



## Where are the mothers?

Popularity share of HGEC female protagonists in the highly-relatable motherhood life-stage has declined significantly over last six years. But there's more to it than meets the eye

Published on February 15, 2023

By [Keerat Grewal](#), [Mitesh Thakkar](#)

---

### Summary





- From 2016-2019, female characters in the highly-relatable life-stage 'Married with Kids' have lost popularity in the HGEC category
  - However, this trend is not a reflection of this character type being less appealing or relevant, but merely an outcome of category-level changes in HGEC fiction content over the last few years
  - Using timeline data from Ormax Characters India Loves, the authors establish an evident need gap available in the HGEC fiction space, that of launching more shows where the female protagonist is a mother right at the onset
-

Hindi General Entertainment Channels (HGECs) have typically followed a life-cycle pattern for lead female protagonists in their fiction shows. The journey of these female characters starts off as a young unmarried girl, with marriage happening within a year of the show’s launch, and then moves into the motherhood stage in about 2-3 years of launch. As per **Ormax Characters India Loves (OCIL)** data, in 2016, more than half (52%) of the female character popularity share in HGECs was held by characters who were in this motherhood stage, such as Ishita (Yeh Hai Mohabbatein), Akshara (Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai), Sandhya (Diya Aur Baati Hum), Daya (Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah) and Gopi (Saath Nibhaana Saathiya).



However, in an interesting trend, the share of popularity for female characters in the ‘Married with Kids’ life-stage dropped sharply from 52% to 33% from 2016 to 2019.

**Life-Stage Popularity Share of HGEC Female Characters (%)**

				
YEAR	CHILD	UNMARRIED	MARRIED WITHOUT KIDS	MARRIED WITH KIDS
2016	4	15	29	52
2017	1	13	44	42
2018	17	9	42	32
2019	14	17	36	33

Is this significant drop reflective of a decline in audience appeal towards this life-stage?

According to our 2021 report '[And The Remote Goes To...](#)', the median age of the family member who controls the TV remote on weekdays is 35 years, and has remained largely unchanged since 2012. A 35-year-old female viewer of HGECs in India is typically married, with 1-3 kids. Hence the 'Married with Kids' life-stage of a protagonist is extremely relatable for this core TG.

It can be safely concluded that since the life-stage of the core TG has not changed, in a category that thrives on audience relevance (vis-a-vis uniqueness, for example), the drop in popularity share of the 'Married with Kids' characters cannot be attributed to a change in audience appeal.

The drop, in fact, is driven by the evolution of HGEC fiction content in the 2016-2018 period. Long-running hit shows started going off-air, but most new launches failed to gain significant audience traction beyond a few months. Lead protagonists of these new launches started losing popularity share even before they could enter the 'Married with Kids' life-stage. In other words, the shows being churned out were not enduring enough to have a shelf-life that's needed (in the conventional unmarried-married-mother trajectory) for the motherhood stage to manifest itself in the story.

This is a huge need gap left under-served for a sizeable period of time. The strong appeal of the 'Married with Kids' life-stage is further exemplified by a dramatic revival of its popularity share in 2020. The share of characters in the motherhood life-stage jumped from 34% in 2019 to 62% in 2020, and then to 66% in 2021.

### Life-Stage Popularity Share of HGEC Female Characters (%)




YEAR	CHILD	UNMARRIED	MARRIED WITHOUT KIDS	MARRIED WITH KIDS
2016	4	15	29	52
2017	1	13	44	42
2018	17	9	42	32
2019	14	17	36	33
2020	6	12	20	62
2021	0	10	24	66
2022	0	5	37	58

But this growth in share has been driven by a single character - Anupama. The show, launched in July 2020, is one of the rare HGEC shows where the motherhood life-stage was in play from day 1. Anupama was introduced as a 40+ mother of three. Her immediate rise in popularity reiterated the relevance of this life-stage among HGEC audiences. She has, since then, gone on to become the most popular HGEC character, overtaking Jethalal (Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah), a male character also from the 'Married with Kids' life-stage!



If Anupama's popularity share is removed, the share of characters in the 'Married with Kids' life-stage drops dramatically, being less than a third of the 2016 level in 2022.

### Life-Stage Popularity Share of HGEC Female Characters (%), without considering Anupama



YEAR	CHILD	UNMARRIED	MARRIED WITHOUT KIDS	MARRIED WITH KIDS
2016	4	15	29	52
2017	1	13	44	42
2018	17	9	42	32
2019	14	17	36	34
2020	13	25	42	20
2021	0	23	54	23
2022	0	10	76	14

Till 2016-17, the idea behind launching shows with younger protagonists was to get the younger female audiences on board, as they generally displayed higher propensity to sample new content, compared to older audiences. Since TV is a family-viewing medium, the mothers would start watching with the daughters, and by the time the marriage phase started, they would be significantly invested in the show. The subsequent motherhood stage enhanced their relatability with the show, helping the show sustain for a few more years thereon, even if some of the younger audiences had moved out by then.

However, with audience cynicism around fiction content being becoming a major factor 2017 onwards, most shows are not afforded the luxury of time to build upon and execute this character trajectory. Anupama has shown an alternative route, where a show can cut out the first two stages of the life journey altogether, and launch directly in the third stage, i.e., motherhood. The need gap and the opportunity is clear and present. Every 'Married with Kids' show cannot be Anupama. But it's almost certain that shows that start in the 'Unmarried' life-stage will struggle to be blockbusters anytime in the near future.