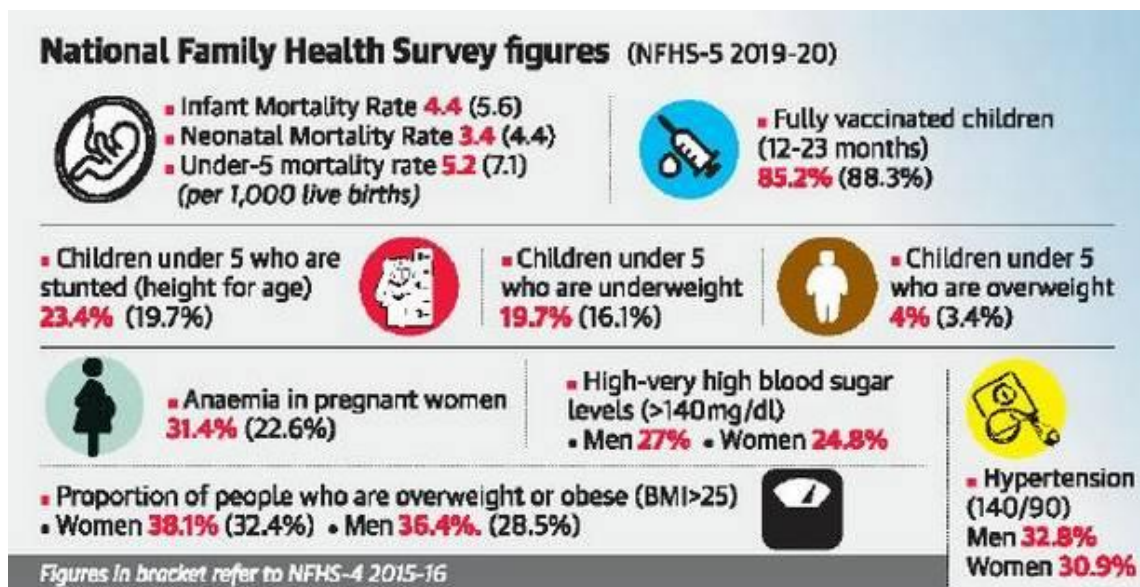


In the NFHS report card, the good, the sober, the future

- The recently released fifth edition of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 brings some positive news.
- NFHS-5, which presents a bird's eye view of the state of the nation's health and related development indicators, looks encouraging on several fronts: population growth is stabilising, family planning services have improved, and health systems are delivering better.
- However, it also highlights the need for further improvement to address gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls, such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection.
- These have been exacerbated by discriminatory social norms and practices hindering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 Agenda and India's development goals.



The population is stabilising

1. The good news is that India's population growth appears to be stabilising. The Total Fertility Rate — the average number of children born per woman — has declined from 2.2 to 2.0 at the national level.
2. A total of 31 States and Union Territories (constituting 69.7% of the country's population) have achieved fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1. The main reasons for the decline in fertility include: Increase in the adoption of modern family planning methods.



3. Significant improvements in female literacy, with 41% of women having received 10 or more years of schooling (compared to 36% in 2015-16). Girls who study longer have fewer children, and are also more likely to delay marriage and find employment.

EXCERPTS FROM NFHS SURVEY



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT (WOMEN AGE 15-49 YEARS)

	2020-21	2015-16
Participation of married women in household decisions	92%	73.8%
Women who worked in last 12 months and paid in cash	24.9%	21.1%
Women owning a house and/or land (alone or jointly)	22.7%	34.9%
Women having a bank or savings account that they use	72.5%	64.5%
Women having a mobile phone that they themselves use	73.8%	66.6%

NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF ADULTS (AGE 15-49 YEARS)

	2020-21	2015-16
Women whose Body Mass Index (BMI) is below normal	10%	14.9%
Men whose Body Mass Index (BMI) is below normal	9.1%	17.7%
Women who are overweight or obese	41.3%	33.5%
Men who are overweight or obese	38%	24.6%
Average out-of-pocket expenditure per delivery in a public health facility (in Rs)	2,548	8,518
Women who have ever used the internet	63.8%	NA
Men who have ever used the internet	85.2%	NA
Households with any usual member covered under a health insurance/financing scheme	25%	15.7%

Improved health delivery

1. Maternal health services are steadily improving. Antenatal care, postnatal and Institutional births have increased.
2. The survey indicates a worrisome figure of 11% of pregnant women who were still either unreached by a skilled birth attendant or not accessing institutional facilities.

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3. Further analysis reveals an institutional delivery rate of under 70% in 49 districts of India. Over two-thirds (69%) of these districts are from five States (Nagaland, Bihar, Meghalaya, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh), indicating the need for an area-specific approach to improving maternal health services.
4. Teenage pregnancy has declined marginally by 1% point. This highlights the need to invest in comprehensive sexuality education as a key component of life-skills education for both in school and out-of-school adolescents and ensuring access to quality sexual and reproductive health services for them.
5. A very small segment of the population is currently accessing the full range of sexual and reproductive health services such as screening tests for cervical cancer (1.9%) and breast examinations (0.9%). These services should be included while expanding the basket of reproductive health services.

Discriminatory social norms

1. Evidence indicates significant progress where women have the right to bodily autonomy and integrity, and the ability to make decisions about their lives.
2. It is heartening to see that the proportion of women (aged 15-24 years) who use menstrual hygiene products has increased by almost 20% points between 2015-16 and 2019-21 and currently stands at 77.3%.
3. The proportion of women who have their own bank accounts has gone up by 25.6% points over the same time period to reach 78.6%. Around 54% of women have their own mobile phones and about one in three women have used the Internet.
4. This, coupled with the increase in the proportion of women with more than 10 years of schooling, lays the building blocks for women's empowerment.
5. In the next few years, the combination of mobile technology, banking, education and women's economic empowerment will be significant drivers to address informal discriminatory norms.

Way Forward:

1. To empower women and ensure gender justice, it is imperative to address harmful practices, such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection.
2. The prevalence of child marriage has gone down marginally from 26.8% in 2015-16 to 23.3% in 2019-21.

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3. Similarly, the sex ratio at birth has shown slight improvement (from 919 to 929 over the same time period).
4. One in three women continues to face violence from their spouse. Hence, there is a need to enhance the value of women and girls by working on transforming unequal power relations, structural inequalities and discriminatory norms, attitudes and behaviours.

Promote gender-equal values

1. Women's participation in the economy continues to remain low (only 25.6% of women engaged in paid work, a meagre increase of 0.3% point).
2. Women still bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care work, hindering their ability to access gainful employment.
3. This points to the need for engaging with men and boys, particularly in their formative years, to promote positive masculinities and gender-equal values.

The pace of progress between one NFHS and the next should be accelerated by devising targeted strategies based on specific indicators and regions that are currently lagging. Together, we must challenge discriminatory social norms that drive gender-based violence and harmful practices, and empower women to exercise agency and autonomy in all spheres of life.

Killing the licence

The Government must give a more transparent account of its actions against NGOs.

Scrutiny of international funding of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

1. If the past few years of enhanced measures against non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in India had not put enough of a squeeze on them, then the Ministry of Home Affairs' long-drawn-out process of scrutinising their foreign-funding licences by year-end is sure to do so.
2. Close on the heels of the news that the Missionaries of Charity group had been denied a renewal of its licence under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (amended in 2020), comes the revelation that more than four-fifths of the applications of the 22,000-plus NGOs that have sought renewal have yet to be scrutinised.
3. Unless the Government extends the deadline by midnight, all of them stand to lose their ability to access international funding in the new year.

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4. As experts have explained, the NGOs have to prove not only that the source of funding and their usage of the funds is appropriate but also establish that their work does not qualify as harmful to “public interest” or “national security” — ambiguous terms that are left to MHA officials to define.
5. So, as many as 2,000 NGOs under scrutiny may be denied a renewal of their FCRA licence as the Missionaries of Charity and its roughly 200 homes around the country have been in this round.

Analysis of unwarranted scrutiny:

1. Contrary to the Government’s defence that it is only following accounting and audit procedures, it seems clear that organisations that have particularly faced the government’s ire are those that work in specific “sensitive areas”: pollution and climate change issues, human rights, child labour and human slavery, health and religious NGOs, particularly Christian and Islamic charities.
2. Prominent names among nearly 20,000 NGOs to have lost their foreign-funding licences since 2014 include Amnesty International, Greenpeace India, People’s Watch, European Climate Foundation, Compassion International and the Gates Foundation-backed Public Health Foundation of India.
3. If the Government has ample evidence to prove that Indians are better off without the work of these internationally renowned organisations, then it has yet to show it.
4. It is time the Government gives a more transparent account of its actions against NGOs, which at present appear to mirror those in China and Russia which have used their NGO laws to shut down dissent and criticism.
5. The actions in India over “foreign hand” concerns seem more hypocritical given the relative ease with which political parties are able to access foreign funds for their campaigns through electoral bonds, under the same FCRA that seeks to restrict funds to NGOs.

At a time when India is facing the crippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a long-term economic crisis, the Government’s moves that have resulted in an estimated 30% drop in international non-profit contributions, only hurt the poorest and most vulnerable recipients of philanthropic efforts, particularly those by NGOs working in areas where government aid fails to reach.