

What Government Expenditure Tells Us About Official Attitudes Towards Women's Safety

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Amidst the whole range of gender disparities in India – starting from survival after conception and birth inequality, unequal access to resources, unequal facilities, and so on – the physical victimisation of women is a problem that needs urgent attention. While comprehensive social reform which ensures access to education and healthcare, equal livelihood opportunities and equal wages is required to arrest the ever-rising incidence of violence against women, a well-thought-out prevention, protection and empowerment mechanism should also be in place to stop such incidents. The political will of the government is of utmost importance in this regard.

In the past decade, there have been a couple of government interventions aimed at preventing violence against women. It is instructive to analyse how these schemes have been prioritised by the current dispensation.

In 2013-14, the Union government set up a non-lapsable corpus 'Nirbhaya' for special police helplines, safety in transportation, etc.

In 2013-14, Rs 1,000 crore was allocated for the 'Nirbhaya' fund, which was then reduced to Rs 550 crore in 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. It was further reduced to around Rs 500 crore in 2021-22 and 2022-23.

In addition, utilisation of the 'Nirbhaya' fund is also very poor. As on April 28, 2023, around Rs 12,008.5 crore has been appraised under the 'Nirbhaya' project, of which only Rs 4,923 crore has been released and Rs 2,521 crore has been utilised (which is roughly around 21% of the appraised amount and 51% of the released amount).

The Union government spent Rs 160 crore on another important scheme, 'One Stop Centre', in 2020-21. The scheme, initially under the 'Mission for Protection and Empowerment for Women', is now subsumed, with many other pre-existing and new schemes, under a new programme, 'Sambal' of 'Mission Shakti', which is why it no longer is possible to find out how much was allocated for the scheme separately.

'Sambal' subsumes '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*', 'One Stop Centre', '*Nari Adalat*', '*Mahila Police Volunteer*', and '*Women's Helpline*'. Of the total allocated amount of Rs 587 crore for Sambal in 2021-22, Rs 183 crore, or roughly around 31%, has been used in that particular year. As a result, the allocation for the scheme was reduced to Rs 562 crore in subsequent years.

Clearly, these programmes have not received adequate importance in terms of budgetary allocations. Additionally, the underutilisation of the funds was followed by even lower allocations in subsequent years.

Almost every day we get to hear a new story of violence against women: the viral video of sexual violence and assault in Manipur; a Delhi University student murdered with an iron rod for refusing marriage; a 17-year-old girl killed in West Bengal after being sexually assaulted, apparently while she was returning from school. Seven women wrestlers accused the Wrestling Federation of India chief and Bharatiya Janata Party MP of sexual harassment; a school teacher sexually harassed a minor student in Tamil Nadu; a man assaulted a minor while on conditional bail, after being arrested for another sexual assault case in Andhra Pradesh; trespassers barged into a Delhi University women's college and harassed students.

The National Family Health Survey 2019 -21 shows a rise in sexual abuse in many states. According to the latest report of the National Crime Record Bureau, the rate of crime against women per lakh population, quite disturbingly, increased to 64.5 in 2021, from 56.5 in 2020. The number of female victims of 'murder with rape/gang rape' was 293 in 2021 in India.

Programmes like 'Nirbhaya' and 'Sambal' have the potential to improve women's safety. However, updating a fully functional safety mechanism with enhanced outreach services is the need of the hour. It is high time that the state starts recognising its past mistakes and takes necessary remedial actions. We look forward to seeing these issues dealt with care in the coming days.

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