

Crime stats miss plight of West Bengal women

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In terms of the state's rate of decline in crimes against women and gender-sensitive policing, the picture is disconcerting

It has now been more than a month since the rape-murder of a young doctor at her workplace, RG Kar Medical College and Hospital – a government hospital in Kolkata – hit the headlines and the conscience of an entire nation. Investigation is still underway, but there is no doubt that the victim was subject to sexual violence. This has renewed debates about how safe West Bengal is for women and has led to widespread popular protests, putting the state government— led by the only female chief minister in the country until recently and one for whom protesting crime against women has been a rallying cry throughout her political career— on the defensive. Perhaps, this is why one has heard an apologia of sorts by voices sympathetic to the government, that this was an unfortunate but isolated incident, and that Bengal is relatively safe for women compared to the rest of the country.



PREMIUMKolkata: People take part in a protest rally against the West Bengal administration over the alleged sexual assault and murder of a trainee doctor, in Kolkata, Saturday, Sept. 7, 2024. (PTI Photo/Swapan Mahapatra)(PTI09_07_2024_000158A)(PTI)

The statistics cited in support are based on data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Indeed, a cursory glimpse at the data gives the impression that the per capita crime rate in Bengal is below the national average and has remained so over the last decade. This is true of almost any and every crime – be it severe crimes like murder or rape, or less extreme ones like assault of women, and even for all categories of crime. In fact, the gap between Bengal and India is highest for rape.

But then, a closer look beyond average crime rates suggests that Bengal is far from being among the best-performing states. If we rank the 31 states for which we have the latest NCRB data (2022) from the best to the worst for rapes per capita, Bengal's rank is 19 (with Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh being the worst performers) and 24 for per capita murder.

More importantly, we should also look at growth rates in crime, instead of just their levels, to understand the true picture. After all,

in a given year, a state's crime records reflect a number of factors that prevent these crimes from occurring and being reported. If a state is lower or higher than the national average in a particular crime, it is due to many factors, the credit or blame for which cannot be assigned to the present state of policing and governance alone. It reflects the effects of institutions and social norms which tend to change slowly – for example, Bengal has a distinguished history of social movements in support of women's rights going back well into the past.

In contrast, the change in the rate of a specific crime is where one can make a more credible attribution of what is happening at present and where things are headed. For instance, if a crime is going up or down with respect to the national average, we can ask if this change is due to factors directly controlled by the government (like policing infrastructure) or driven by other trends affecting the likelihood of such crimes happening or being reported. Observing changes makes it possible to see how the situation shifted, no matter where it started.

Since 2017, more detailed NCRB data on different types of sex crimes have become available. Since then, India's crime rate relating to all crimes against women or severe crimes like murder and rape (including rape and murder) has been coming down and has continued the downward trend till 2022. It is interesting to note that Bengal, too, displayed a downward trend in all these categories. Not just that, Bengal shows a sharper decline in two of these three categories. Guess which is the category in which Bengal's rate of decline has been less than the national rate of decline? It is rape. The rate of decline in rapes in West Bengal, at just 0.15%, is much worse than the national average of 3%. Could this be because India

had much more room for improvement compared to West Bengal, to begin with? But then, West Bengal continues to look much better in handling gender-neutral crimes like murder during this period despite being much below the Indian average six years ago. Clearly, the trend in crimes against women in Bengal is worrisome.

Now, while considering sex crimes against women, one cannot ignore the potential role of reporting bias. Many women hesitate to report sexual violence to male police officers, perhaps due to a combination of social stigma, humiliation, shame, or reluctance of male police officers to register crimes against women in patriarchal societies. Indeed, recent research shows that women police officers are much more likely to register FIRs in cases of gender-based violence compared to male police officers.

A large part of gender-based police reforms in the aftermath of the 2012 gangrape murder in Delhi has been geared towards making police stations more accessible for women. It is in light of these possibilities that we should look at the reported numbers for sexual crimes in Bengal. At 9,522, the number of women in the civil police in the state today is half of that in Andhra Pradesh (18,599) and one-third of Maharashtra's (29,466) and more than 30% lower than even Bihar's (12,795). On per-capita metrics, Bengal is ranked 34th among 37 states, with one officer serving more than 5,000 women. And this is not just driven by the smaller size of the overall police force. Even within the existing force, the share of women is much lower in Bengal (9%) compared to the India average (12%). This is perhaps the reason why the prime accused in the current case carried on with his policing assignment despite an assault complaint from his former wife's family.

While it is difficult to ascertain the extent of reporting bias, we compared information on crime against women reported in the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) with that from NCRB. The NFHS reports “physical violence inflicted by people other than a husband”. If we compare this with NCRB numbers on crime against women, we expect that data from the two sources to roughly align. In 2005, Bengal was close to the Indian average in both NCRB and NFHS, in terms of per capita incidences. By 2015, it was still close to the Indian average in NFHS but way below in NCRB. By 2021, this gap in NCRB had increased further even when NFHS continued to indicate that Bengal is close to the India average. The comparison not only suggests that Bengal has a high reporting bias in the official records on crime against women, but also that this bias has increased over time.

On top of our argument that the view based on a superficial reading of NCRB data suggesting Bengal is safe for women is misleading, evidence of extensive and worsening reporting bias in the state suggests that what NCRB data reveals could well be the tip of the iceberg.

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