

## WE NEED MORE POLICEWOMEN

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Women police personnel at a Republic Day parade. File photo | Photo Credit: [The Hindu](#)

At least since 2009, when the [Home Ministry set 33% as the target for women's representation in the police](#), increasing women's recruitment in the police force has been the goal of the Central and State governments. Yet, India persists with a male-dominated police force. In 2019, women comprised less than 10% of police personnel. Only seven States (Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Sikkim) had more than 10% policewomen. In fact, there has been only a 5% increase in the number of policewomen in a decade (3.65% in 2009 to 8.98% in 2019).

Reservation has been the primary tool to increase women's representation. Yet, no government has developed an action plan with clear timelines to meet the quota within a specified time period. Thus, it is not surprising that the annual change in the share of women in the police force from 2012 to 2016 was found to be less than 1% across States, according to the India Justice Report, 2019. At this rate, most States will take over 50 years to achieve the 33% target.

'Women police personnel face bias'

While States adopt the reservation policy, they are very selective about its implementation. Very few States apply reservation for women at all the entry points (constable, sub-inspector, and deputy superintendent of police levels) or to all posts at each level. Some States (Kerala and Karnataka) have reservation for women only at the constable rank. Some (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu) extend it to the constable and sub-inspector ranks. But here too there are restrictions: reservation is limited to specific cadre posts within each rank.

This has resulted in huge disparity in the representation of women across ranks. There are far fewer women at the gazetted ranks at the State level (assistant sub-inspector to deputy superintendent of police) than those at the constabulary level. This means that women are most prominent in the most junior ranks. While this is not a negative in itself, in the absence of institutional support, women remain in large numbers at the bottom of the ladder without moving up.

Restricting women's quotas to entry levels or select posts not only shrinks the potential pool of women recruits in a given year but also reduces the proportion of women likely to get promoted to leadership and supervisory positions. As a consequence, there are not enough women personnel to perform exclusive functions when gender-based crimes are reported. For instance, in 2013, the Home Ministry said that at least three women sub-inspectors should be available in a police station as investigating officers. Tamil Nadu, which has the highest percentage of women personnel (17.46%), requires 6,057 women sub-inspectors to meet this standard across its 2,019 police stations. At present, it has barely one-fourth of that requirement.

A model policy for women in the police

Also worrying are signs that States with relatively high proportions of policewomen appear to hit a plateau. The figure for policewomen in Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh has stayed at around 12% for the past four years. Some places like Chandigarh have even recorded a decline.

It is time to look beyond numbers to institutional barriers that hinder women's growth within the service. Frequent inter-district transfers and disallowing postings in home districts for specified periods of time coupled with poor childcare support systems and lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure present distinct difficulties for women. Taken together, these and other barriers limit the avenues for women's promotion. Sexual harassment at the workplace that policewomen suffer is not adequately acknowledged. There is even less recognition of the impact that the policing sub-culture, with its association with "masculinity" and coercive force, has on the participation of women. No wonder it is common to hear the police being described as policemen — as if women in the police don't exist at all.

The underlying assumption seems to be that an increase in numbers will automatically make the organisational culture more egalitarian. This is far from the truth. Women are typecast — for example, they are asked to deal with crimes against women, while they are kept outside the mainstream of varied experiences. As a result, new recruits will become increasingly ghettoised in the absence of a framework to guide their career path. Increasing the number of recruits alone will not be enough; institutional changes embedded in principles of diversity, inclusion and equality of opportunities are as important. Otherwise, discrimination and exclusion will continue to persist even as the numbers of women increase.

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