



She is no Sati or Durga: Indian woman unveiled

CNN-IBN



TWO OF A KIND: The survey finds Indian women reject some stereotypes while adhering to others.

There are two dominant images of the modern Indian woman. The first image is that of the meek *sati-savitri*, an eternal victim who is yet to see the light of modern values. She may have donned modern clothes and started living in metropolis, yet she remains her conservative self, steeped in values of a male-dominated society. The other image is that of *Durga*, the irrepressible rebel, who cannot be contained or tamed. Radicals and feminists often draw upon this imagery to script a story of the hidden modernity of Indian women. The tyranny of these two images often prevents us from listening to the voice of the modern Indian woman.

The findings of the CNN-IBN-CSDS-*Indian Express* survey of Indian women invite us to question both these images. To be sure, the survey has over-sampled urban women (56 per cent as compared to the national average of 28 per cent).

Yet it is not easy to fit in some of the findings with the *sati-savitri* image. Both urban and rural women reject some of the male-centric notions of gender roles:

- There is an overwhelming support cutting across rural-urban and religious divide that parental property should be divided equally among daughters and sons. This sentiment is strongest among graduate, single women living in the metros. But even the younger generation of rural women clearly favour this.
- There is a near consensus among women that their role should not be restricted to staying at home and looking after the family, as 77 of the urban and 69 of the rural support the proposition that there is nothing wrong in women going out and working. It is not just that practically every young graduate woman favours this idea. A majority of old and non-literate women too endorse the idea of working women.
- Again, cutting across the rural-urban and class divide, our respondents reject the belief that too much education is not good for women. Even the uneducated do not favour this proposition.
- If you thought all these opinions are about politically-correct subject, consider this: when asked to react to a proposition that there is nothing wrong for women to have sexual desires, the verdict is an abashed 3:1 in favour. The ratio is of course higher among the young metropolitan women, but no section displays a dominance of Victorian prudishness. An incipient sexual revolution? The beginning of a much-delayed transition from a 'traditional' and 'conservative' mindset to a modern outlook?

Across sections women think of themselves as more sensitive than men

Women are more sensitive than men...	Yes	No	No Opinion
All women	77	14	9

Note: All figures in percent.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Women are more sensitive than men'?"

But not everyone thinks that men are more intelligent than women

Men are more intelligent...	Yes	No
All women	46	45
Graduates	28	68

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Men are more intelligent than women?'"

The findings of the survey do not support this reading either. A rejection of male-centric views on things that fall within their experience does not lead to a rejection of the male-female stereotypes:

-- The stereotype that men are generally more intelligent than women is accepted by a large number of our respondents, a shade more than those who reject it. Of course, the well-educated strongly reject this stereotype but this rejection does not have the force across various classes as in the case of rejection of gender roles.

-- Women as of course happy to embrace the more convenient stereotypes that they are more sensitive than men and that men tend to be disloyal. The image of a sensitive woman is prevalent across all sections of women and is strongest among young single women. The stereotype that men cannot be trusted as they are generally disloyal is also stronger among single women; married women tend to be a shade more generous.

-- Even though majority of them disagree with the idea of only men taking important family decisions two out of five women seem to be fine with the idea.

Nor does the rejection of gender roles lead the Indian women to question institutions such as marriage, family, caste and community.

-- If men and women are incompatible, should they seek divorce or continue to be together? This question draws a split verdict with more women favouring retention of marriage. No doubt the proportion of those who favour divorce in such a situation is much higher than it would have been in the past, but there is generally an unwillingness to do anything that would shake the institution of marriage.

-- The idea of a live-in relationship outside marriage finds little support. The highest endorsement comes from the young graduate women, one-sixth of whom support the idea.

-- The idea of pre-marital sex too finds few takers, though the urban educated women are a little more open to this idea. It may be tempting to think of these attitudes as contradictory and to portray the modern Indian women as a split personality. Or perhaps, like their male counterparts, the modern Indian woman is trying to forge her own kind of modernity.

Women generally suspect that men are disloyal

Men are generally disloyal...	Yes	No
All women	49	36
Single	58	31
Married	48	37

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Men cannot be trusted they are generally disloyal?'"

Women generally suspect that men are disloyal

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Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Men cannot be trusted they are generally disloyal'?"

Strong rejection of gendered roles

Those who...	Agree	Disagree
Equal inheritance rights for men and women	77	18
Nothing wrong if women go out for work	74	13
Higher education not good for women	24	69
Important family decisions being taken by men	41	52

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Parental property should be equally divided between daughters and sons'; 'Too much education is not good for women' AND 'All important family decisions should be taken only by men'?" AND "People have different opinions about a woman going out to work. Some people feel that women should not work and they should only look after their families, while others say that there is nothing wrong if women go out for work. What is your opinion?"

Conservative view on inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, but some openness towards divorce

Views on marriage...	Support	Oppose
A ban on inter-caste marriage	46	38
A ban on inter-religious marriage	50	38
Its fine to divorce is a couple is basically incompatible	42	47

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements – 'Marriage of boys and girls from different castes should be banned' AND 'Marriage of boys and girls from different religions should be banned'?" AND "Please tell me which one of the two statements you agree more with – 'Once married a couple must stay together even if they are basically incompatible' OR 'If husband and wife are incompatible, there is no harm in getting a divorce'?"

Young, graduate women more open to the idea of a live-in relation

	Yes	No
There is nothing wrong in a live-in relation...		

All women	6	86
Young, graduate women	16	78

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me which one of the two statements you agree more with – 'There is nothing wrong in men and women living together in the same house without being married' OR 'Living together of a man and a women should be accepted only if they get married'?"

Overall pre-marital sex continues to be a taboo

	Yes	No
If based on mutual consent, there is nothing wrong in pre-marital sex		

...

All women	6	78
Metropolitan, young and graduate	22	71

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me which one of the two statements you agree more with – 'There is nothing wrong in sex before marriage as long as it is based on consent' OR 'Sex should take place only between a married couple'?"

But no taboo on having sexual desires

	Yes	No
Like men women can also have sexual desires...		

All women	50	16
Young metropolitan women	67	12
Young rural women	51	18

Note: All figures in percent. Rest 'no opinion'.

Question wording: "Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement 'Like men women also have sexual/bodily desires there is nothing wrong in it'?"