.9%	39.6%	39.9%	39.4%	39.3%
Partly true	30.7%	36.1%	35.7%	34.7%	35.3%	34.8%
Not true	18.3%	9.9%	10%	10.7%	14.9%	11.8%
Base (N)	678	748	1,847	1,895	791	5,959

The caste pattern closely mirrors that seen for marriage choice. Scheduled Tribe women place the greatest importance on women's ability to decide when to have children and how many children to have, at 71 per cent, and they are also the most likely to believe that women in their communities are able to exercise this choice, at 64 per cent. Scheduled Caste women are at the other end of the spectrum, reporting both the lowest importance (54 per cent) and the lowest perceived availability (44 per cent). Other Backward Class and General-category women fall between these two groups. Differences across caste reflect both how widely fertility autonomy is valued and how far women believe it is accepted and practised within their communities. Muslim women report somewhat lower availability on fertility timing than Hindu women; on most other areas the two are close.

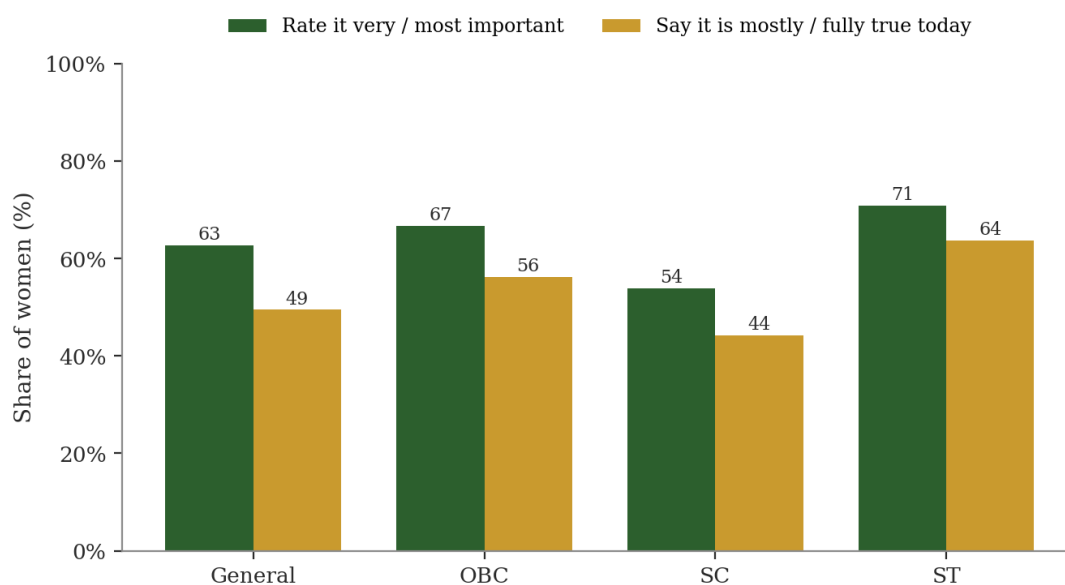


Figure 26. Fertility timing (community-voiced): importance and attainment, by caste

Table 60. Fertility timing, importance by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Most important	19.4%	22.1%	15.1%	23.8%
Very important	43.2%	44.6%	38.8%	47.1%
Somewhat	31.1%	25.5%	37.2%	24.1%
Not important	6.3%	7.8%	8.9%	5%
Base (N)	1,198	2,533	1,241	956

Table 61. Fertility timing, availability by caste. Share at each level, with base.

Response	General	OBC	SC	ST
Fully true	13.4%	14.5%	11.8%	17.5%
Mostly true	36%	41.8%	32.4%	46.3%
Partly true	36.8%	31.8%	44%	27%
Not true	13.8%	11.9%	11.7%	9.3%
Base (N)	1,199	2,522	1,235	951

Women across all regions attach considerable importance to women having a say in when to have their first child and how many children to have. Importance is highest in the Eastern states (67.6 per cent) and the tribal belt (67.1 per cent), while the Hindi heartland (62.0 per cent) and the South and West (59.9 per cent) report slightly lower levels.

Perceived availability of this right varies more sharply. The tribal belt stands out, with 65.0 per cent of women saying that women in their community are able to make these decisions, substantially higher than the South and West (52.0 per cent), the Eastern states (50.9 per cent) and the Hindi heartland (50.0 per cent).

These differences translate into markedly different aspiration gaps. The tribal belt records by far the smallest gap, at just 2.2 percentage points, indicating that perceived opportunities closely match aspirations. The South and West also show a relatively modest gap (7.9 points), while the Hindi heartland records a gap of 12.1 points. The Eastern states have the widest, at 16.7 points, reflecting strong aspirations that are not matched by perceived opportunities. Women in the tribal belt see substantially greater scope for reproductive decision-making than women in other regions, while the Eastern states combine high aspirations with comparatively limited perceived autonomy.

Table 62. *Fertility timing: importance and availability, by regional groupings, with the gap in percentage points and base.*

Belt	Importance (%)	Attainment (%)	Gap (pp)	Base (N)
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	62.0	50.0	12.1	2,410
Predominantly tribal states	67.1	65.0	2.2	1,130
Large economies of South and West	59.9	52.0	7.9	1,240
Eastern states	67.6	50.9	16.7	1,179

2.14 The ladder: where women place themselves

Who was asked: *Asked of all five cohorts; a single self-placement, no importance item.*

The ladder question asked each woman to place herself on a scale from the bottom, where few of her hopes for life had been realised, to the top, where most had been achieved. It provides an overall assessment of how women see their lives today. Overall, 26 per cent place themselves at the bottom, 61 per cent in the middle and 12 per cent at the top.

The youngest women are the most pessimistic about their current position. More than one-third (38 per cent) of unmarried young women place themselves on the bottom rung, compared with 24 to 29 per cent of women in the three middle cohorts and 22 per cent of the oldest. The largest change across the life course is therefore a movement away from the bottom rather than towards the top.

This is reflected in the middle of the ladder. Half (51 per cent) of the youngest women place themselves in the middle, rising to around 64 per cent among women in the middle life stages before easing slightly among the oldest. As women age, they are increasingly likely to feel that they have made some progress, even if they do not feel they have realised most of their aspirations. Very few women place themselves at the top regardless of age: the share holds at around 11 to 12 per cent across the first four cohorts and rises only among the oldest, to 18 per cent. Age is associated less with reaching the top than with escaping the bottom; the dominant transition is from feeling that few hopes have been realised to feeling that at least some have been.

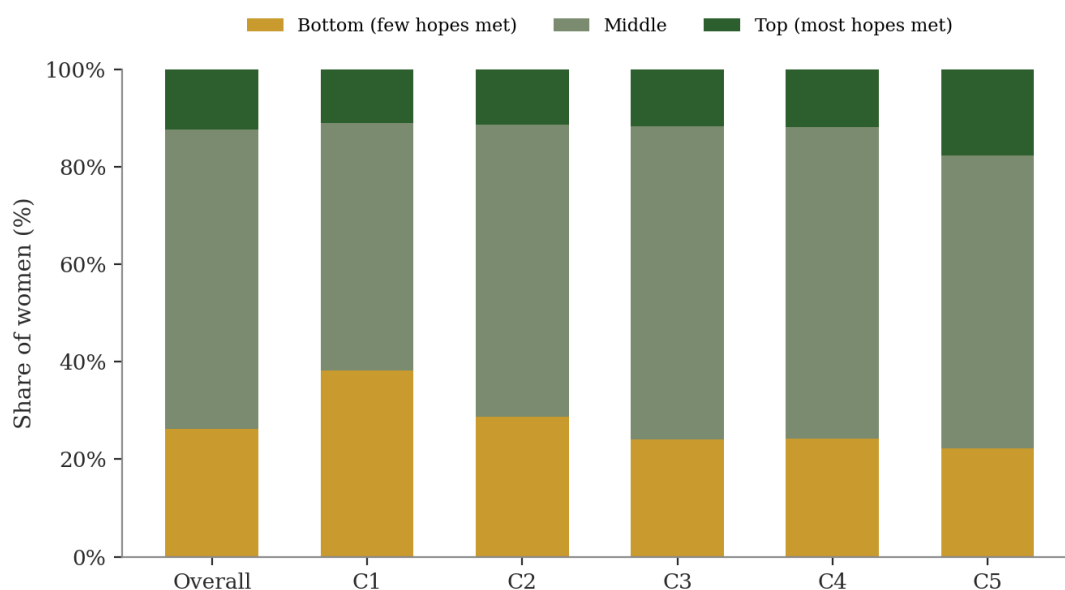


Figure 27. Where women place themselves on the ladder today, by cohort and overall

Table 63. Ladder placement today by cohort. Share on each rung, with base.

Rung	Overall	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
Top (most hopes met)	12.4%	11%	11.4%	11.7%	11.8%	17.6%
Middle	61.4%	50.8%	59.9%	64.2%	64%	60.1%
Bottom (few hopes met)	26.2%	38.2%	28.7%	24.1%	24.2%	22.3%
Base (N)	5,973	730	743	1,836	1,879	785

The overall ladder tells a different story from the individual aspiration indicators. Although the preceding sections documented sizeable caste differences in education, agency, leadership and asset ownership, these differences almost disappear when women give a single overall assessment of their lives: across all four caste groups, between 25 and 27 per cent place themselves on the bottom rung. Financial independence, by contrast, is much more strongly associated with how women view their lives. Women who earn an independent income are considerably less likely to place themselves at the bottom (20 per cent, against 30 per cent among those without an independent income) and almost twice as likely to place themselves at the top (17 per cent against 9 per cent). Having an income of one's own shapes a woman's overall sense of progress more strongly than caste does. Religious differences are more mixed: Muslim women are somewhat more likely than Hindu women to place themselves at the bottom, while Christian women are the least likely to do so, though the Muslim and Christian samples are much smaller than the Hindu sample and these comparisons should be read with caution.

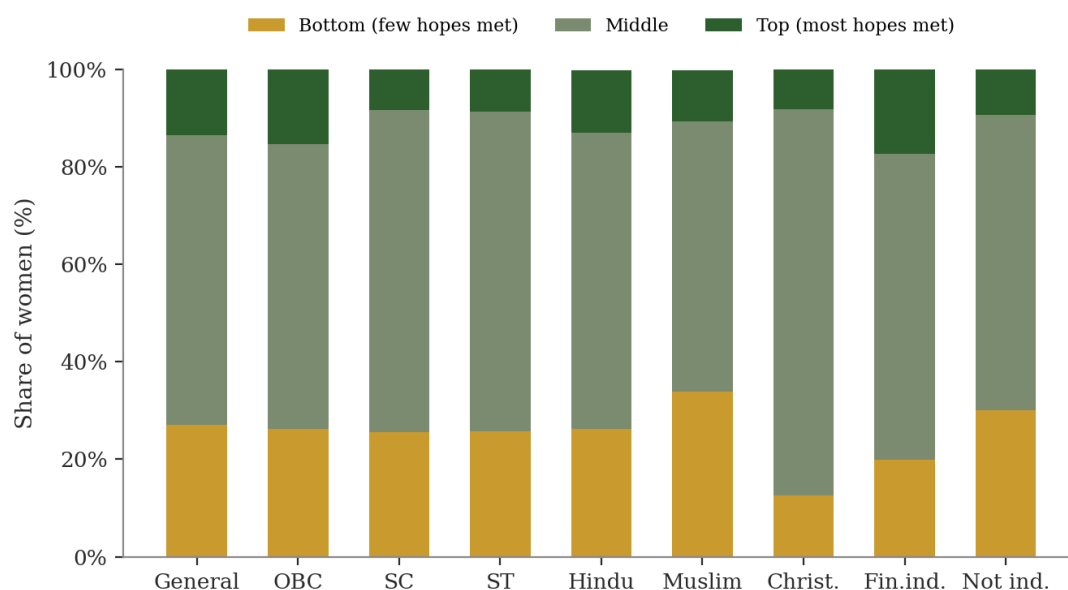


Figure 28. Ladder placement today, by caste, religion and financial independence

Table 64. Ladder placement today by caste, religion and financial independence. Share on each rung, with base.

Rung	General	OBC	SC	ST	Hindu	Muslim	Christ.	Fin.ind.	Not ind.
Top (most hopes met)	13.5%	15.4%	8.3%	8.6%	12.9%	10.6%	8.2%	17.3%	9.5%
Middle	59.5%	58.4%	66.2%	65.7%	60.8%	55.4%	79.3%	62.8%	60.5%
Bottom (few hopes met)	27%	26.3%	25.5%	25.7%	26.2%	33.9%	12.5%	19.9%	30.1%
Base (N)	1,210	2,524	1,250	938	5,076	386	353	2,250	3,696

2.15 Barriers to realising aspirations

Who was asked: Asked of women who placed themselves on the bottom or middle rung and expected no rise within five years, or expected to slip; 590 answered.

Looking ahead, most women remain optimistic. Overall, 63 per cent expect to move to a higher rung within the next five years, while only a little over one per cent expect their circumstances to worsen. Optimism is strongest among younger women, with 71 per cent of the youngest cohort expecting to climb, and it declines steadily with age to 50 per cent among the oldest.

The survey then asked the 590 women who expected no improvement what they believed was holding them back. The most frequently cited reason was that they were no longer interested in pursuing anything beyond their present life (32 per cent). Lives built around children and family (17 per cent) and restrictions imposed by guardians or elders (17 per cent) were the next most common responses, followed by poverty (14 per cent), obligations to help in the family business or farm (13 per cent), and a lack of education or skills (12 per cent). Husband's disapproval, often assumed to be the principal barrier, came only seventh, mentioned by 11 per cent of women.

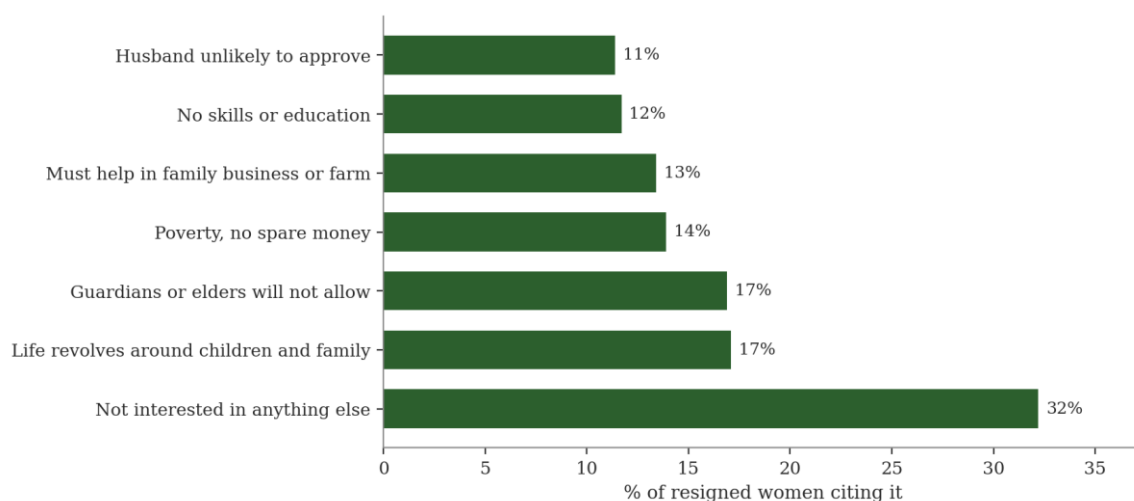


Figure 29. What holds back the women who expect no improvement

Table 65. Leading barriers among the 590 women who expect no improvement: those cited by more than one woman in ten (multi-select; the full sixteen-item list is in the analysis workbook).

Barrier	% citing
Not interested in anything else	32.2%
Life revolves around children and family	17.1%
Guardians or elders will not allow	16.9%
Poverty, no spare money	13.9%
Must help in family business or farm	13.4%
No skills or education	11.7%
Husband unlikely to approve	11.4%

These findings give the aspiration gap an important perspective. Most women continue to believe that their lives will improve, particularly in the younger cohorts. Among the much smaller group who expect no improvement, the dominant barrier is not financial hardship or family opposition but a loss of interest in pursuing a different future. For some women, prolonged exposure to constraint appears to have narrowed their opportunities and, with them, their expectations of what is achievable.

Part 3. Reading the cohorts and segments together

3.1 The life-stage story

Down the life stages, one pattern holds across most areas: wanting and having both change with age, and they seldom move together. The young want schooling and movement most and hold assets and standing least. Older women have built up assets, health control and standing but have let some wanting go. Financial independence is the exception, flat and low throughout. So the same programme meets different women at each stage. A titling drive lands on decades of shortfall among older women; a schooling or mobility drive meets live demand among the young.

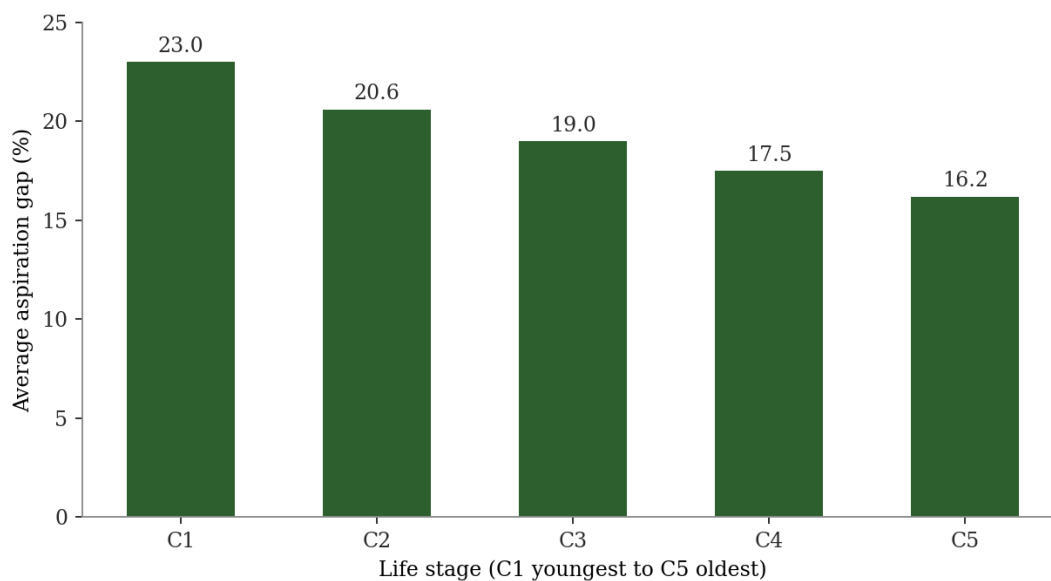


Figure 30. The overall aspiration gap narrows across the life stages

Table 66. Average composite gap by life stage (%).

Life stage	Average gap
C1	23%
C2	20.6%
C3	19%
C4	17.5%
C5	16.2%

3.2 The caste story

Across many dimensions of empowerment, Scheduled Caste women consistently report the lowest levels of both aspiration and achievement. Compared with other social groups, they are less likely to aspire to own assets, exercise control over voting decisions and savings, or have a voice in public affairs, and they are also less likely to have realised these outcomes. This pattern may reflect two overlapping realities: persistent structural exclusion that limits opportunities, and aspirations that have gradually adjusted to those constraints.

In contrast, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class women often report both higher aspirations and higher levels of achievement than General-category women in areas such as mobility, health and leadership, suggesting that the relationship between social group and empowerment is less uniform than a simple hierarchical ordering would imply.

Part 4 returns to this question by examining how to distinguish between aspirations that are in fact lower and aspirations that have been shaped by long-term disadvantage. From a programme perspective, however, the key implication is clear: lower expressed aspirations among Scheduled Caste women should not be interpreted as lower need. On the contrary, they may signal the cumulative effects of exclusion and therefore warrant greater attention.

3.3 The religion and location story

Hindu and Muslim women show remarkably similar patterns across most dimensions of empowerment, challenging many common assumptions about differences between the two groups. The main exceptions are reproductive autonomy, where Muslim women report a slightly lower sense of perceived freedom over the timing of childbirth, and political autonomy, where the detailed analysis reveals a more pronounced unmet aspiration to vote independently.

Location tells a similar story at first glance. Peri-urban women, 443 of the sample, report headline percentages close to their rural counterparts on most areas. Differences by place of residence are less apparent in these headline percentages but become more evident in the deeper analysis of aspiration gaps in Part 4, where peri-urban women carry wider gaps than rural women, concentrated among the most frustrated rather than spread across all.

3.4 The geographic picture: states and regions

The fifteen states differ nearly twofold in the average aspiration gap, from 13% in Odisha to 24% in Rajasthan. Odisha, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh sit at the low end; Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh at the high. Grouped into four belts, the pattern is clearer. The Hindi heartland carries the widest average gap at 21%. The tribal belt follows at 20%, the economically developed states of the south and west at 18%, and the east, at 0.15, carries the narrowest.

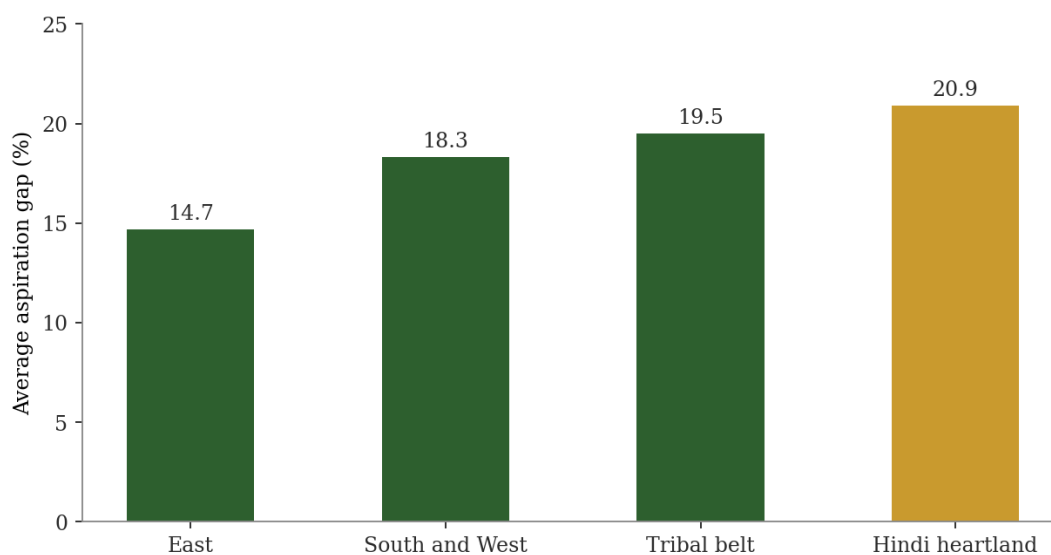


Figure 31. Average aspiration gap by regional belt

Table 67. Average composite gap by regional belt (%), raw means. Grouping: economically developed south and west; Hindi heartland; tribal belt; east.

Region	States	Average gap	Women
Hindi heartland of North, Central and East	UP, MP, Haryana, Bihar, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh	20.9%	2,470
Predominantly tribal states	Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Nagaland	19.5%	1,143
Large economies of South and West	Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra	18.3%	1,272
Eastern states	West Bengal, Odisha, Assam	14.7%	1,207

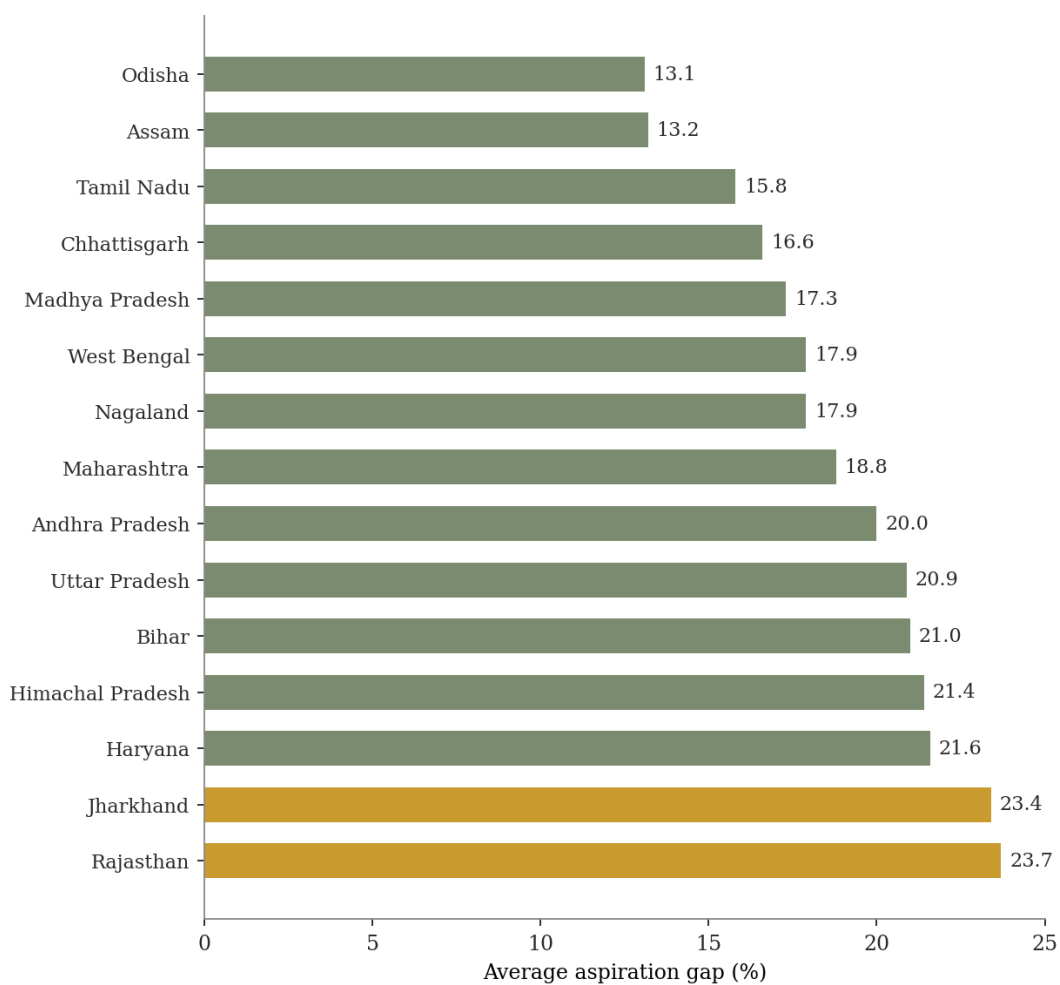


Figure 32. Average aspiration gap by state

Table 68. Average gap by state (%), raw means.

State	Average gap
Odisha	13.1%
Assam	13.2%
Tamil Nadu	15.8%
Chhattisgarh	16.6%
Madhya Pradesh	17.3%
West Bengal	17.9%
Nagaland	17.9%
Maharashtra	18.8%
Andhra Pradesh	20.0%
Uttar Pradesh	20.9%
Bihar	21.0%
Himachal Pradesh	21.4%
Haryana	21.6%
Jharkhand	23.4%
Rajasthan	23.7%

The gap between wanting and having is widest in the Hindi heartland and narrowest in the east, and this holds when every individual and household characteristic is accounted for, so it is a feature of place rather than of who happens to live where. A regression with the four belts in place of individual states (Annexure A) confirms it: against the Hindi heartland as the reference, every other belt shows a significantly narrower gap, the east furthest below, the tribal belt closest. The state-by-state picture, which the report uses as its headline, is retained because it is more precise for a Ministry that works state by state; the belts are the simpler summary. Question-level results for every area, by belt and by state, are in the analysis workbook.

Read area by area, the regional patterns show that women's aspirations and achievements vary in different ways across the country. The tribal belt stands out for the highest aspirations across many dimensions, including mobility, financial control, political agency and reproductive choice. In some areas, such as marriage and fertility decisions, these are matched by relatively high attainment, but sizeable gaps remain in public voice, voting autonomy and control over savings.

The Hindi heartland is characterised by consistently high aspirations, particularly for education, assets and leadership. Attainment is often relatively strong, but aspirations are stronger still, leaving substantial gaps in several areas.

The Eastern states present a different picture. They record some of the widest gaps in education, asset ownership and reproductive autonomy, reflecting aspirations that outpace perceived opportunities. An important exception is independent voting, where attainment exceeds stated importance, suggesting that this has become a widely accepted norm. The South and West generally show more moderate aspiration levels and gaps, while the Hindi heartland and the tribal belt display sharper contrasts between what women value and what they attain.

3.5 The intersectionality between life stages, social group, and place

The findings become more revealing when life stage, social group and place are read together. **There is no single rural woman whose aspirations follow one predictable path.** Age changes what women want and what they have achieved; social background shapes the room they have had to act; and place changes the opportunities available to turn aspirations into reality.

Life stage does not operate in the same way for every woman. Younger women tend to have more open aspirations around education, mobility and independence, while older women have accumulated more assets, health control and standing but often express less of the wanting that characterised earlier stages. This means that the same caste or region can contain very different forms of disadvantage depending on where a woman is in her life.

Caste, in turn, changes the meaning of a life-stage difference. Scheduled Caste women often appear to have both less achievement and less expressed aspiration in areas such as assets, savings, voting and public voice. But this should not be read simply as younger or older SC women “wanting less”. Some of that lower wanting may itself be the result of having lived with fewer opportunities for longer. By contrast, Scheduled Tribe and OBC women sometimes combine relatively high aspirations with relatively high achievement, particularly in mobility, health and leadership.

Place adds another layer. The four regional belts do not simply rank from “better” to “worse”. The tribal belt, for example, combines strong aspirations with relatively greater room to act in areas such as marriage and fertility, while still showing important constraints in political voice and control over money. The Hindi heartland tends to have strong aspirations but substantial gaps between wanting and having. The eastern states often show a different pattern, with some of the country's widest gaps in education, assets and reproductive autonomy.

The composite index makes the point concrete. Scheduled Caste women record the narrowest average gap at every life stage, from 22% among unmarried girls to 15% among the oldest cohort, sitting below every other group at the same stage, which is the adaptation pattern of section 4.3 visible across the whole life course rather than a cohort artefact. Region cuts across caste in the same way: in the East the composite gap is narrow for all four caste groups, between 14% and 16%, while in the Hindi heartland every group sits at 20% or above. The table below gives the full caste-by-life-stage picture; two regional cells (General-category women in the tribal belt and Scheduled Tribe women in the South and West) rest on fewer than 110 women and should be read with care.

Table 69. Composite aspiration gap by caste and life stage (% scale). Scheduled Caste women record the narrowest gap in every cohort.

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
General	23%	24%	20%	18%	17%
OBC	23%	20%	19%	18%	17%
SC	22%	19%	17%	17%	15%
ST	24%	20%	20%	17%	15%

The most important point is therefore not that one caste, one region or one age group is consistently the most disadvantaged. Rather, disadvantage takes different forms where these identities meet. A young woman in one region may face a live opportunity gap around education or mobility; an older woman elsewhere may face a long-standing shortfall in assets or decision-making power; and a Scheduled Caste woman may have a smaller measured gap precisely because years of constraint have changed what she expects to be possible. The report's findings suggest that policy needs to respond to these combinations rather than treating "rural women" as a single category.

Part 4. The overall picture and what drives it

4.1 A composite measure of unmet aspirations

While the results in Part 2 are presented separately for each area of empowerment, it is also useful to summarise the findings into a single measure that captures the overall extent to which a woman's aspirations remain unmet. To do this, the study constructs a composite aspiration gap index, which produces one score for every respondent.

The area figures in Part 2 combine into one number per woman, the composite aspiration gap. For each area we take how far attainment falls short of importance, weight it by how much the woman said that area mattered, and average across the thirteen areas that carry a gap: the ten personal areas, the two community-voiced areas, and the ladder. Financial independence has no importance question and no gap, so it sits outside the index and is reported as a status. The result runs from zero, fully met, to one. It is useful for comparison, but the area-by-area picture is where the programme signal sits.

Two points on what the index includes. The two community-voiced areas, marriage and fertility, are folded in on the understanding that a woman reads her own position through what she sees for women like her in the community, a reasonable but not exact substitution. The ladder, which has no importance question, enters with its gap defined as the distance from the top rung, and takes the woman's own average importance across the other areas as its weight. The ladder gap is large on average, so it pulls hard on the composite; the methodology note in Annexure A sets out both choices in full, and Annexure A5 reports an alternative index built on the ten personal areas alone. The two track each other closely, at a correlation of 0.93, and the findings that follow hold on both.

On this measure, the average aspiration gap across all women is 19%, indicating a modest but meaningful disconnect between aspirations and lived experience. One in five women record a gap below 10%, perceiving little distance between what they value and what they have achieved. The average gap declines steadily across the life course, from 0.23 among unmarried young women to 0.16 among the oldest life-stage group, reflecting either greater attainment, changing priorities, or a combination of the two.

Geographical differences are also evident. Peri-urban women have a higher average aspiration gap (22%) than rural women (19%) in raw means, indicating that unmet aspirations are more pronounced in these transitional settings. Differences across states are even more striking, with the average gap varying by nearly twofold, from the lowest level in Odisha (13%) to the highest in Rajasthan (24%). As the multivariate analysis that follows shows, these state differences persist even after accounting for individual characteristics such as age, education, marital status, caste, religion and place of residence, so broader social and institutional contexts play their own part in shaping women's ability to realise their aspirations.

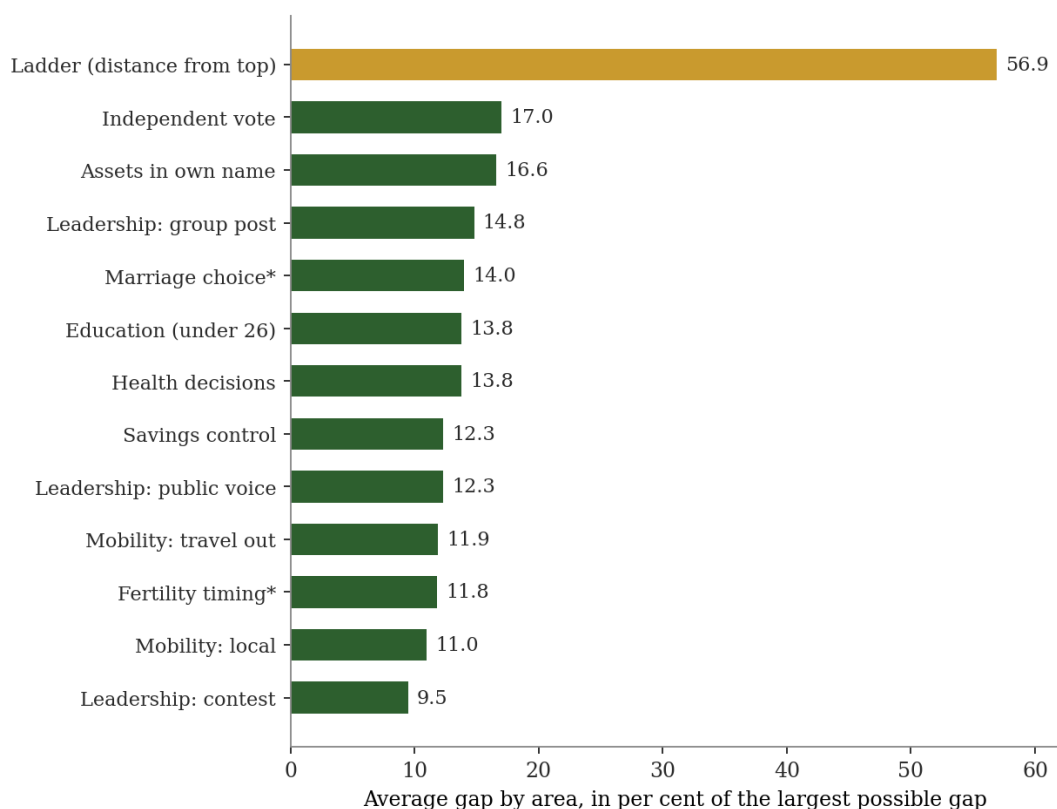


Figure 33. The composite gap by area: the ladder self-rating stands well above the rest, then property and the vote; mobility and contesting office trail

Table 69. Average gap by area (%)

Area	Average gap
Ladder (distance from top)	56.9%
Independent vote	17.0%
Assets in own name	16.6%
Leadership: group post	14.8%
Marriage choice*	14.0%
Education (under 26)	13.8%
Health decisions	13.8%
Savings control	12.3%
Leadership: public voice	12.3%
Mobility: travel out	11.9%
Fertility timing	11.8%
Mobility: local	11.0%
Leadership: contest	9.5%

4.2 What predicts a wider gap

A regression of the composite gap on a woman's characteristics, holding the rest constant and including the state she lives in, isolates what independently predicts a wider or narrower gap. The clearest results: peri-urban residence predicts the widest gap of any factor; the gap narrows with marriage and, more weakly, with age; and Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class women show narrower gaps than otherwise similar General-caste women. The Muslim and self-help group coefficients point the same way as before but are smaller and only marginally significant on this index. The chart shows the direction and size of each; the full table, with standard errors and significance, is in the annexure.

Four findings stand out. First, peri-urban residence is associated with the widest aspiration gaps of any characteristic included in the model, even after accounting for differences in age, education, marital status, social group, religion and state. Second, the aspiration gap narrows among married women, and more weakly with age. Third, Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class women display narrower aspiration gaps than otherwise comparable General-category women. Finally, the Muslim and self-help group coefficients point the same way, though on this index they are smaller and only marginally significant. The chart presents the estimated effect of each characteristic, showing both its direction and magnitude, while the complete regression results, including coefficients, standard errors and significance levels, are in Annexure A.

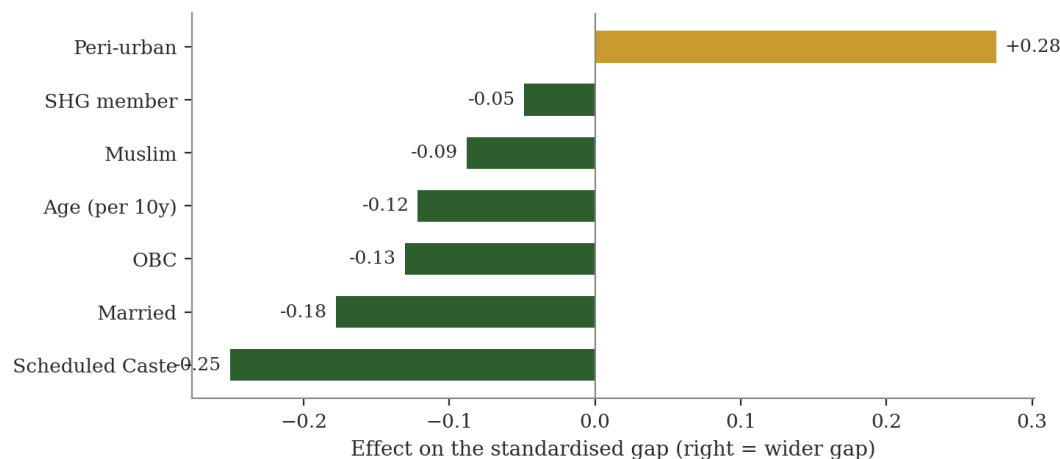


Figure 34. What independently predicts the aspiration gap

(bars to the right widen it, to the left narrow it)

Interpretation

Peri-urban residence has the largest positive coefficient. After accounting for age, caste, religion, marital status, education, self-help group membership and state, peri-urban women carry the widest gaps, at 0.28 of a standard deviation. Peri-urban environments appear to create aspirations that are not matched by opportunities.

Age has a negative coefficient. Older women tend to have smaller aspiration gaps, which could reflect greater attainment with age, lower aspirations over time, or both; on this index the age term is only marginally significant.

Married women have smaller gaps than unmarried women. Marriage is independently associated with closer alignment between aspirations and achievements.

Scheduled Caste women have smaller gaps than comparable General-category women. This should not be read as their being better off. The descriptive results show lower attainment on many areas; the regression shows lower stated aspirations too, and the narrower gap follows. This is why section 4.3 examines adapted or constrained aspirations.

The Muslim and self-help group coefficients also point to smaller gaps. Both are smaller and only marginally significant on this index, and neither implies higher wellbeing; section 4.3 separates the two readings a narrow gap can carry.

Table 70. Determinants of the standardised composite gap (selected coefficients; full model in Annexure A1)

Factor	Effect on gap	Std. error	Significance
Age (per 10 years)	-0.122	0.070	p < 0.10
Currently married	-0.178	0.046	p < 0.01
Scheduled Caste	-0.251	0.039	p < 0.01
Other Backward Class	-0.130	0.035	p < 0.01
Muslim	-0.088	0.049	p < 0.10
Self-help group member	-0.049	0.027	p < 0.10
Peri-urban residence	+0.275	0.063	p < 0.01

4.3 Wanting less, or having more

At first glance, a smaller aspiration gap may appear to be a positive result. This is not always the case. The gap between aspirations and achievements can become smaller in two very different ways: women may achieve more of what they aspire to, or they may lower their aspirations because they believe those goals are beyond their reach. These two situations have very different implications.

To distinguish between them, the analysis takes the two components of the aspiration gap separately, what women say is important to them and what they say they have achieved. This reveals why some groups have narrower gaps than others.

Scheduled Caste women and married women have smaller aspiration gaps primarily because they report lower aspirations, not because they have achieved more. Their levels of attainment are similar to, or no higher than, those of comparable women, but they place less importance on many of the opportunities measured in the survey. Aspirations appear to have adjusted over time to the constraints they experience.

The pattern is quite different for self-help group members. They report higher aspirations than non-members, but they also report substantially higher levels of achievement. Because their achievements rise even more than their aspirations, their overall aspiration gap is smaller. In this case, a narrower gap reflects real progress rather than reduced expectations.

The reading rule from Part 1 matters here. A narrow gap can close from either end, and the ends mean opposite things. Running the same analysis separately on the two halves, what women say matters and what they say they have, separates them. Scheduled Caste and married women reach their narrow gaps by wanting less: their importance ratings are lower while their attainment is no higher. That is what wanting adjusted to constraint looks like. Self-help group members show the opposite, wanting more and having more still, with attainment rising faster than wanting so the gap narrows for the right reason. This is the single most important caution in the report: a narrow gap among a constrained group is not good news until its two halves are read apart.

4.4 The peri-urban pattern

The average results show that peri-urban women have larger aspiration gaps than rural women. But the average hides an important detail: **the difference is not the same for all peri-urban women.**

Among women with relatively small gaps, there is almost no difference between peri-urban and rural women. The difference grows among women with larger gaps and is largest among the **10 per cent with the widest gaps**. At this end, the peri-urban effect is about 0.05, compared with almost zero among women with the smallest gaps.

This means that the wider gap among peri-urban women is not spread evenly across the group. It is concentrated among a smaller group of women who want considerably more than they have been able to achieve. One possible explanation is that living closer to towns exposes some women to new possibilities and opportunities faster than they can actually access them. Whether this creates motivation to pursue those opportunities or eventually leads to resignation is an important question for the next phase of the research.

The pattern is different for Scheduled Caste women and SHG members. Their gaps are generally smaller across the distribution, with the difference particularly noticeable among women who otherwise have the largest gaps. This suggests that the factors associated with caste and SHG membership operate differently from those associated with peri-urban residence.

The important finding, therefore, is not simply that peri-urban women have larger gaps. It is that the gap is concentrated among a relatively small group of peri-urban women who appear to be experiencing the greatest mismatch between what they want and what they have.

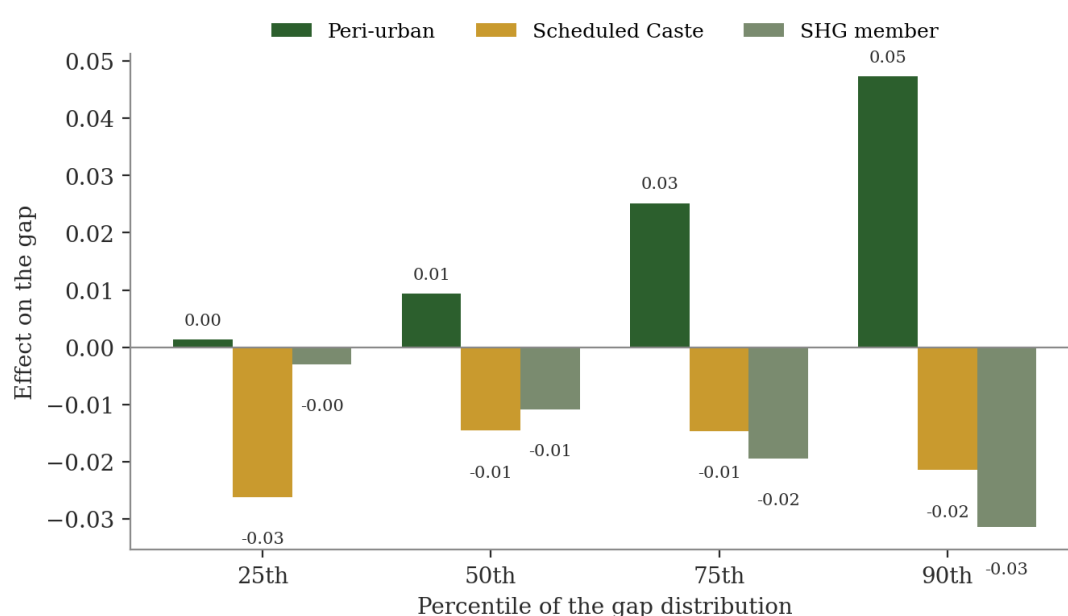


Figure 35. How three factors act across the gap distribution

Table 71. Quantile-regression effects on the gap, by percentile.

Factor	25th	50th	75th	90th
Peri-urban	0.001	0.009	0.025	0.047
Scheduled Caste	-0.026	-0.015	-0.015	-0.021
SHG member	-0.003	-0.011	-0.019	-0.032

Part 5. What it means, and what is next

5.1 What the study found overall

Across 6,092 women from fifteen states, the study finds that the average aspiration gap is relatively modest, but it is far from evenly distributed. On a scale from 0 to 100, the average gap is 19%, and one in five women record a gap below 10%, reporting little distance between what they aspire to and what they believe they have achieved. Rather than being spread uniformly across rural India, unmet aspirations are concentrated among particular groups of women. The largest gaps are found among younger women and those living in peri-urban areas. At the same time, looking separately at aspirations and attainment reveals another group whose circumstances deserve attention: women whose aspirations themselves appear to have narrowed over time.

The area-level findings reinforce this picture. On the composite measure, the widest gaps sit in ownership of assets and in women's ability to exercise an independent vote. In both cases, aspirations are relatively high but attainment remains much lower, marking areas where women continue to face substantial barriers, and both carry clear policy handles in titling, account ownership and political inclusion. By contrast, control over one's own health stands out as both the most widely shared aspiration and one of the most widely realised, with strong support across all generations of women, and its value carries intact from older women to their daughters. Mobility presents a more mixed picture than is often assumed: most women report relatively little gap in moving freely within their own village or neighbourhood, while travelling alone outside the village remains a larger constraint. Financial independence emerges as a persistent concern throughout the life course: only 37 per cent of women report a steady income from employment or a business of their own, the figure is flat across the life stages, and it is the standing condition against which every other gap should be read.

The regression confirms that these are structural rather than incidental. Holding age, education, religion, group membership, location and state constant, peri-urban residence is the single strongest predictor of a wider gap, at 0.28 of a standard deviation ($p < 0.001$). The gap narrows with marriage (0.18, $p < 0.001$) and, more weakly, with age (0.12 per decade, $p = 0.08$). Scheduled Caste women show the largest negative coefficient of any group, 0.25 narrower ($p < 0.001$), and Other Backward Class women 0.13 narrower ($p < 0.001$); the Muslim and self-help group coefficients are smaller and only marginally significant on this index (both around 0.05 to 0.09, p near 0.07). The model explains about thirteen per cent of the variation in the gap, which is high for a single cross-section of stated preferences and tells us that who a woman is, and where she lives, systematically shapes both what she has and what she has come to want.

The decomposition is what turns those coefficients into a finding rather than a curiosity. Splitting the gap into its two halves shows that the narrow gaps of Scheduled Caste and married women come from lower stated importance, not higher attainment, while the narrow gap of self-help group members comes from higher attainment sitting above already-higher importance. The same summary number, a below-average gap, means opposite things for the two: adapted wanting in one case, real progress in the other. Any reading of this study that stops at the composite gap will mistake the first for the second, which is the single most important caution the analysis carries into policy.

5.2 Three mechanisms

Taken together, the findings point to three broad patterns in how women's aspirations are shaped and realised.

The first is adaptation to constraints. Scheduled Caste women, older women and married women all have relatively small aspiration gaps, but this is often because they report lower aspirations rather than higher levels of achievement. The analysis of women who expect little improvement in their lives points in the same direction: many identify long-standing social and economic barriers that have limited what they believe is possible, and the leading barrier among the resigned is an absence of wanting itself. Aspirations can adjust to persistent disadvantage. This is the aspirations trap the theory predicts, seen in the field, and it is the strongest argument for measuring aspirations directly rather than assuming that low expectations reflect satisfaction.

The second pattern is exposure to new opportunities. Both self-help group membership and peri-urban residence appear to broaden women's horizons, but they do so in different ways. Self-help group members report higher aspirations, yet they also report greater achievement, leaving relatively small aspiration gaps. Peri-urban women, by contrast, often aspire to more without experiencing comparable improvements in their lives, especially among women with the largest gaps. Exposure alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by opportunities and support if higher aspirations are to translate into better outcomes.

The third pattern is the importance of looking beyond averages. Overall averages can conceal area-level structure. Muslim women appear to have relatively small aspiration gaps overall, but this masks substantial unmet aspiration in particular areas, most sharply the desire to vote independently. A single composite measure cannot reveal where aspirations remain unfulfilled; examining each area separately remains essential for understanding the specific barriers women face and for designing interventions.

These three themes reinforce a central conclusion of the study: the size of the aspiration gap alone does not tell the full story. To understand women's empowerment, it is necessary to consider both what women aspire to and what they have been able to achieve.

5.3 What to read with care

The findings presented here are based on a single survey conducted at one point in time. The relationships reported between women's characteristics, place of residence and aspiration gaps should therefore be read as associations rather than evidence of causation; women who join self-help groups or live in peri-urban areas may differ from other women in ways the analysis cannot fully account for.

Lower importance ratings among more disadvantaged groups may reflect aspirations that are in fact lower, but they may also arise because different groups use the response scale differently. The next round of the study includes an anchoring question designed to distinguish between these possibilities. The two community-voiced questions were asked differently from the personal areas and enter the composite only on the assumption stated in Annexure A; the ten-personal-area alternative in A5 shows the findings do not depend on them. High mobility attainment should also be read with the caution set out in Part 2: among labouring communities it can reflect the necessity of work and subsistence rather than free movement by choice. Finally, while the survey covers fifteen states, the state-level comparisons should be read as indicative rather than precise. None of these limitations affects the report's central descriptive findings, which rest on straightforward comparisons of well-based survey percentages.

5.4 The next wave

The next phase should move beyond measuring aspiration gaps to understanding why they persist. It should be predominantly qualitative and focus on five areas: understanding whether lower aspirations reflect real choice or adaptation to constraints; exploring the barriers women face in turning aspirations into reality; examining whether aspirations change across the life course; looking more closely at differences among younger Scheduled Caste women; and following a group of women over time to see how their aspirations and circumstances change. Repeating the study every two years, with qualitative research alongside it, would help show whether women's aspirations are widening and whether the barriers they face are changing.

A series of focus group discussions should be conducted with women at different stages of the life cycle, adolescent girls, unmarried young women, newly married women, mothers of young children and older women, to understand how aspirations evolve over time and what events influence them. Separate discussions should be held with Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class, Muslim and General-category women, as well as with self-help group members and non-members, to explore how social identity, community norms and institutional support shape both aspirations and achievements. Given the findings of this round, peri-urban women should form a separate group of enquiry, to understand why they experience particularly wide aspiration gaps.

The qualitative work should go beyond asking what women aspire to. It should explore how aspirations are formed, who influences them, what women see as realistic or unrealistic goals, the compromises they have made, and whether some aspirations have been abandoned over time. Discussions should also examine the role of families, husbands, mothers-in-law, peers, community institutions, schools and self-help groups in shaping women's choices. For women who report low aspirations, the enquiry should seek to understand whether this reflects satisfaction with their circumstances or an adjustment to longstanding constraint.

Alongside the group discussions, a smaller number of life-history interviews should be undertaken with women representing contrasting experiences: women with very large aspiration gaps, women whose aspirations have largely been realised, Scheduled Caste women with low reported aspirations, peri-urban women with high aspirations but low attainment, and self-help group members who report both high aspirations and high achievement. These interviews would give a fuller account of how aspirations change over a woman's life and the events that reinforce or reshape them.

Finally, the study should revisit the same women after two or three years. Combining a second survey with qualitative follow-up would make it possible to observe how aspirations evolve, whether gaps narrow or widen, and which life events, programmes or institutional changes help women translate aspiration into reality. Together, the quantitative and qualitative components would turn the study from a snapshot of women's aspirations into an account of how aspirations are formed, sustained and fulfilled.

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Annexure A. Full estimation tables

Heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) standard errors. Significance: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. State fixed effects included in every model. Education dummies relative to no formal education. Full detail, including state coefficients and the item-level models, is in the analysis workbook.

A0. How the composite index is built

The composite aspiration gap is an importance-weighted mean of domain shortfalls across all thirteen areas. For each area, the shortfall is importance minus attainment on the matched four-point scales, set to zero where attainment meets or exceeds importance, and scaled to run from zero to one. Each area is weighted by the importance the woman placed on it, and the weighted shortfalls are averaged over the areas she was asked. Two areas need explanation. The community-voiced areas, marriage and fertility, use the respondent's perception of women like her in the community as the attainment measure, since the personal version was not asked. The ladder has no importance question and no attainment item on the four-point scale; its shortfall is defined as the distance from the top rung, that is, (3 minus her rung) divided by 2, and it is weighted by the woman's own average importance across the other twelve areas. Because the mean ladder shortfall (0.57) is much larger than any other area, the ladder carries substantial weight in the composite; readers who prefer a narrower measure can reconstruct the personal-areas-only version from the item tables. The index averages 0.19 with a standard deviation of 0.11.

A1. Determinants of the composite gap

Table A1. OLS on the standardised composite gap ($n = 6,082$, R -squared 0.1348)

Term	Coefficient	Std. error	p
Constant	0.781***	0.119	<0.001
Age (per 10 years)	-0.122*	0.070	0.081
l(age10 ** 2)	0.001	0.009	0.900
Currently married	-0.178***	0.046	<0.001
Scheduled Caste	-0.251***	0.039	<0.001
Scheduled Tribe	-0.029	0.052	0.568
Other Backward Class	-0.130***	0.035	<0.001
Muslim	-0.088*	0.049	0.069
Self-help group member	-0.049*	0.027	0.073
Peri-urban resident	0.275***	0.063	<0.001

A2. Wanting and having, estimated separately

Table A2. The same specification run on mean importance (C1) and mean attainment (C2)

Term	Importance	p	Attainment	p
Currently married	-0.045	0.293	0.079*	0.067
Scheduled Caste	-0.139***	<0.001	0.002	0.959
Other Backward Class	0.078**	0.027	0.162***	<0.001
Muslim	-0.138***	0.009	-0.095*	0.071
Self-help group member	0.162***	<0.001	0.222***	<0.001
Peri-urban resident	0.090**	0.049	0.039	0.488

A3. Quantile regressions on the composite gap

Table A3. Quantile regressions on the unstandardised 0 to 1 gap

Term	25th	50th	75th	90th
Age (per 10 years)	-0.008***	-0.011***	-0.017***	-0.016***
Currently married	-0.013***	-0.015***	-0.020***	-0.029***
Scheduled Caste	-0.026***	-0.015***	-0.015***	-0.021***
Scheduled Tribe	-0.015***	-0.015***	-0.010***	0.006***
Other Backward Class	-0.000***	-0.003***	-0.002***	-0.012***
Muslim	-0.001***	-0.009***	-0.018***	-0.008***
Self-help group member	-0.003***	-0.011***	-0.019***	-0.032***
Peri-urban resident	0.001***	0.009***	0.025***	0.047***

A4. Regression with regional groupings

The baseline model in A1 uses state fixed effects. This alternative replaces them with four regional belts, so the coefficients can be read directly. The Hindi heartland is the reference. Heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) standard errors; n = 6,082, R-squared 0.092.

Table A4. Belt-grouped OLS on the standardised composite gap. Reference: Hindi heartland.

Term	Coefficient	Std. error	p
Belt: South and West	-0.250***	0.036	<0.001
Belt: Tribal	-0.110***	0.037	0.003
Belt: East	-0.594***	0.034	<0.001
Age (per 10 years)	-0.156**	0.071	0.029
Currently married	-0.168***	0.047	<0.001
Scheduled Caste	-0.229***	0.040	<0.001
Scheduled Tribe	-0.164***	0.048	<0.001
Other Backward Class	-0.140***	0.035	<0.001
Muslim	+0.001	0.049	0.991
Self-help group member	-0.039	0.027	0.155
Peri-urban resident	+0.222***	0.064	<0.001

A5. Alternative index: the ten personal areas alone

For readers who prefer a composite built only on questions a woman answered about her own life on matched four-point scales, this alternative uses the ten personal areas and leaves out the two community-voiced areas and the ladder. It averages 0.156 with a standard deviation of 0.116, and falls across the life stages from 0.204 among the unmarried young to 0.127 among the oldest. States run from Odisha at 0.085 to Rajasthan at 0.206, the same ordering as the main index. The two indices correlate at 0.93, and the main patterns hold on both: peri-urban residence widens the gap most, Scheduled Caste women show the largest narrowing, and the life-stage gradient declines throughout. The clearest difference is that the Muslim and self-help group coefficients, marginal on the main index, are clearly significant on this narrower one.

Table A5. The main thirteen-area index against the ten-personal-area alternative.

Measure	Main index (13 areas)	Alternative (10 personal areas)
Mean	0.189	0.156

Measure	Main index (13 areas)	Alternative (10 personal areas)
Standard deviation	0.107	0.116
Cohort 1 (youngest)	0.230	0.204
Cohort 5 (oldest)	0.162	0.127
Lowest state	Odisha, 0.131	Odisha, 0.085
Highest state	Rajasthan, 0.237	Rajasthan, 0.206
Correlation between the two	0.93	0.93

Annexure B. The questions, as asked

Every question in the survey is reproduced here word for word from the deployed KoboToolbox form (Womens_CATI), grouped by construct in the order of Part 2. Each carries its field name, whether it measures importance, attainment or status, its response options, and its routing. All construct questions sit within the main survey section, which was shown only to respondents who consented, cleared screening and were assigned a life-stage cohort. Response codes 1 to 4 are the four-point scale; code 98 is refused or don't know and is set to missing in analysis.

A. Education

EDU_C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, or wanted for yourself when you were younger, how much does it matter to you to reach the level of education or learning you most want for yourself?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked only of women aged 25 or under. All other respondents skip this item.

EDU_C2 Attainment

“Reaching the level of education or learning that you most want for yourself: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

B. Financial independence

WRK_C2 Status

“Being financially independent, that is, having a job or your own business that earns you a steady income: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

C. Mobility, moving around the local area

MOB_1C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to move around your area freely and safely, including alone after dark?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

MOB_1C2 Attainment

“Being able to move around your village or neighbourhood freely and safely, including alone after dark and in local public spaces, without fear of harassment or violence: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

D. Mobility, travelling outside the area

MOB_2C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to travel outside your area on your own to take up work or higher education or to visit people?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

MOB_2C2 Attainment

“Being able to travel outside your village on your own, using public transport, to pursue higher education, take up a job, or visit friends or relatives, without fear: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

E. Agency, saving and spending

AGY_1C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to save money and spend it on yourself or as you decide, without needing anyone's permission?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

AGY_1C2 Attainment

“Being able to save money and spend it on yourself or as you decide, without needing anyone's permission: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

F. Agency, deciding her own vote

AGY_2C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to decide things for yourself?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

AGY_2C2 Attainment

“Deciding who to vote for on your own, without following the family line: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

G. Leadership, a responsible group post

LDR_1C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to hold a responsible post where you make decisions on behalf of others?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

LDR_1C2 Attainment

“Being in a responsible position in your [\${CALb04}], where you make decisions on behalf of others: ‘Is it possible to get such a responsible position?’”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

H. Leadership, a public voice in meetings

LDR_2C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to be heard and able to contribute to public decisions in meetings such as the gram sabha?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

LDR_2C2a Attainment

“In public meetings such as the gram sabha or ward sabha, being heard, that is, having others take your views seriously when you speak: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

LDR_2C2b Attainment

“In public meetings such as the gram sabha or ward sabha, being able to contribute to public decisions that affect life in your village: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

I. Leadership, contesting a local election

LDR_3C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to be able to contest a local election and hold an elected post that gives you decision-making power?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

LDR_3C2 Attainment

“Being able to contest a local election, such as for the panchayat or a ward seat, and to hold an elected post that gives you decision-making power: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

J. Health

HLT_C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to look after your own health and body and make your own health decisions?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

HLT_C2 Attainment

“Being able to look after your own health and body and make health decisions for yourself, including contraception and reproductive health, your own health during pregnancy and after childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of your infant: how true is this for you today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of cohorts 1 to 3 only (self-report version of the health-attainment item).

HLT_C3 Attainment

“Would you give your daughter or daughter in law the right to take care of her own health and body and make her own health decisions, including contraception and reproductive health, her own health during pregnancy and after childbirth, where to give birth, and the care of her child?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of cohorts 4 and 5 only (projective version, about a daughter or daughter-in-law).

K. Assets in her own name

AST_C1 Importance

“Thinking about the life you want for yourself, how much does it matter to you to own assets in your own name that are yours and that you control?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

AST_C2 Attainment

“Do you have property like land, a house, gold, or bank savings in your name and under your control?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

L. Marriage choice (community-voiced)

MAR_C1 Importance

“Do women like you in your society have the right to decide at what age and whom they want to marry?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

MAR_C2 Attainment

“Is it possible for women like you in your society to take their own decisions regarding their marriage age and life partner?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

M. Fertility timing (community-voiced)

AGY_3C1 Importance

“How much does it matter to you that women like you in your community can have a say in when to have their first child after married and how many children to have?”

Response options: 1 = Not important to me · 2 = Somewhat important · 3 = Very important · 4 = Most important · 98 = Refused / no view

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

AGY_3C2 Attainment

“Women like you in your community having a say in when to have their first child after married and how many children to have: for women like you, how true is this today?”

Response options: 1 = Not true for me at all today · 2 = Partly true for me today · 3 = Mostly true for me today · 4 = Fully true for me today · 98 = Refused / don't know

Routing: Asked of all eligible respondents (no individual skip condition).

N. The ladder and barriers

F1a single self-placement

“Imagine a ladder. A woman at the bottom rung has very few of her aspirations met. A woman at the middle rung has several met and some freedom, but still faces restrictions. A woman at the top has the greatest freedom to pursue her aspirations. Where on this ladder do you feel you stand today?”

Response options: 1 Bottom · 2 Middle · 3 Top · 98 Refused/don't know

Routing: Asked of all five cohorts.

F1b five-year expectation

“Where on the same ladder do you expect to stand 5 years from now?”

Response options: 1 Bottom · 2 Middle · 3 Top · 98 Refused/don't know

Routing: Asked of all five cohorts.

F1c barriers, multi-select

“You feel you are near the bottom of the ladder today and expect to be in the same place in 5 years. Why do you not foresee any improvement in your wellbeing, and what do you think stops you from reaching your aspirations?”

Response options: Fifteen coded barriers plus Other (specify); multiple answers allowed

Routing: Asked only of women who placed themselves at the bottom or middle and expected no rise, or expected a slip (F1a and F1b both answered).

Notes on the battery

- Health attainment forks by life stage: HLT_C2 (self-report) for cohorts 1 to 3, HLT_C3 (projective) for cohorts 4 and 5. Each woman answered one of the two, and together they form the single health-attainment measure used in Part 2.
- Public voice has two current-state items, LDR_2C2a (being heard) and LDR_2C2b (contributing to decisions), averaged into one attainment score.
- Marriage and fertility are asked about women like you in your community rather than about the respondent, so they are reported with that framing flagged, and they enter the composite index on the stated assumption that a woman reads her own position through what she sees for women like her.
- Financial independence has a status question only, with no matching importance item.
- LDR_1C2 inserts the respondent's own group name, captured earlier in the interview, where the text shows a placeholder.

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