

CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

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“The three worst States in incidence of crimes in 2001—Delhi, Haryana and Assam—remained largely unchanged in 2015.” A scene in Delhi. PHOTO: RAMESH SHARMA

If we go by the National Crime Records Bureau reports, incidence of serious crimes against women rose from 237 per day in 2001 to 313 per day in 2015. These crimes include rape, kidnapping and abduction, dowry deaths and cruelty by husbands and relatives. Minor girls, adolescent and old women are frequently victims of brutal rapes and murders. Of these crimes, 30 per cent were rapes (including intent to rape). Higher incidence of crimes during 2001-2015 coupled with low conviction rate of 21 per cent of cases reported suggests that women are more vulnerable to serious crimes.

Women's vulnerability varies enormously across States. Incidence of serious crimes was as high as 75 per lakh women in Delhi in 2015 as against approximately 5 per lakh women in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

There are huge gaps in incidence of crimes between the three worst and the three best States. The three worst States in 2001 — Delhi, Haryana and Assam — remained largely unchanged in 2015, with Assam replacing Haryana as the second worst State. The best performers, however, changed during this period. Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Sikkim displayed the lowest incidence of crimes in 2001 but the top two were replaced by Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in 2015. However, across States, the overall concentration of serious crimes did not change significantly. For example, the three States (Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra) that accounted for 37 per cent of the crimes in 2001 were responsible for a slightly lower share of 34 per cent in 2015.

Here we focus on two related questions: (i) Why have crimes against women risen between 2001 and 2015? What are the factors associated with huge inter-State variation in these crimes in 2015? As answers to these questions lie in the interplay of affluence of a State, religion, demographics including female/male ratio, employment opportunities for women, their literacy, rural/urban population ratio, quality of governance in the State and media exposure, we carried out a detailed analysis that allows us to assess their individual and joint contributions to variation of serious crimes over time and across States.

Our analysis reveals the following effects. A 1 per cent increase in State GDP (per capita) is associated with a 0.42 per cent reduction in the incidence of serious crimes. It follows that greater affluence is accompanied by a reduction in such crimes. If alcoholism and substance abuse are lower among men, or if these addictions are better treated in more affluent States, sexual or physical assaults on women are less likely.

Another factor is the sex imbalance measured as the number of females per 1,000 males. The sex ratio norm is 950. India's ratio was below this (944 in 2015). A one per cent increase in the sex ratio lowers serious crimes against women by 8 per cent. Indeed, a skewed sex ratio more than undermines the affluence effect. So, if Delhi and Haryana continue to be the worst States despite being affluent (relative to, say, Andhra Pradesh), it is largely because of the abysmally low sex ratio in these two States. While the sex ratio increased in several States but remained low (Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan), in others (Bihar, Maharashtra) it remained low and barely changed.

Other influential factors include female literacy and labour force participation. Female bargaining power depends on both their literacy and outside employment. However, the evidence also suggests a backlash in which male spouses — especially those who are unemployed — assert their superiority by retaliatory physical and sexual violence. Our analysis points to a favourable joint effect of female literacy and labour force participation, though the positive individual effects of female literacy and labour force participation are larger. If brutality in marriage becomes unbearable, exit options for women who are both literate and employed become more viable for them. Promoting both jointly is likely to be more effective in curbing domestic violence against women.

A somewhat surprising finding is that the higher the rural/urban population, the higher the incidence of serious crimes against women. A one per cent decline in the rural/urban population ratio is associated with a reduction of 0.4 per cent in the incidence of such crimes. Even though such crimes in urban areas have greater visibility in the media, the grim reality is that women in rural areas are more vulnerable. Despite likely under-reporting of such crimes, it is revealing that rural women more often seek remedial action against them. This, of course, doesn't imply that they are more likely to succeed.

Although cultural norms and context take diverse forms — whether, for example, it is a matriarchal or patriarchal society — religion is one key dimension. Classifying the populations into Hindus and Muslims, we find that in both groups women are vulnerable to serious crimes but more so among the former. A one per cent increase in the share of the Hindus increases such crimes by 1.64 per cent — double the incidence among Muslims. That a greater frequency of wife-beating and dowry-related violence among Hindus — in extreme cases “bride burning” — still persists is worrying.

Exposure to media — captured through readership of newspapers in English and major Indian languages — has two effects: one is better reporting of crimes and perhaps, more importantly, a crime deterrence effect. It is difficult to separate the two and so the combined effect is that a one per cent increase in readership is associated with a 1.9 per cent reduction in such crimes. The Delhi gang rape case of 2012, for example, wouldn't have sparked a national uproar and led to the speedy arrest of the perpetrators without sustained media activism.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has emphasised that rape and other serious crimes against women are closely intertwined with inefficient policing and judicial systems, and callousness of society. So the quality of governance in States is key to understanding the huge variation in incidence of serious crimes against women. In a recent but ambitious study this year led by economist Sudipto Mundle, 19 States have been ranked on the basis of a composite indicator of governance in 2001 and 2012. This indicator combines five criteria — infrastructure, social services, fiscal performance, justice, law and order, and quality of the legislature. Even if some State rankings are intriguing because of the failure to take into account rampant political corruption, it is significant that the best five and the worst five performers remained largely unchanged during 2001-2012. Subject to this caveat and the fact that 2015 is not covered, using this measure of governance, we find that the incidence of serious crimes against women declines with better governance.

In conclusion, if the crimes against women rose despite greater affluence and a slight increase in the sex ratio during 2001-15, the answer must lie in likely deterioration of governance and persistence of low sex ratios in certain States. Illustrative cases include Bihar, Delhi and Maharashtra.

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