Breaking the code: The rise of women in India's STEM landscape

January 2026

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Foreword

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) are at the heart of global progress, shaping industries, economies, and societies. In India, women have historically played a crucial role in STEM, despite facing systemic barriers and cultural constraints. This report, Breaking the code: The rise of women in India's STEM landscape, provides a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape for women in these fields within India, highlighting both the strides made and the challenges that persist.

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in female enrollment in STEM education. Additionally, women have been key contributors in significant projects, such as the Chandrayaan-3 lunar mission. Their stories are a source of inspiration and a call to further action, urging academia, industry, and policymakers to bridge the gender gap in STEM.

Education has been the cornerstone of this transformation. Government initiatives such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Vigyan Jyoti, and the Pragati Scholarship have played a vital role in increasing female enrollment in STEM education. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further emphasized skill-based learning and inclusivity, laying the groundwork for a more diverse and competitive workforce. Several corporates have also supported female enrollment in STEM courses through earmarked scholarships under their CSR programs to encourage more women to pursue STEM courses. As a result, India now exceeds global averages in female STEM graduates. However, there remains a stark gap between education and employment, with many women not transitioning into STEM careers.

The workforce statistics reflect a paradox: while 42.6% of India's STEM graduates are women — outpacing several developed nations — their participation in STEM jobs remains disproportionately low. Social norms, workplace biases, and the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon continue to hinder career progression. Despite initial workforce entry, women often face stagnation at mid- and senior-level positions, with representation at the leadership level significantly dwindling.

Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to create gender-inclusive workplaces, offer mentorship opportunities, and introduce family-friendly policies that accommodate career breaks without penalizing women's professional growth.

Globally, the urgency to act has never been greater. According to the World Economic Forum, the world could face a shortage of over 85 million skilled workers by 2030, predominantly in technology and engineering sectors. This gap poses a threat of a US$8.5 trillion loss in global GDP over the next decade. Addressing this shortage requires tapping into the full potential of the skilled female labor force, which is crucial for a country's economic productivity, social mobility, and innovation.

In response to these challenges, the corporate sector has stepped up, with several companies launching programs designed to support and encourage women in STEM. A prime example of such an initiative is the EY STEM App, which aims to bridge the gender gap in technology careers. The corporate efforts, alongside those of NGOs and other private entities, are crucial in creating a supportive ecosystem for women in STEM. The collective impact of these efforts is beginning to reshape the STEM ecosystem, creating new opportunities for women to thrive.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the landscape at present, identifying key barriers and presenting actionable recommendations to bridge the gender gap in STEM. It is an urgent call to industry leaders, policymakers, and educators to foster an inclusive, equitable, and innovation-driven future. By investing in women's participation in STEM, India is not just advancing gender equity — it is unlocking a wellspring of talent that will drive the nation's scientific and economic growth towards Viksit Bharat.

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Introduction

In the heart of Bengaluru, at the Indian Institute of Science, a black-and-white photograph from the 1970s captures a moment in time — a group of pioneering women, poised with the promise of progress. They represent the early chapters of a story that continues to unfold today: the rise of Indian women in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics ('STEM').

The story of Indian women in STEM is one of gradual but determined change. In the early 20th century, opportunities for women in scientific fields were scarce. Nevertheless, trailblazers like V. K. Janaki Ammal, the first Indian woman to earn a Ph.D. in the U.S. in 1931, and Asima Chatterjee, the first Indian woman to receive a doctorate in India in 1944, set the stage for future progress.

Today, Indian women continue to make significant strides in STEM, building on the legacy of these early pioneers. Leaders like Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, the founder and executive chairperson of Biocon Ltd, has redefined India's biotechnology landscape through pioneering work in biopharmaceuticals and healthcare innovation. Dr. Tessy Thomas, known as "The Missile Woman of India," has contributed to the advancement of India's defense capabilities through her work at the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO), where she became the first woman to lead a missile project. Dr. Indira Hinduja, a gynecologist, brought new hope to countless families by delivering India's first test-tube baby and introducing groundbreaking reproductive techniques. Oceanographer Dr. Aditi Pant, one of the first Indian women to join an Antarctic expedition, has made substantial contributions to marine science and environmental studies. Kalpana Chawla, the first Indian-American woman in space, who tragically passed away in 2003, continues to be a beacon of inspiration for young women dreaming of careers in STEM.

India's Chandrayaan-3 mission's success is another achievement that highlights significant contributions of women in STEM at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), where women held around 27% of senior executive positions in the Chandrayaan-3 project and over 100 women participated in the mission by contributing to robotics, navigation, and aerospace divisions.

The accomplishments of these contemporary leaders underscore the importance of women representation in STEM and exemplify the enduring spirit of discovery and resilience. By excelling in their respective fields, they not only honor the legacy of past pioneers but also pave the way for the next generation of Indian women to make their mark in STEM. Over the decades, public attitude has changed, and educational reforms have opened doors, leading to a significant increase in women pursuing STEM education and careers. However, their journey has not been an easy one, with women facing many societal stereotypes and cultural constraints. This shift is a result of both changes in perceptions and policy-driven efforts to encourage participation of women in STEM. Efforts to increase the participation of women in STEM, such as scholarships, mentorship programs, and reforms, are chipping away at these old barriers.

Creating opportunities and platforms to amplify women's voices in STEM is crucial for fostering a more innovative future, which will translate into more successful ventures, apart from increasing the vital contribution of women to India's economic growth and GDP. A gender-diverse STEM workforce not only enhances problem-solving but also challenges stereotypes, promotes social equity, and creates strong role models for future generations. By supporting women in STEM, the society builds a more inclusive and balanced workforce that is capable of addressing global challenges and shaping a more resilient and equitable future.

This report traces the journey of women in STEM fields and looks ahead to a future where diversity in STEM is not just encouraged and celebrated but becomes a norm.

Contents

1

Background and evolution of STEM roles for women in India

India's vast population of over 1.4 billion showcases its scale and diversity. In our emerging economy, education is a pivotal element for advancement, offering pathways to development and economic freedom for its burgeoning youth. As we explore the academic landscape, the numbers tell a story of progress made and gaps to bridge.

To foster inclusive and accessible education for its growing populace is a demanding task, but one that the Indian government has focused on progressively improving. Gradual efforts to improve gender representation at primary levels have also led to significant progress in India. These have been a result of the government's increased investment in education and initiatives such as the 'Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme' (KGBV, 2004); 'The National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education' (NSIGSE, 2008); Central Board of Secondary Education Udaan (2014); 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' (BBBP, 2015); Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats (2025)[1] amongst others, to address the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and related issues of women empowerment over a life-cycle continuum and enhance educational access for all.

The National Education Policy 2020[2] (NEP 2020), laid down as the first education policy of the 21st century, was designed to meet India's developmental needs by overhauling the entire education system. Replacing the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE), NEP 2020 introduced reforms from pre-school to secondary levels. While the NPE 1986 emphasized standardization and equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups, NEP 2020 focuses on customizability, skill-based learning, and global competitiveness.

The policy prioritizes holistic development, promoting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills alongside academic learning. Unlike the old system, where subjects were taught in isolation, NEP 2020 encourages a multidisciplinary approach, allowing students to explore connections across subjects and develop a comprehensive understanding.

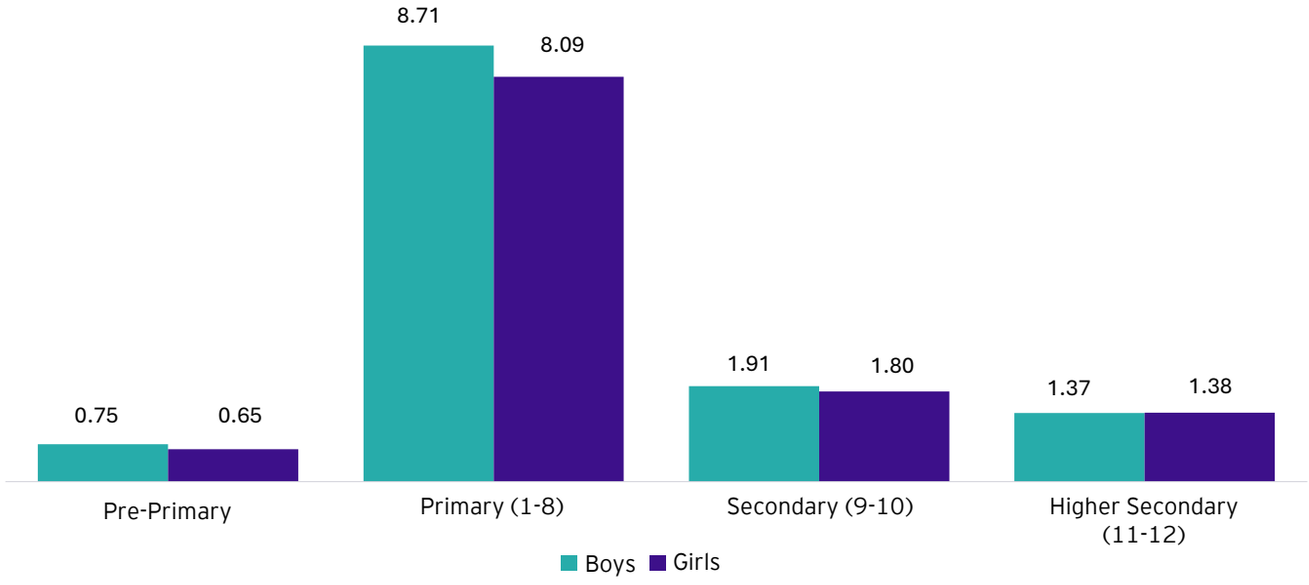
As a result of all these initiatives, there has been significant improvements in the Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) and gender equality over the last decade. Enrolment of both girls and boys in primary education (ages 6-10) and upper primary (ages 11-13) increased. There have also been noted improvements in the education infrastructure, including schools, digital resources, and an improved student-teacher ratio.

In contrast to developed nations such as Japan, Canada, the US, Germany, and the UK, where primary and secondary education enrollment rates are nearly universal (95%-100%)[3], India's enrollment figures lag, particularly at the secondary level (65%-70%)[4]. This stage is pivotal in shaping the academic and professional future of students, as it influences their choices in higher education and career paths. These challenges often stem from economic constraints, social disparities, and infrastructural deficiencies.

Despite efforts to create a more inclusive and accessible education system, government spending on education has historically remained low and continues to fall short given the growing population. NEP 2020 recommends public investment in education to reach 6% of GDP — echoing a target that has been in place since 1968 and was reaffirmed in 1986. However, India's actual spending was only 4.1%[5] of its GDP in 2021, falling significantly short of the mark. In contrast, developed nations spend much more on education – the US spent 5.4%[6] of its GDP on education in 2021, the UK 5%[7] in 2022, and France 5.4%[8] in 2021, highlighting the need for increased investment in India's education sector.[9]

1. https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2108572
2. Ministry of Human Resource Development, National Education Policy 2020; https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
3. https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/view#indicatorPaths=UIS-EducationOPRI%3A0%3AGER.1T3&geoMode=countries&geoUnits=&browsePath=EDUCATION%2FUIS-EducationOPRI%2Fenrolatt%2Fenrolment&timeMode=range&view=table&chartMode=multiple&tableIndicatorId=GER.1T3&chartIndicatorId=GER.1T3&chartHighlightSeries=&chartHighlightEnabled=true
4. Unified District Information System; UDISE+
5. Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) - India | Data
6. Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) | Data
7. World Bank Group – Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) | Data
8. World Bank Group – Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) - France | Data
9. Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) - India | Data

India: Gender wise student enrolment at various levels of education (In crores)

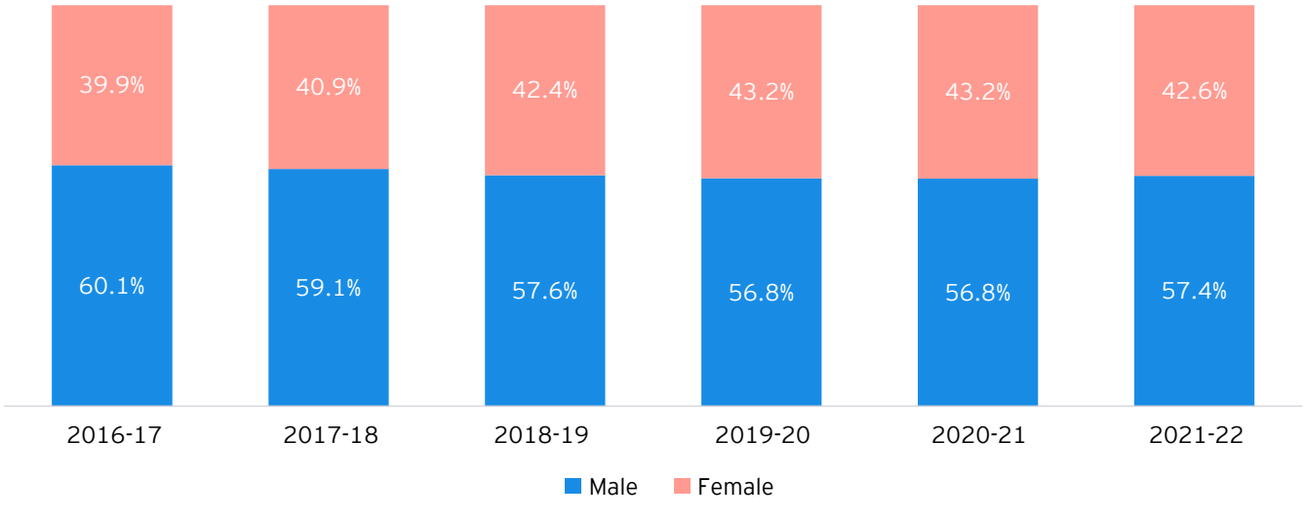


Source: UDISE + 2024-25[10]

According to the latest report by UDISE+ 2024-25, while boys tend to have higher enrolment in the early years as compared to girls, the trend changes as they grow older, with girls slightly outnumbering boys in enrolling for higher secondary education.

When we delve in to the fields of STEM, women, while present, are underrepresented at various levels of academia, serving as a stark reminder of the obstacles that persist. According to the latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report, the proportion of women enrolled in STEM courses (from higher secondary to M.Phil.) increased from 39.9% in the 2016-17 academic year to 42.6% in 2021-22[11].

India: Proportion of women enrolled in STEM courses

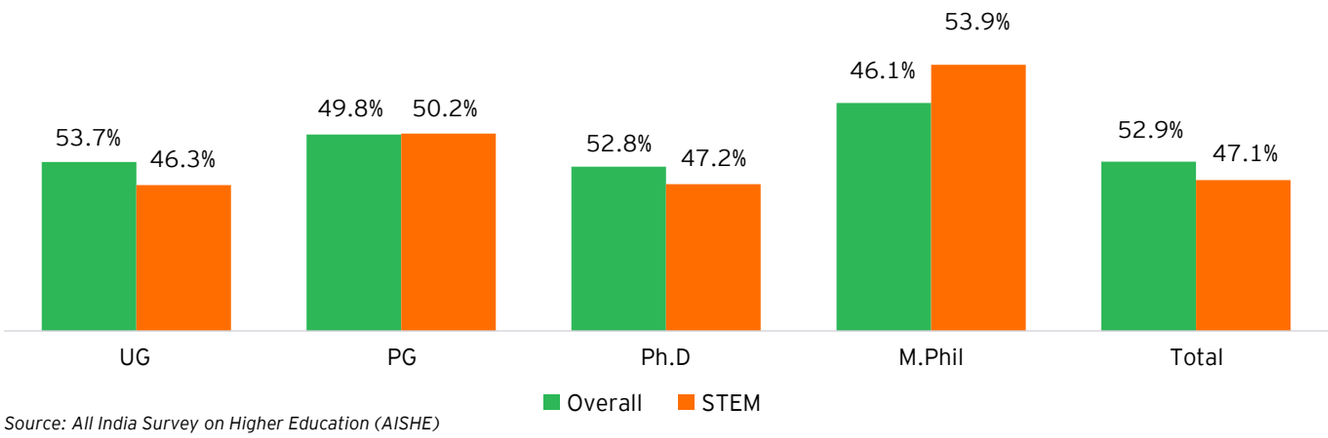


Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)

10. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/UDISE%2BReport%202024-25%20-%20Existing%20Structure.pdf
11. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports; https://aishe.gov.in/

The demand for STEM expertise is becoming more evident in a world driven by technological innovation and scientific discovery. According to estimates by the National Science Foundation, 80% of new jobs in the next 10 years will require skills in Science and Mathematics[12]. The lower enrolment in STEM courses at the undergraduate and Ph.D. levels signals a gap between current academic trends and future industry needs. This gap presents an opportunity for governments and academic institutions to encourage and guide students toward fields that are expected to drive the future.

India: Women enrolment at various academic levels (in %)



Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)

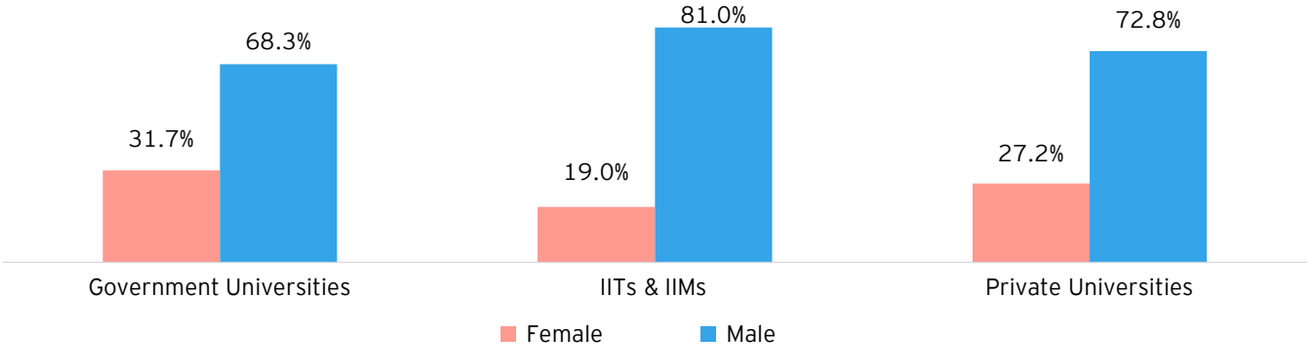
India, with 42.6%[13] of STEM graduates being women, not only exceeds the global average of 35%[14] but also outperforms developed countries like the UK (31%)[15], Germany (27.7%)[16], and France (32%)[17].

This places India in a strategic position to contribute skilled talent to the global workforce. The talent pool included the world's largest number of English-speaking STEM graduates, with approximately 2.5 million new graduates each year (2022-23), almost half of whom were women[18].

While there has been progress in women's representation in education, there is still an imbalance, especially when looking at different types of universities: government universities, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and private universities.

Data from LinkedIn Talent Insights shows that women make up about 30% of STEM graduates from the top 24 universities contributing to the STEM graduate pool. However, the picture changes when looking at premier institutions. The IITs and IIMs, which are renowned for their rigorous academic programs and competitive selection processes, report a lower percentage of female graduates, with women accounting for only about 20% of their STEM graduates. This discrepancy highlights a need for closer investigation and action to support gender diversity in higher education.

India: STEM graduates from different universities (2024)



Source: LinkedIn Talent Insights analysis

12. https://www.educationtimes.com/article/editors-pick/89886806/national-science-day-democratising-stem-skills-is-crucial-to-creating-a-future-ready-india
13. Press Release: Press Information Bureau
14. UNESCO, 'Girls' and women's education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics
15. STEM Women, 'Women in STEM Statistics: Progress and Challenges'; https://www.stemwomen.com/women-in-stem-statistics-progress-and-challenges
16. Eurostat, 'Female tertiary education graduates in STEM education fields - % of all tertiary education graduates in STEM education fields'; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00217__custom_10079895/default/table?lang=en
17. Eurostat, 'Female tertiary education graduates in STEM education fields - % of all tertiary education graduates in STEM education fields'; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00217__custom_10079895/default/table?lang=en
18. NASSCOM report, India Tech Industry Digital Talent Demand and Supply Analysis 2023

2

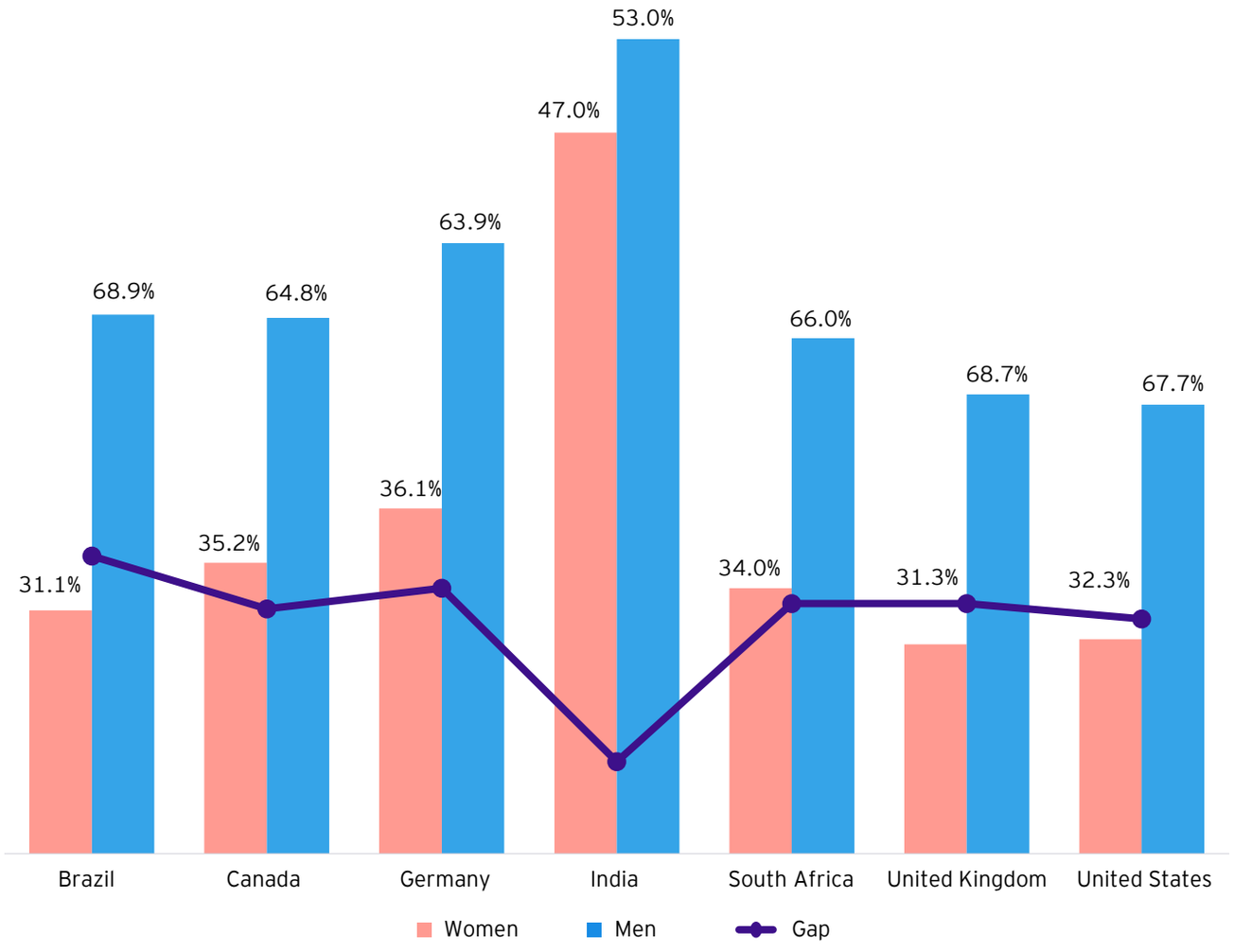
Gender parity in STEM related jobs

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG-5, focus on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, emphasizing the need for their inclusion in STEM fields to foster innovation and economic growth by 2030.

STEM jobs are expected to play an increasingly vital role in the future economy. It is anticipated that while workers with lower skill levels will need to leverage technology to enhance productivity, those with higher skill levels will rely on STEM capabilities to develop new products and services.

Data from LinkedIn shows that globally 31% of men work in STEM fields, in contrast to just 15.6% of women[19]. This underrepresentation of women in STEM is a common trend across countries, though the extent of the gap varies. The trend persists despite women graduating in STEM fields at higher rates than men in many regions. Despite observing a steady improvement in this measure in nearly all countries over the past seven years, the gap in STEM employment levels highlights barriers like social norms, domestic work burden, motherhood penalty, and workplace and career advancement challenges that women continue to face.

Comparison: Share of workers in STEM, by country and gender (2022)



Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

In this context, India presents an optimistic picture, with the smallest gender gap in STEM employment at a mere 5.4 percentage points, as per the latest LinkedIn Economic Graph report (2022 cohort).

However, considering that India outperforms many developed countries in the proportion of female STEM graduates, this presents an interesting paradox where a higher graduate pool does not consistently translate into job market participation.

19. LinkedIn Economic Graph report, 'International gender representation in STEM employment and skills – September 2023'

3

Transition from STEM academia to STEM workforce

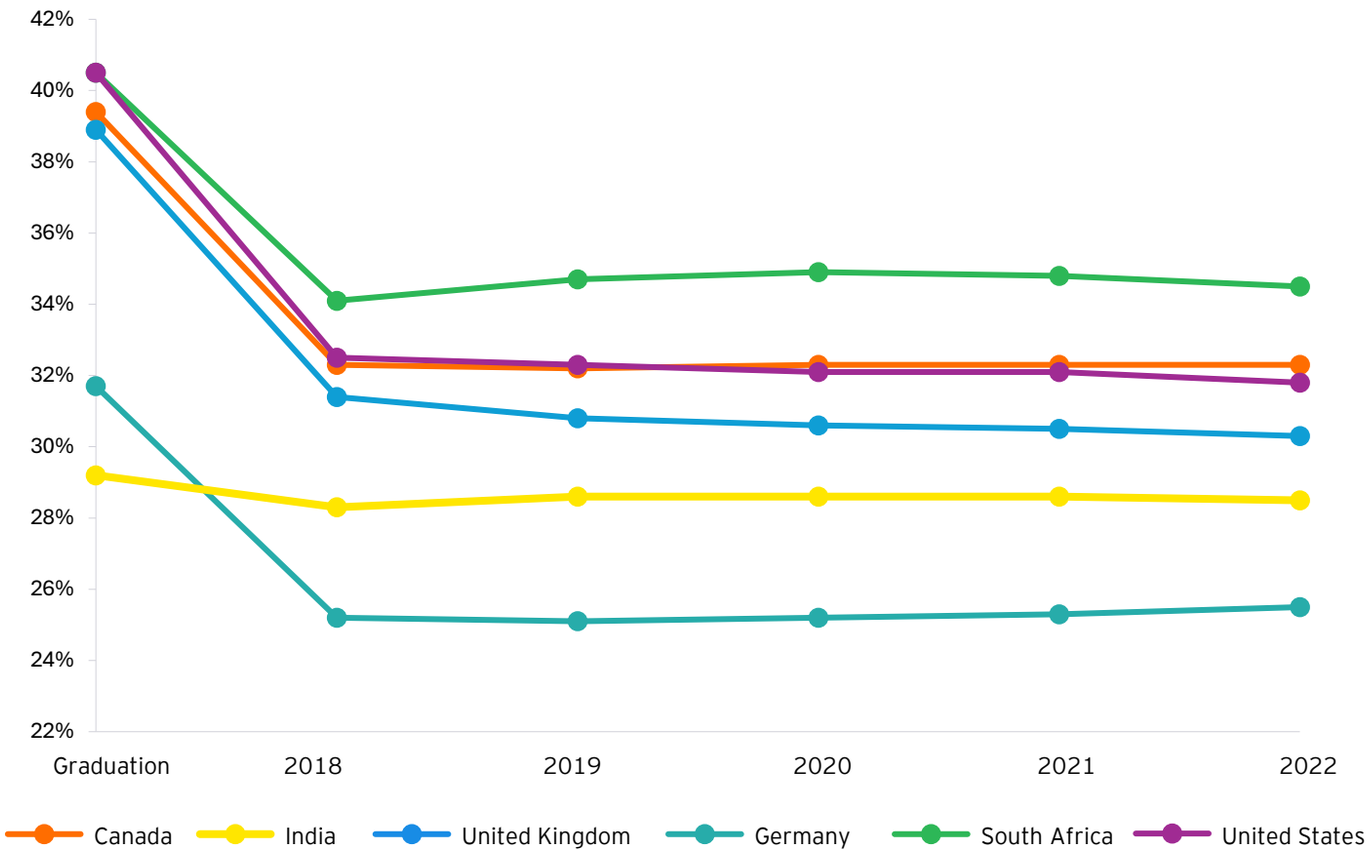
The shift from academics to workforce is an inflection point, yet it is here that the number of women in STEM workforce falls sharply. The gender gap is the widest between finishing a degree and working for a year — a pattern that has been noticed with the past four cohorts of graduates.

The 'leaky pipeline' sees many skilled women leave STEM careers. The reasons? Challenges with bias at work, inequitable opportunities, work-life balance, societal expectations, and professional hurdles often present roadblocks and disrupt career progression and cause a noticeable decline, especially in higher positions.

Initial year versus subsequent years

The attrition of women in STEM is most acute between graduation and the first year thereafter, with over half of all STEM graduates leaving the field during this period. The decline in subsequent years is less marked, often in single digits, and occasionally, positive trends indicate a return to STEM careers. A combination of domestic and caregiving burdens, along with workplace-related challenges like biases and stereotypes, are among the factors behind this huge drop.

Comparison: Female representation drop-off after graduation in STEM (2017 batch)



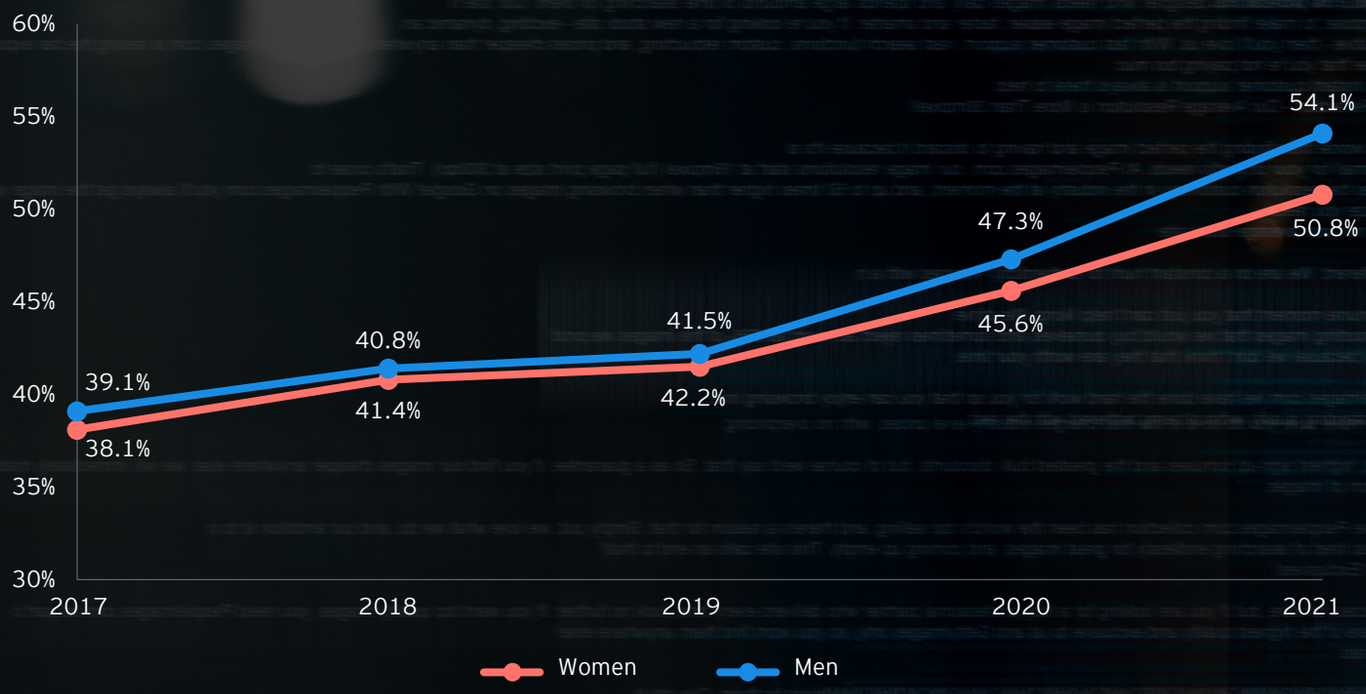
Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

India clearly bucks the trend with minimal drop-off in the initial year, boasting the second-highest retention of women in STEM between graduation and one year later for the 2017 cohort. While this chart looks at the 2017 graduation cohort, similar patterns emerge for more recent cohorts as well[20].

Despite a yearly dip in the number of women from each STEM graduating class, the overall trend is positive. Over time, more women are entering STEM fields than are leaving them. This steady progress is one of the primary reasons for the gradual increase in the presence of women in STEM each year.

20. LinkedIn Economic Graph report, 'International gender representation in STEM employment and skills – September 2023'

India: Share of STEM graduates working in STEM in the first five years after graduation



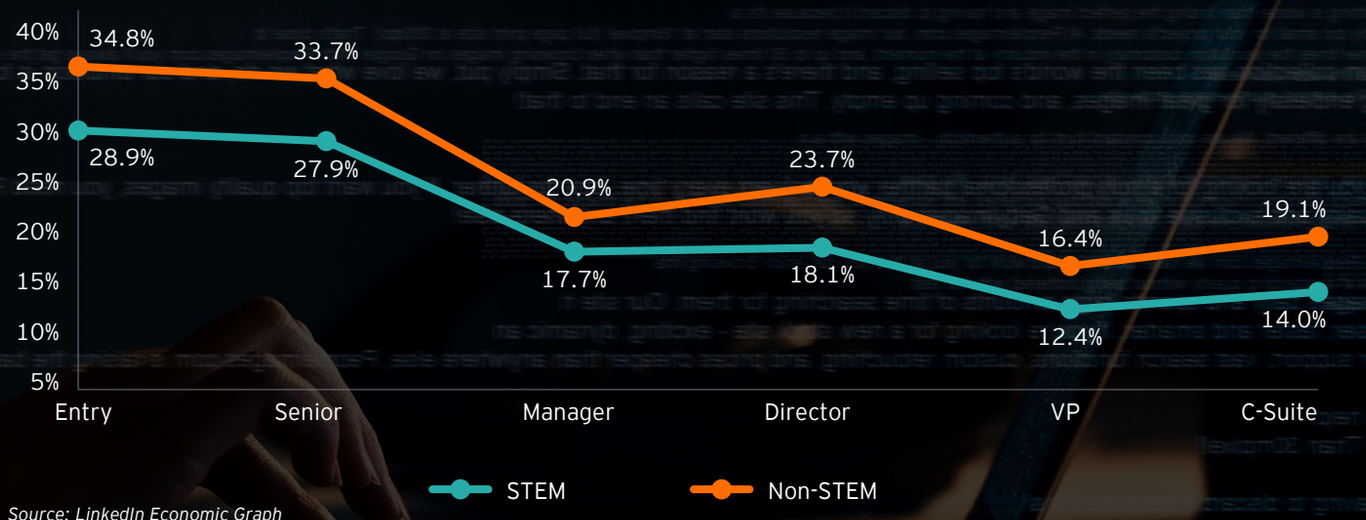
Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

Representation across various levels of seniority and leadership

Two consistent patterns emerge across countries. First, women's representation in STEM declines at higher levels of seniority. For example, in India (2023), women comprised 28.9% of entry-level STEM employees, but this figure dropped to 18.1% at the Director level and further plummeted to 12.4% and 14% at VP and in C-level positions, respectively[21].

Second, women hold more leadership positions in non-STEM areas compared to STEM sectors across all levels of seniority. At the entry-level, women accounted for 34.8% of the workforce. However, as the ranks progress to higher leadership positions such as vice-president and Chief Executive Officer, the percentage of women decreased to 16.4% and 19.1%, respectively.

India: Representation of women at various career stages (2023)



Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

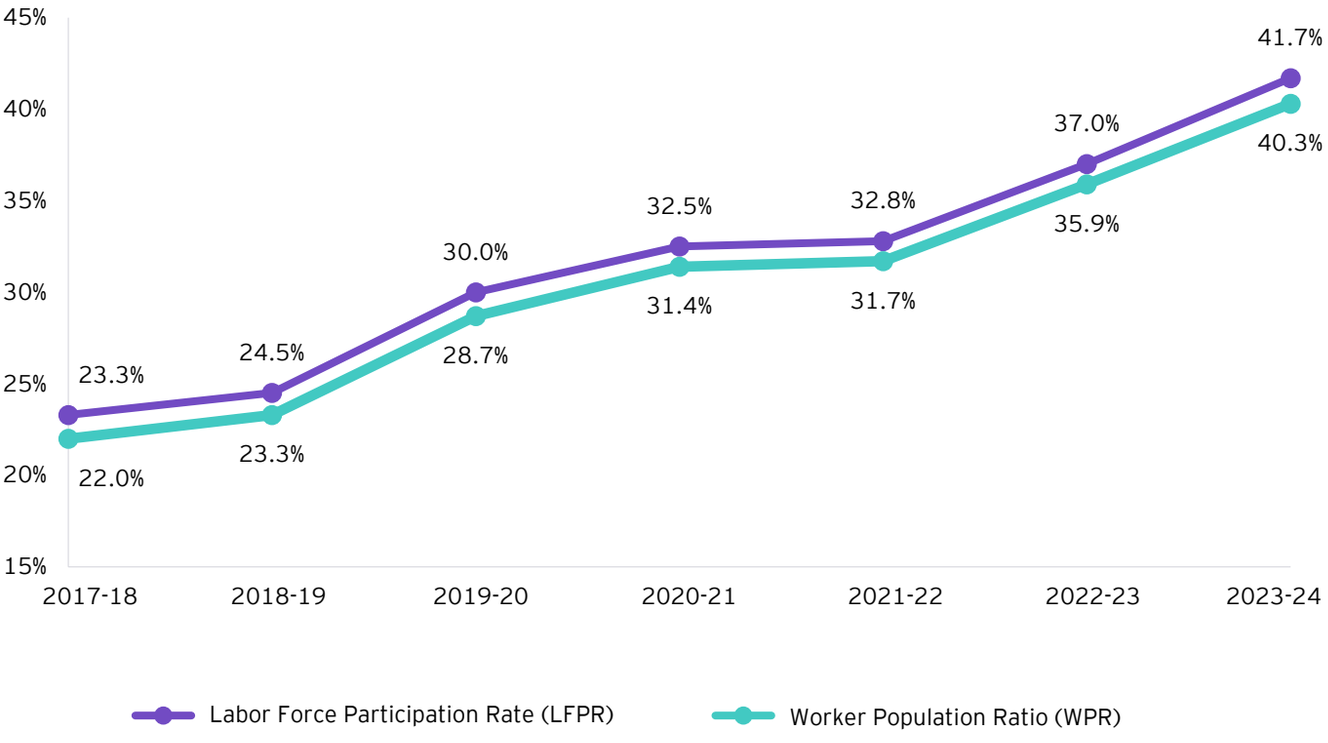
21. LinkedIn Economic Graph report, 'International gender representation in STEM employment and skills - September 2023'

4

Sector-wise women representation in STEM workforce

As of 2024 LinkedIn dataset, women represented 41.2%[22] of the overall workforce (Global Gender Gap Report 2025). While India observed an increase in women's labor force participation, rising from 32.8% in 2021-22[23] to 41.7% in 2023-24 as reported by the most recent Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS), it still fell short of the worldwide average.

India: Female labour force participation rates (%, age: 15 years and above)



Source: Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS)

The India Decoding Jobs report for CII and digital recruitment platform Taggd mentions a robust hiring momentum across industries in India, projecting an overall hiring intent of 10% for FY26[24]. The forecast for workforce diversity in 2025 indicates a promising trend, with the proportion of women in the workforce expected to rise to 30%, and the share of men predicted to decrease to 70%.

This is a significant improvement from the 2021 diversity ratio of 25% women to 75% men. The corrective trend is also an indicator of the proactive approach by corporations in furthering greater gender inclusivity and diversity within the organizational framework.

22. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2025.pdf
23. https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/pib1908961.pdf, Press Information Bureau
24. IDJ_Annual_Report_2025 (Digital) 1 (1).pdf

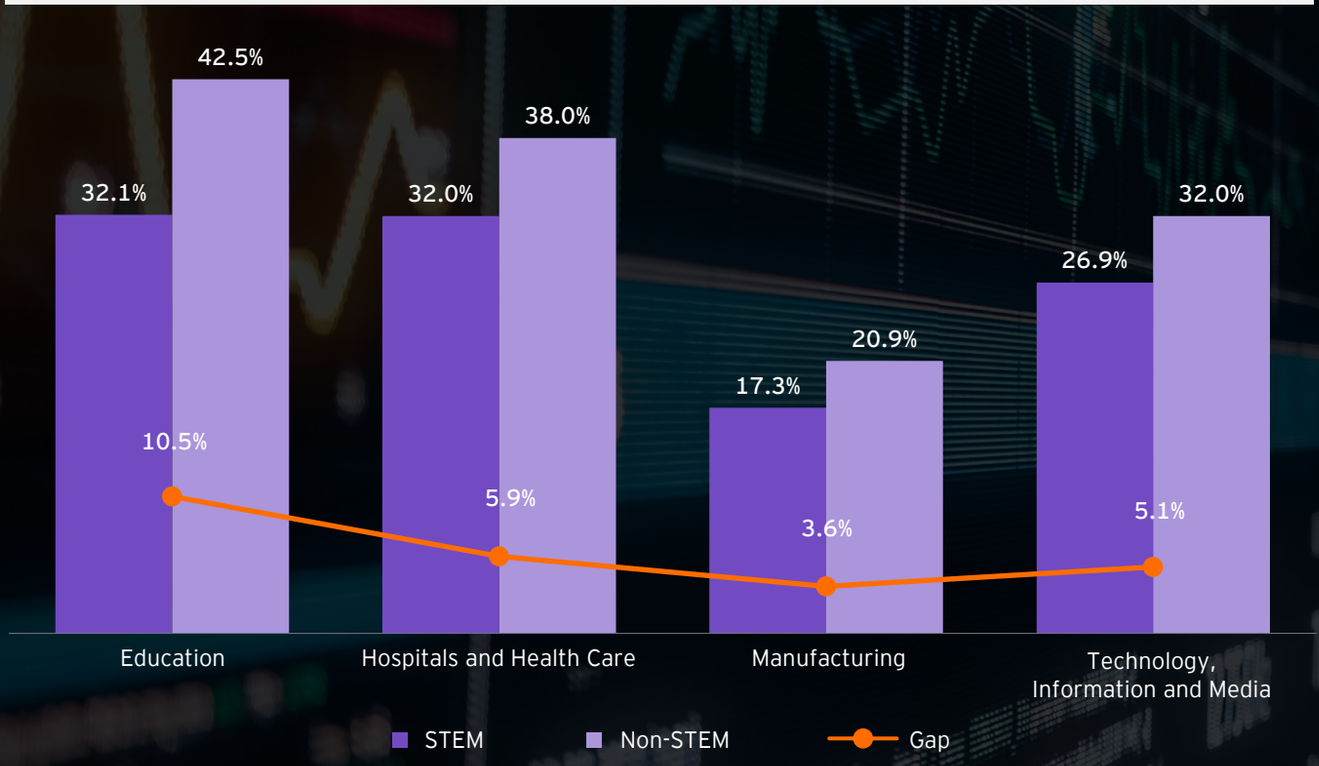
India: 2024 Gender diversity by sector

Sector	Number of people employed in the sector (in million)	Female	Male
Automotive (Electric Vehicle sector)	19.0	13%*	87%
Heavy Manufacturing and Engineering	35.6	3%	97%
Technology and IT	5.6	36%	64%
Renewable energy	1.0	32%	68%
Aviation	0.25	5.5%	94.5%
Chemicals	2.0	33.2%	66.8%

Source: India Decoding Jobs report 2025
**average of 11%-15% women workforce in Automotive (Electric Vehicle sector)*

Across various industries, the gender gap in STEM remains a consistent issue worldwide. While some sectors, like Technology, Information, and Media, have a higher percentage of STEM roles compared to Manufacturing, all sectors include STEM jobs. Notably, even in fields predominantly staffed with female workforce, such as Healthcare and Education, there is a lower proportion of women in STEM roles compared to non-STEM roles. This emphasizes the importance of targeted efforts to bridge gender disparities in STEM across all sectors.

India: STEM representation by Industry



Source: LinkedIn Talent Insights analysis

Despite these instances of underrepresentation and the challenges that women face, the future looks promising. A report from NTT Data indicates that 62% of employers hired more women in STEM in the fiscal year 2023-24 compared to fiscal year 2022-23, and 38% increased their female STEM representation by up to 20%[25]. Additionally, 58% of employers believed that gender diversity can enhance revenue growth and talent acquisition. Notably, 31% of employers were considering programs to attract women re-entering the workforce, which could improve gender diversity.

Sectors such as Retail/E-commerce, Healthcare and Pharma, and IT/ITeS showed a significant uptick in the hiring of STEM-qualified women in the fiscal year 2023-24.

25. US-Press-Release_Bridging-the-Skills-Gap_Towards-an-Equal-Workplace_NTTDATA_NLBServices.pdf

5

Upskilling to bridge the skill gap in STEM workforce

Within the Indian context, the job market's complexity reflects its distinctive cultural values. A prevalent belief in India is that education, especially advanced education, is a lifelong commitment with the potential to elevate one's economic and social status. Indians are known to invest in education for personal growth, higher income for status and the betterment of their families.

The World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report forecasts a significant shift in the job market over the next five years, with about 22% of existing roles expected to change[26]. This shift could result in 92 million jobs vanishing and 172 million new ones created, largely due to the progression of advanced technologies like AI. In line with this, confidence in job retention has increased by 11 percentage points to 73% in the fiscal year 2026, up from 62% the previous year (FY2025). Among entry-level professionals, the confidence is even lower, with only 36% feeling confident about retaining their jobs, reflecting concerns that are consistent with global industry trends[27].

Continuous upskilling is the key to continue staying relevant in this dynamic market. Coursera noted a marked improvement in the share of enrollment in STEM courses, growing from 33% in 2023[28] to 34% in 2025. Notably, enrollments in generative AI (GenAI) courses surged by 195% in 2025 (YoY), emphasizing the urgency to keep up with some of the fastest-growing and highest-paid jobs, such as computer science and engineering.

Popular STEM subjects among women include Computer Programming, Web Development, Data Analysis, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Machine Learning (ML), Cybersecurity, and User Experience (UX) Design.

Sector-wise skills in demand

Automotive	Battery Technology, Powered Electronics Engineering, Electric Vehicle Motor Design and Integration, Software Development, Data Analytics, Cybersecurity
Pharmaceuticals	Health Informatics, Cybersecurity, Digital Health Solutions, Health Data Analytics, Machine Learning, and Telemedicine
Heavy Engineering and Manufacturing	Battery Technology, Data analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Power Electronics, Motor Design, Data Science, Internet of Things (IoT)
Technology and IT	Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Data Science, Application Developers, Software Engineering, Full-stack Developers, Blockchain
Renewable Energy	Engineering, Data Science, Data Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Automation
Aviation	Machine Learning, Cloud Operations, Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence
Chemicals	Industrial Automation, Robotics, Internet of Things (IoT), R&D Professionals, Process Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Digital Technologies, Data Analytics, Data Science, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning

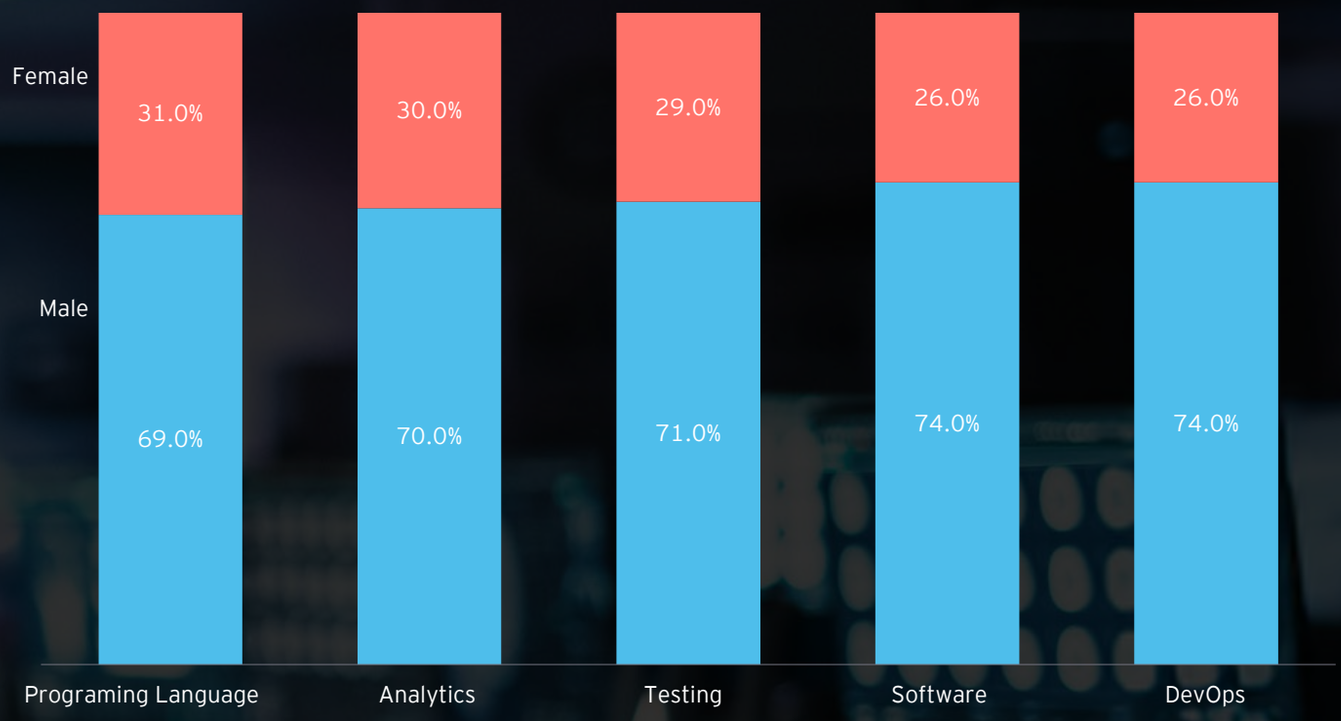
Source: India Decoding Jobs Report 2025

26. WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf
27. https://www.mygreatlearning.com/blog/upskilling-trends-report-2025-26/
28. Global Skills Report 2025 | Coursera

Key skills among software and IT professionals

Identifying and showcasing skills are crucial for career progression and job transitions, with employers using them to select candidates and professionals using them to improve productivity and career growth. Technology skills, ranging from industry-specific to advanced technical skills like AI, can highlight gender disparities in the workforce. An analysis by LinkedIn indicates that, in all the countries studied, women are less likely to mention technology skills on their profiles compared to men. A closer look at the skills listed by technology professionals in India reinforces this significant gender gap across different technology fields.

India: Common skills of technology professionals on LinkedIn (2024)



Source: LinkedIn Talent Insights analysis

6

Challenges women face in STEM careers in India

Women in STEM in India face several challenges, including gender bias, unequal pay, and limited opportunities for advancement. Social expectations and the pressure to balance family responsibilities with professional growth also contribute to the attrition of women from STEM careers. However, there are other factors too.

In 2023, a study by IBM revealed that almost half of women are willing to accept a 10% pay cut for jobs that offer flexible work schedules, supportive management, better daycare or care facilities for children or meaningful work.

Educational system gaps

These prevent more women from entering STEM fields. Gender equality discussions are not yet a standard part of school education in a traditionally male-dominated society. Also, basic literacy and numeracy issues, along with inadequate resources, hinder the development of a STEM-focused mindset in children.

Cost of STEM education

The financial investment required for STEM education can be prohibitive. For example, due to the high fees of coaching centers along with tuition costs of higher education in STEM fields, many families assess whether the eventual career opportunities and salary justify the upfront financial commitment.

Social norms

Cultural practices such as focus on marriage and restrictions during adolescence deter women from pursuing STEM. Inadequate public transportation and safety issues can also result in women opting out of opportunities, particularly educational facilities like tutoring centers are not easily accessible from their homes.

Domestic work burden

Despite the overall increase in women's workforce participation, the burden of care work and domestic work lies largely with women. According to a survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Management (IIM)-Ahmedabad, women in India spend an average of 7.2 hours of their daily time on unpaid domestic work compared to 2.8 hours spent by men, which can have a direct bearing on their ability to participate in paid work[29].

Motherhood penalty

In India, marriage and childbirth are seen as societal duties, and these events can often mark the end of a woman's career. The break taken for childbirth, coupled with insufficient support from family and spouses, can make it difficult for women to return to the demanding STEM sector.

Workplace and career advancement challenges

Women in STEM roles often go unrecognized as they feel undervalued and face unsupportive management, due to which they can miss out on key opportunities. Male-dominated workplace cultures and unfair promotion practices can further hinder women's career advancement, creating a significant obstacle to their retention and progress in STEM roles.

29. Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, 'A Matter of Time – April 2023'; https://www.iima.ac.in/sites/default/files/2023-05/A%20MATTER%20OF%20TIME.pdf

7

Government initiatives to promote STEM education for women

NEP 2020 of India marked a significant shift in STEM education, advocating for a holistic, interdisciplinary approach that combines STEM with the arts and humanities. The policy aims to alleviate the burden of excessive content and to build a solid foundation in STEM concepts and analytical skills.

To further support women in STEM, the Indian government and various organizations have introduced initiatives like 'Vigyan Jyoti' and 'KIRAN', which offer scholarships, mentorship, and networking opportunities to women, encouraging their advancement in these fields.

Stage of lifecycle	Initiative	Details and impact
Primary to high school	Vigyan Jyoti	Vigyan Jyoti[30], a program introduced in 2019-20, is aimed at encouraging girls from rural areas to pursue STEM education and careers. It provides support and financial aid to help close the STEM gender gap and empower women in science. The Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS), under MHRD, implements the program through its network through 250 Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, to cater for girls from JNVs, Kendriya Vidyalayas, government schools, Army Schools of small cities and rural areas. Since its inception, the program has benefitted over 50,000 girls from 250 districts across 34 states/UTs[31]. The initiative serves as a feeder to increase the gender parity in STEM at successive levels (UG, PG, PhD, Post Doctoral).
Undergraduate to postgraduate	Pragati Scholarship	The Pragati Scholarship[32] introduced in 2014-15, encourages female students from economically weaker sections of society to pursue technical degree programs such as engineering, technology, architecture, and pharmacy courses. Under this scholarship program, a total of 10,000 scholarships (5,000 for diploma and 5,000 for degree) are disbursed every year. An amount of INR50,000 per annum is given to the scholarship winners[33].
	Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI)	GATI[34] aims to develop an indigenous Charter for Gender Equity in STEMM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics & Medicine) and encourage educational institutions to adopt gender-sensitive policies and practices for women enrolled in STEM courses and create a supportive and inclusive environment. Thirty institutions completed a DST-British Council pilot, receiving self-assessment training. By 31 January 2023, 22 reports were submitted, and the institutions have been recognized post-assessment.
PhD and Post-doctoral research	Indo-US Fellowship for Women in STEM	A fellowship launched in 2000, in collaboration with the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum (IUSSTF)[35] to provide international exposure and opportunities to Indian women scientists and technologists by participating in international collaborative research in STEMM in premier US institutions. Through this program, women fellows can enhance their research capacities and capabilities and get an exposure to the US scientific community and their contemporary research, means and methodologies. Since its inception, the program has benefited over 670 women across 15 programs[36].

30. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India, Vigyan Jyoti; https://vigyanjyoti.dst.gov.in/
31. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India; https://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi30Krdyo2JAxXYyTgGHeSgEbQQFnoECA8QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fonlinedst.gov.in%2FDocuments%2FProjectProposalFormat%2FSchemeId_2338_EOI_ImpactAssessment_Final.docx&usg=AOvVaw3RrAcv-lHfo7sXN51ucleA&opi=89978449
32. All India Council For Technical Education (AICTE), Pragati Scholarship; https://www.aicte-india.org/schemes/students-development-schemes/Pragati/General-Instructions
33. Ministry of Education; https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1779333
34. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India, GATI; https://dst.gov.in/sites/default/files/Gati%20detailed%20advertisement_0.pdf
35. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India, Indo-US Science and Technology Forum (IUSSTF); https://www.indiascienceandtechnology.gov.in/programme-schemes/women-schemes/indo-us-fellowship-women-stemm
36. Indo-U.S. Science and Technology Forum (IUSSTF); https://dashboard.iusstf.org/visitations-and-fellowships

Stage of lifecycle	Initiative	Details and impact
	SERB Power	Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB)[37] is a national funding agency that supports R&D through policy interventions and extramural funding for basic research in science and engineering. The SERB - POWER program[38] addresses gender disparities in research funding by promoting diversity and equal opportunities for women in Indian academia and R&D. It offers POWER fellowships and research grants, with 240 new proposals and an expenditure of INR49.18 crore sanctioned in 2022-23. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) was created under the ANRF 2023 Act, incorporating the previously established Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) from 2008.
	Consolidation of University Research for Innovation and Excellence (CURIE)	The CURIE initiative, launched in 2008-09, aims to improve R&D infrastructure in India's women's universities and colleges, by developing research infrastructure and establishing state-of-the-art research facilities in women universities and PG colleges fostering world-class female scientists in basic and applied sciences. It provides resources to enhance research facilities, supports cutting-edge research by women, and promotes gender equality in STEM. The CURIE program has supported over 42 women PG colleges and 11 women universities to establish state-of-the-art research facilities[39].
Early to mid-career	Women Scientists Scheme	The Women Scientists Scheme[40], launched in 2002-03, aims to achieve gender parity in science and technology by providing career opportunities for women scientists, particularly those with career breaks, to engage in research and development. It has three components: WOS-A for research in sciences and engineering, WOS-B for S&T projects with societal benefits, and WOS-C for training in intellectual property rights management. Between 2016-20, approximately 2200 women scientists aged 27 to 57 have benefited from the scheme under the KIRAN initiative, receiving fellowships to resume higher education in Science and Technology after career breaks.
Mid to senior career	Biotechnology Career Advancement and Re-orientation Programme (BioCARe)	The BioCARe Programme[41], launched in 2011 by India's Department of Biotechnology, aims to boost women scientists' involvement in biotechnology research. It targets the career development of women up to 55 years of age, providing their first extramural research funding. The initiative helps women establish themselves in science, re-enter the field, and advance in science and technology careers. Under the programme, five calls have been made, supporting 364 women in life sciences. Participants have published around 400 papers and filed 11 patents.
Throughout career	I-STEM	The Indian Science, Technology, and Engineering facilities Map (I-STEM)[42], launched in 2020, is an interactive web portal designed to accelerate scientific progress, by bringing together information on publicly funded R&D equipment and facilities across various institutions throughout the country. The Women in Engineering, Science, and Technology (WEST) initiative within I-STEM provides a dedicated space for women to engage in research and pursue careers across various R&D roles, from equipment operation to design and entrepreneurship. The portal currently has consolidated information on more than 27,000 equipment across 3,000-plus institutes and has over 35,000 users.

37. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India, Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB); https://serb.gov.in/
38. SERB - Home: Anusandhan National Research Foundation, Department of Science & Technology, Government of India
39. Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt of India; https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/262/AU2210.pdf?source=pqars
40. https://dst.gov.in/pressrelease/kiran-scheme-dst-lights-st-paths-thousands-women-scientists
41. https://dbtindia.gov.in/biotechnology-career-advancement-and-re-orientation-biocare-programmes
42. Indian Science, Technology, and Engineering facilities Map (I-STEM); I-STEM: Your Hub for Research Facilities in India

8

Corporate initiatives in development of women in STEM

In India's corporate sector, there is a growing commitment to furthering the advancement of women in STEM. Firms are not just embracing strategies that promote a diverse and inclusive workforce but are also crafting flexible work environments and initiating mentorship programs. Such efforts are crucial in supporting the professional advancement of women within STEM careers.

- At EY, the firm has launched several impactful initiatives, including the Disha Scholarship Program and the EY STEM app. Since its inception in 2007, the Disha Scholarship Program has been dedicated to transforming the lives of underprivileged yet meritorious children by fostering their holistic development. To date, the program has supported over 10,000 graduates, with an additional 3,000 students currently enrolled—over 65% of whom are girls. The program provides comprehensive support through financial scholarships, career guidance, skill development, and a range of other enriching opportunities.
- The EY STEM app was launched under the Global Women in Technology (WIT) leaders in 2019 in India (Delhi NCR) and the US (Atlanta and Seattle) to help accelerate gender parity in the technology space. This interactive mobile application is designed to guide and support young girls in choosing STEM careers, aiming to establish a more balanced future in these fields. The app targets girls between the ages of 13 and 18 and has been successfully rolled out in 20 states in India, reaching over 64,000 students. Offered by the EY Foundation at no cost, the app provides a secure learning environment free from external distractions such as links or ads. The content for the app is sourced from globally recognized institutions including NASA, the World Economic Forum (WEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), EY Global, and universities like UC Berkeley and Stanford.

Other notable corporations in India are also spearheading initiatives:

- IBM's "STEM for Girls" program[43], initiated in 2019, aims to improve educational and career paths for girls in state-run high schools. The vision is to prepare over 200,000 high school girls in India, through a three-year program, to explore and realize their potential in STEM careers. IBM has partnered with Quest Alliance and the American Indian Foundation Trust to bring this program to select government schools in various cities. Over the past two years, IBM has reached over 330,000 students across 12 states in India.
- Hitachi Energy India's Women in Technology program[44], in collaboration with the Shikshana Foundation, provides financial aid, training, mentorship, and resources to women aspiring to be engineers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This initiative has positively affected over 200 women.
- Qualcomm's Aqriti™ Program[45], launched in 2017, focuses on promoting STEM education among girls from less privileged communities. The program works to improve access to STEM education and challenge societal views on gender equality through various community outreach efforts. In partnership with United Way of Hyderabad and the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, Aqriti has impacted more than 69,000 children and over 700 teachers across 400 schools in cities like Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Chennai.
- L&T's 'Engineering Futures' initiative[46], started in 2019, is dedicated to helping children from underserved communities develop the necessary skills and knowledge for a future shaped by technology. The program also aims to foster creativity and innovation. So far, 'Engineering Futures' has reached 38,589 children in 205 schools.
- Tata Consultancy Services, Tata Motors, and Tata Steel are working together to promote STEM education among children. TCS launched 'Go Innovate Together' (GoIT)[47], a digital innovation and career readiness initiative aimed at engaging students from diverse backgrounds, especially marginalized communities. Initially launched in North America, GoIT has expanded to 48 countries, including India, reaching over 300,000 students and creating more than 26,000 digital innovation prototypes. Notably, 49% of participants were girls, with 75% from marginalized groups.

43. IBM, 'STEM for Girls: Shaping women's education and careers in India'; IBM India/South Asia Blog
44. 'Hitachi Energy India is empowering women through STEM education'; https://www.hitachienergy.com/in/en/news-and-events/features/2023/06/hitachi-energy-india-is-empowering-women-through-stem-education
45. 2024-qualcomm-corporate-responsibility-report.pdf
46. https://www.lntsustainability.com/people/jyoti
47. Tata; https://www.tata.com/newsroom/community/stem-young-minds-tata

- In 2023, Infosys Foundation committed over INR100 crore to launch the 'STEM Stars'[48] scholarship program, aimed at empowering underprivileged girl students. The program will benefit over 2,000 girls from economically weaker backgrounds across India, providing financial support for four years as they pursue undergraduate and postgraduate STEM courses at reputed colleges.
- Dr. Reddy's Foundation, through its Sashakt[49] initiative, provides scholarships and mentorship to talented young women from underprivileged backgrounds pursuing STEM careers. Launched in 2019, the initiative initially supported 20 girls pursuing B.Sc degrees. The program covers tuition and living expenses for B.Tech and MBBS courses. In 2022, "Junior Sashakt" had been introduced for high school students. Scholars, mentored by female scientists, have gained admission to top institutions like Oxford and IIT, showcasing the program's transformative impact.
- Honeywell and Avasara launched the Centre for Advancing Girls in Science[50] in 2019 to promote science learning through hands-on experiences for underprivileged students from Indian government schools. The program, targeting girls aged 11-18, focuses on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It aims to benefit 500 Avasara students and 12,000 students from government and low-budget schools.
- The Kotak Girls Scholarship[51] is a corporate social responsibility effort by the Kotak Mahindra Group and the Kotak Education Foundation, that offers financial aid to qualified female students from low-income families who are pursuing full-time undergraduate professional degrees including Engineering, Medical Sciences (MBBS, BDS), Integrated Law (LLB), Pharmacy (B.Pharm), Nursing (B.Sc.), and Integrated Science (BS-MS/BS-Research) at recognized institutions like Institute for Scientific and Engineering Research (ISER) and IISc Bengaluru, as well as other professional fields such as Design and Architecture institutes accredited by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) or the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF).
- Mahindra Group started Project Nanhi Kali[52] in 1996, an educational support initiative for girls, jointly managed by the K.C. Mahindra Education Trust and the Naandi Foundation. It aims to empower underprivileged girls in India by providing them access to quality education, currently focusing on supporting grades 6 to 10. It was founded to combat challenges like low female literacy rates, high dropout rates, child marriage, and child labor. As of 2024-25, the project has supported over 870,000 girls in 7 states in India.

To recognize and further corporate efforts towards STEM education, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) introduced the CII Awards towards Excellence for Women in STEM in 2024[53]. This initiative is committed to promoting and increasing the presence of women in STEM in both industry and academic institutions. The awards aim to recognize and celebrate organizations and institutes that have shown outstanding commitment to gender diversity in STEM. The goal is to inspire other entities to emulate these practices, creating an environment where women in STEM are not just recognized but are actively encouraged and promoted. The first edition of these awards is expected to be a catalyst for change, motivating organizations and institutions to contribute actively to building an equitable and diverse STEM landscape.

48. Infosys, Infosys Foundation Commits over INR 100 crore to Launch a STEM Scholarship Program to Empower Aspiring Girl Students; https://www.infosys.com/newsroom/press-releases/2023/launch-stem-scholarship-program.html
49. https://drreddysfoundation.org/annual-report-2024-25/
50. Honeywell and Avasara Collaborates for STEM Program for Girls; https://forceindia.net/honeywell-avasara-collaborates-stem-program-girls/
51. Kotak Girls Scholarship ; Kotak Kanya Scholarship | Scholarships for women
52. Donate, Sponsor, Support Girl Child Education, NGO for Education of Girls in India | Nanhi Kali
53. Confederation OF Indian Industry (CII), 'Empowering Women in STEM: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Futures'; https://ciiblog.in/empowering-women-in-stem-breaking-barriers-and-shaping-futures/

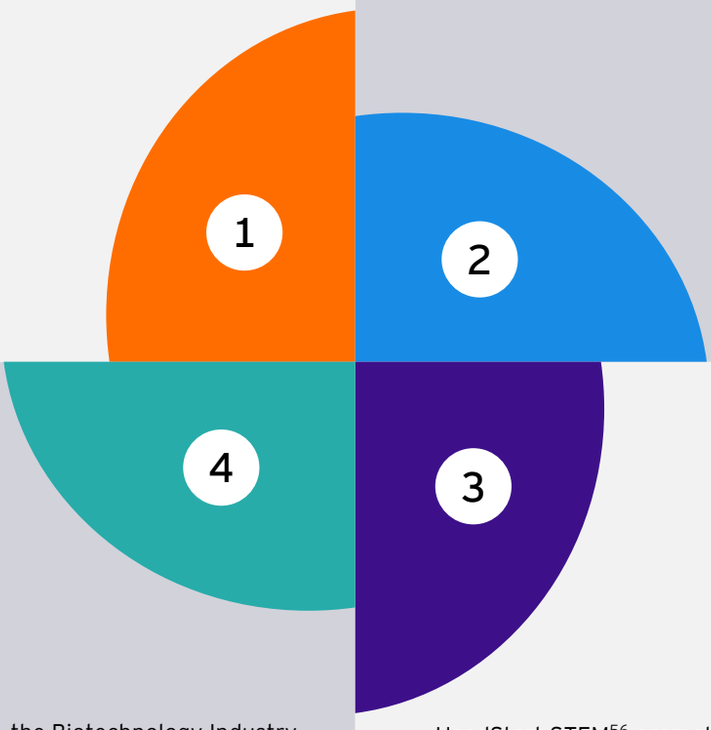
9

Initiatives by private institutions and NGOs

Private institutions and NGOs also play a pivotal role in advancing STEM education in India by developing infrastructure, promoting innovative learning methods, focusing on marginalized groups, and fostering partnerships with various stakeholders.

India STEM Foundation (ISF)[54] is a non-profit organization committed to advancing STEM education in India. It offers several initiatives targeted specifically at girls. The foundation's programs, such as Robo Siksha Kendra, Gyanoday, Anusikshan, and Sanrachna, are tailored to ignite curiosity and enhance critical thinking, with a commitment to fostering a lasting interest in STEM subjects. ISF's efforts have reached over 500,000 students and teachers, impacted more than 20,000 schools, and delivered more than 6 million hours of STEM education.

The British Council provides Women in STEM[55] scholarships annually, from South Asia (including India), Americas, East Asia and Wider Europe. These scholarships enable women to pursue Master's degrees and Early Academic Fellowships in fields like Data Science, Environmental Science, Engineering, Public Health, Information Technology, Renewable Energy and Energy Management, and Project Management at select UK universities partnered with the British Council.



Grand Challenges India, the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), and WomenLift Health launched a Women Leadership in STEM (WLS) program to empower and elevate Indian women in STEM. Targeting women with 10–25 years of experience from recognized STEM institutions, the program[57] includes residential workshops with the Center for Creative Leadership and aims to equip participants with leadership tools, foster a supportive network, and enhance their impact and visibility. The inaugural event in 2024 selected a cohort of 20 women scientists from public and private research institutions across India.

HeadStart STEM[56] promotes STEM education, especially for girls, in under-resourced government and low-income schools across urban and rural areas. It provides essential infrastructure, resources, and training, to fosters scientific thinking and an enabling environment for STEM. The program has impacted 31,811 students in 69 schools to date.

54. India STEM Foundation; https://indiastemfoundation.org/about-us/
55. https://www.britishcouncil.in/study-uk/scholarships/womeninstem-scholarships
56. https://www.unitedwaymumbai.org/headstartstem
57. https://www.womenlifthealth.org/press-release/inaugural-women-leadership-in-stem-program-launch/

10

Recommendations

With an increasing number of women pursuing STEM education at all levels, the STEM landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, signaling a future where their presence is the norm. This shift is not only a triumph for gender equality but also a strategic imperative for the global economy.

According to the World Economic Forum, the world could face a shortage of over 85 million skilled workers by 2030, predominantly in technology and engineering sectors. This gap poses a threat of a US$8.5 trillion loss in global GDP over the next decade [58].

Addressing this shortage requires tapping into the full potential of the skilled female labor force, which is crucial for a country's economic productivity, social mobility, and innovation.

Organizations across the technology industry and beyond stand to gain immensely by embracing diversity and ensuring equal opportunities. Recognizing the full potential of women in STEM is key to driving innovation, economic growth, and societal progress.

To harness the untapped potential of women in STEM, a multi-faceted approach must be adopted that includes:

Developing inclusive educational policies

Crafting educational frameworks that encourage girls to explore STEM fields, providing them with the resources and support to flourish.

Offering career support and mentorship

Creating programs that offer guidance and mentorship, helping women navigate the challenges of STEM careers and achieve their professional goals.

Celebrating women's achievements

Acknowledging the contributions of women in STEM to inspire future generations and highlight the importance of their work.

Building robust support systems

Encouraging collaboration between governments, academia, and the corporate sector to establish support systems that cater to the needs of women in STEM.

Combating unconscious bias

Implementing training to address and reduce unconscious bias within STEM education and workplaces.

Enabling financial support / scholarships

Implementing and broadening access to scholarships, grants, and financial aid will enable more women to pursue and successfully complete their education in STEM fields.

58. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/global-talent-pool-new-era-of-tech-skilled-employees/

Conclusion

The photograph of the pioneering women at IISc serves as a reminder of the progress made and the potential that lies ahead. It is a call to action for continued commitment and collaboration across government, academia, and industry, to ensure that the ascent of Indian women in STEM continues, shaping a future where diversity and innovation thrive together. As we look to the future, the full participation of women in STEM is not just a matter of equity but also a cornerstone for the nation's development.

The increase in women entering STEM is a beacon of change, signaling a future where gender-parity is the norm. With the potential shortage of skilled workers on the horizon, the full participation of women in STEM becomes not just a gender issue but an economic necessity. Leveraging the skills of the female workforce is pivotal for innovation and economic success.

By breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes, we move closer to achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 but also the broader goals that intersect with STEM. Embracing diversity and equal opportunities is more than an ethical choice—it is a strategic advantage that can propel organizations and societies forward.

As we look to the future, the narrative is clear: women in STEM are an invaluable asset. There is a compelling need to cultivate an environment where their talents are nurtured, their achievements celebrated, and their potential fully realized. In doing so, we pave the way for a world that is richer in knowledge, more innovative in solutions, and more equitable in opportunities—a world where everyone can thrive.

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