Institutional Recognition:

Activating Representation to Build Police Responsiveness to Women

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Abstract. How can public agencies become more responsive to marginalized citizens? We develop a theory of bureaucratic responsiveness as the product of resources, representation, and recognition. While material investments and inclusion of marginalized personnel are insufficient in passive forms, they can be jointly activated through *institutional recognition*: organizational dynamics that enhance a social group's visibility and ascribe value to bureaucratic effort to meet their needs. We illustrate this in the domains of policing and gender, examining station-level Women's Help Desks in India. Combining a large-scale experiment and sustained qualitative research, we reveal how the desks—when staffed by female officers—increased police responsiveness to women's cases. This occurred as female personnel actively utilized help desk resources to build professional standing while supporting women. These gains, however, were constrained by patriarchal norms that limit reporting and prosecution of gender-based violence. Our findings illuminate possibilities and challenges of institutional change in unequal settings.

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Introduction

Gender, race, and other social markers strongly predict citizens' encounters with bureaucracies, reflected in unequal treatment, access to services, and welfare (Park 2022; Grossman and Slough 2022). What, given these persistent inequalities, can improve the responsiveness of public agencies to citizens that they have long neglected or excluded? Policymakers around the globe grapple with this question, pursuing reforms in sectors like education, health, welfare, policing, and beyond (Frederickson 1990; Pandey et al. 2022; Park 2022). Most efforts fall into two types: allocating *resources* to build agency capacity to better serve marginalized groups (Evans et al. 2024; Colombini et al. 2022; Shettar 2023); and increasing bureaucratic *representation* by appointing personnel from under-represented backgrounds (Favero 2024; Headley et al. 2021; Riccucci and Ryzin 2017). However, results are often disappointing. Dedicated resources are easily co-opted, while initiatives to diversify agencies are stymied by unsupportive organizational cultures (Jassal 2020, 2021; Husain 2024).

This article examines the challenges of responsiveness and potential for institutional change in public-facing bureaucracies. We argue that efforts to increase responsiveness to marginalized groups are often hamstrung by siloed attempts to build either representation or local agency capacity. Attempts to build diversity without dedicated resources or support – i.e. "just add and stir" approaches (Datzberger and LeMat 2018) – leave personnel disempowered, while resources without personnel with the capacity and incentives to use them can lay dormant. However, when jointly activated, investments in representation and resources can empower and motivate under-represented officials to meet under-served groups' needs. We identify a key mechanism enabling this activation: *institutional recognition,* referring to organizational dynamics that enhance the visibility and value of social groups within public agencies. By acknowledging group needs, highlighting their presence, and assigning them

worth, recognition expands spaces – physical, cognitive, and symbolic – for work benefiting those groups.

We build our theory of bureaucratic responsiveness through a study of gender[4] and policing. Gender-based violence (GBV)[5] and police reform are both "wicked problems" (Head 2008) for which change is difficult, making the nexus of the two particularly challenging. Globally, one in three women will experience sexual and/or physical violence in their lifetime. South Asia, Africa, and Latin America lead the world in femicide, while incidences of rape, domestic violence, public harassment, and trafficking of women and girls persist at alarming rates globally (UN Women 2023). This violence carries tremendous human, social, and economic costs, and has provoked wide-ranging policy responses and legal reforms (Tripp 2010; Htun & Jensenius 2020). The police are central to many of these efforts, yet also represent an arena of the state where gender injustice and violence are reproduced (Lake 2022). This makes the police a critical agency in which to investigate the possibilities and limitations of gender-oriented reforms.

Our empirical focus is on India: a country marked by constrained state capacity (Kapur 2020), entrenched patriarchal norms (Brulé 2020; Prillaman 2023; Behl 2019), and some of the highest rates of GBV in the world (Goldsmith & Beresford 2018). India's police force is overwhelmingly male (just 10% women) and is viewed as both "incapacitated and sexist … neither able nor willing to enforce [women's] rights" (Roychowdhury 2021, 22). Our research setting is Madhya Pradesh (MP), a large state (population 81 million) in north-central India. Drawing on sustained qualitative research and surveys in police stations, we demonstrate how women's concerns are routinely dismissed due to resource constraints, political pressures, and dismissive narratives, while female officers are marginalized within male-dominated stations.

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[4] We conceive of gender as a set of socially constructed identities that shape social behavior and distributions of power. Where we employ the term women, we refer to those who identify as having a female gender identity.
[5] We define GBV, following the Istanbul Convention, as "any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity."

To understand what might begin to address these problems, we partnered with the MP Police (MPP) to study a program that established Women's Help Desks (WHDs), introducing resources, training, and new roles for female officers in local police stations. In a precursor paper (Sukhtankar et al. 2022), we examined the impact of the WHDs through a randomized control trial (RCT) covering 180 police stations, serving a combined population of 23 million. One-third of those stations served as controls. The remainder received WHDs, one-half of which were mandated to be run by female officers.[6] We found that the presence of a WHD, particularly when staffed by female officers, led to significant increases in police registration of women's cases – a 14% rise in recorded crimes against women and a 10% increase in cases filed by women. While case registration is only a preliminary step towards achieving justice, it is an essential one, without which there is no access to the justice system. The impact of the WHDs, however, was constrained by the persistence of patriarchal norms and a slow-moving and gendered judicial system (Jassal 2024; Roychowdhury 2021): while registration of women's cases increased, such cases often flounder in the courts. The WHDs, moreover, did little – in the time span of our study – to move actual rates of violence against women or the rates at which women report violence, reflecting social constraints, including familial and community stigma and pressures, that dissuade women from approaching the police.

While the RCT identified the causal impact and limitations of the WHD program, it stopped short of explaining *why*, leaving us with an inadequate understanding of the contextual factors and mechanisms that enabled and constrained responsiveness to women. We draw on four years of intensive field research in MP, informing the design of the WHD program and process-tracing its implementation, amassing a total of 170 days of station-level visits and over

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[6] We include a full description of the experimental design, methods, and data in the Appendix (A4). This current paper draws on new methods and data, not in the precursor paper, to develop a novel theory that situates and extends beyond the RCT.

1,300 hours of interview and observational data. We used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Goulding 2002; Gioia 2021), allowing themes to emerge inductively (Fujii 2018). To complement our site-intensive fieldwork, we conducted surveys of over 2,000 police officers across all 180 stations, including 120 officers (women and men) assigned to run the help desks. This multi-method approach was built into the RCT, from pilot and baseline stages to qualitative research accompanying all arms of the intervention, to elucidate mechanisms, obstacles, and unanticipated effects – including those that may not be quantifiable (Rao, Ananthpur, & Malik 2017).

We argue that police responsiveness to women emerged from the interplay between representation (inclusion of female personnel) and resources (material inputs) supporting the WHD program. Although all officers at WHDs received resources to better address women's needs, female officers utilized the resources more effectively, transforming available spaces for handling women's cases. This included ensuring private, clearly marked, and well-equipped physical spaces within the police station. The creation of dedicated Help Desk posts, along with standard operating procedures and training, also expanded the cognitive space for officers' attention to women's cases.

The differential utilization of resources at women-run WHDs unfolded alongside agency-wide changes in how women were seen and valued, creating new symbolic space for women within the police. These shifts in recognition stemmed from senior officers' commitment to the WHD program, and were recursively amplified inside police stations. High-level policy support, resource allocation, and visible endorsements by senior officials, developed in a climate of heightened public attention to GBV, sent signals prioritizing women's needs. Station-level actors responded by utilizing the resources assigned to the WHDs. This, in a resource-constrained setting, enhanced both their professional standing as well as the visibility of women's cases. That these dynamics were driven by female officers reflects the importance of recognition to women within the police, in a context where they have long been professionally marginalized.

Female officers used the WHDs to assert their presence, develop expertise, and actively engage with male colleagues – marking a significant change in gendered workplace dynamics.

There are, however, potential limits to recognition as a catalyst for institutional change, including concerns that it could, by highlighting social difference, lead to segregation or resentment. Whether gains in responsiveness at the WHDs continue over time may depend on the extent to which recognition is institutionalized, and in a manner that integrates rather than isolates women. More generally, reforms that rest on recognition require institutional commitments that may be politically fragile and difficult to sustain, for example, in highly polarized environments.

Our study contributes to a growing body of work on the politics of violence against women in India and beyond (Roychowdhury 2021; Htun and Weldon 2012) and the potential and limitations of police-centered reforms (Htun & Jensenius 2020; Lake 2022; Jassal 2024). Beyond law enforcement, our theory of bureaucratic responsiveness is also relevant to other resource-constrained public agencies in settings marked by histories of social exclusion. Under such conditions, our theory illuminates longstanding debates over substantive versus passive representation (Pitkin 1967), extending beyond the electoral arena (Saward 2006) to investigate what activates representation in public agencies (Riccucci & Meyers 2004), particularly for women (Durose & Lowndes 2023). By demonstrating how social and material inequalities are reproduced and challenged within public agencies, we cast new light on the intersection of the politics of recognition, distribution, and accountability (Fraser 2005; Young 2008a; Paller 2019).

In what follows, we first present our theory in relation to prior literature on representation, resources, and recognition. We then describe the crisis of gender-based violence globally and in India, and the inadequacy of police responses, before introducing the WHD program and its impacts, as well as our research methods. We then illustrate the interplay of representation and

resources at WHDs, and the catalytic effects of institutional recognition in building police responsiveness to women. We go on to consider counterfactuals, alternatives, and limits to our theory, before concluding with a discussion of extensions beyond gender and policing.

A Theory of Bureaucratic Responsiveness

In what follows, we develop a theory of bureaucratic responsiveness, arguing that it is the interactive product of representation, resources, and recognition within an agency. While we illustrate our theory in the domains of gender and policing, we first lay out the core components in general terms, as they might apply to multiple sectors and agencies.

We understand bureaucratic *responsiveness* as action by public personnel to meet citizens' needs and demands. We are concerned with agency responsiveness to marginalized social groups – those lacking the socioeconomic or political power typically required to influence the distribution of public goods and services. Bureaucratic responsiveness in this specific sense involves dedicating resources and effort to historically neglected groups – for example, helping girls stay in school, addressing racial or gender health disparities, or responding to women's reports of domestic abuse.

By *resources*, we refer to funding and material investments for specialized services to support those who are traditionally under-served; for example, community and classroom initiatives to support girls' education (Mangla 2022a, 2022b; Evans et al. 2024), health outreach to minority communities or targeted training to improve women's health (Williams and Cooper 2019; Colombini et al. 2022), or programs to improve women's access to justice (Karim et al. 2018; Jassal 2020). Formal resource allocation is an enabling but insufficient condition for responsiveness. Without personnel with the capacity and incentives to use them, resources can lay dormant or be repurposed to other ends.

We understand bureaucratic *representation* in descriptive terms as personnel who share characteristics with a given social group. Following the longstanding distinction in the literature, we distinguish passive from active representation, where the former refers simply to the presence of individuals with certain demographic features while the latter entails substantively advancing the interests of a given group (Pitkin 1967; Phillips 1995; Jensenius 2017). Theories of representative bureaucracy suggest that where the composition of public agencies reflects societal makeup, officials will more effectively meet citizens' needs (Mosher 1968; Meier 1993, Lim 2006; Bishu and Kennedy 2019). Newer research focuses on the identity of individual bureaucrats and their actions towards those with a shared social background (Favero 2024; Meier 2019; Riccucci and Meyers 2004; Dhillon & Meier 2020). Active bureaucratic representation occurs where personnel from a given social group expend effort and resources to meet that group's needs.

Gender receives particular attention in theories of bureaucratic representation (Keiser et al. 2002; Park 2013; Durose & Lowndes 2023). But the presence alone of female personnel is unlikely to build agency responsiveness to women. Female employees in male-dominated agencies often face layers of marginalization, including overt discrimination and masculinized organizational cultures (Ramsay and Parker 1991; Husain 2024). For example, where police agencies impose quotas for hiring women, recruits are often posted to socially isolating, inhospitable, and even hostile work environments (Santos 2004; Prenzler and Sinclair 2013; Ahmad 2022; Husain 2024). Efforts in education and healthcare to hire more female teachers, nurses, and doctors similarly often fail to address underlying gender inequalities (Datzberger & LeMat 2018; Husain 2024). Feminist scholars of bureaucracy, moreover, note how women are expected to conform to masculine norms, to be "one of the boys" (Kennedy et al. 2020). Thus, while a link from passive to active representation in bureaucracies has long been suggested, the conditions under which this might occur are not well understood (Riccucci & Meyers 2004).

Our article focuses on this gap, asking how public personnel become responsive to the citizens they purportedly represent, and how resources are deployed in the process. We argue that *institutional recognition* is a key mechanism enabling the joint activation of dedicated resources and personnel (Figure 1). Agency-wide shifts in recognition build visibility and ascribe value to particular social groups, both as members of the public and as employees. These dynamics unfold at multiple levels. Policymakers must first recognize the needs of marginalized groups through the allocation of resources and personnel. However, those initial inputs can lay dormant without further signals of commitment – including symbolic messaging and intra-agency communication – that encourage resource utilization by newly appointed personnel. This, in turn, builds recognition at the local agency level, enhancing capacity and spaces for work on marginalized groups' behalf, as well as the status assigned to that work. This local agency recognition recursively feeds back into the broader organization.
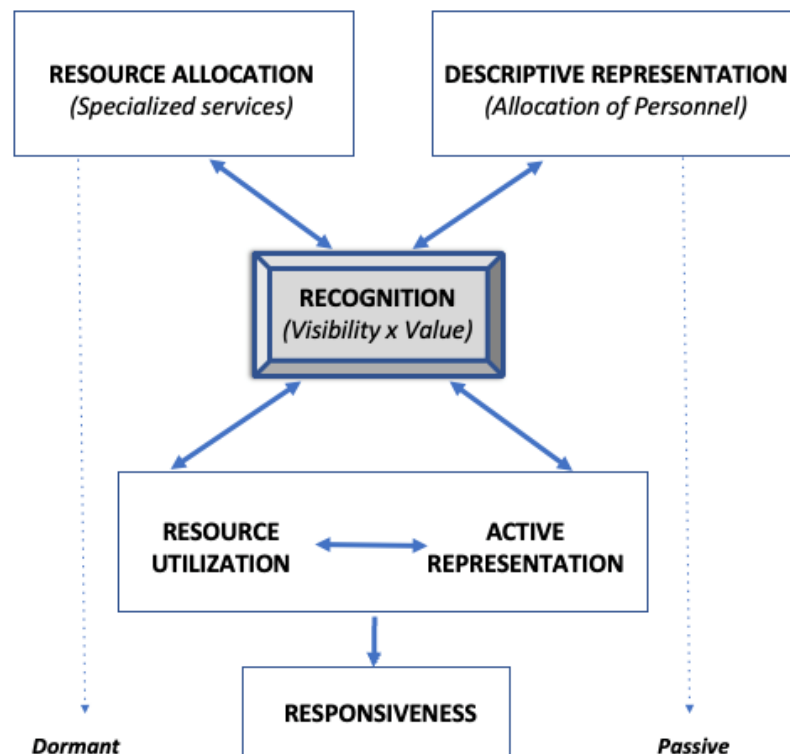
Figure 1. Activating Bureaucratic Responsiveness to Marginalized Citizens

Our argument concerning recognition builds on scholarship on identity in the public sphere. Scholars of multiculturalism contend that recognition rests on a "politics of difference" (Taylor 1992, Young 2008b) that centers diverse identities and experiences in public discourse and policy making. Phillips (1995) argues that this requires attention to the "politics of presence" of socially marginalized groups as officer bearers within public bodies, while cautioning that representation alone does not guarantee accountability. To move from passive to active representation requires material and power redistribution within political institutions (Phillips 1995; Young 2008a). Recognition, moreover, also involves a "politics of dignity" (Honneth 1995; Rao and Sanyal 2010; Chakrabarti 2024), where social acknowledgment is linked to respect and a sense of social and self-worth (Lamont 2018). By simultaneously engaging these politics of difference, presence, and dignity, recognition acknowledges the needs of marginalized social groups, makes them visible, and assigns them value.

Most scholarship on identity and recognition discusses these dynamics in relation to social and electoral spheres, or with regard to citizens' claims of recognition from the state (Paller 2019; Kumar 2025). We turn to a different but equally important locus of politics: public bureaucracies, which are critical sites where social and material inequalities are reproduced and contested (Durose & Lowndes 2023; Eiró & Lotta 2024). Within frontline agencies, appointed personnel exercise considerable discretion in policy implementation (Lipsky 1980) and citizens seek recognition through non-electoral demands. We explore how institutional recognition is produced and how representation and resources are activated within public agencies. This occurs through policy design and implementation, as bureaucratic actors – operating within an institutional scaffolding of laws, policies, norms and routines – interpret their mandates in ways that directly impact citizens' welfare (Mangla 2022a). Shifts in institutional recognition reshape those interpretations, building visibility and ascribing priority to groups of citizens often neglected by the state. At the same

time, recognition builds the standing of personnel from marginalized backgrounds who otherwise are isolated or stigmatized within their agencies.

Institutional recognition, in this sense, is an iterative dynamic: it is both a driver and a product of responsiveness within public agencies, and so a source of endogenous institutional change (Koning 2016; Ang 2025). This, however, is a contingent and potentially fragile process. Each element – representation, resources, recognition – rests on the others. To ensure sustained bureaucratic responsiveness to marginalized citizens, these elements must continue to work in tandem against structural inequalities, as well as counter resistance and backlash to change, which can surface at the frontlines of the state.

Gender and Policing

As frontline agencies (Wilson 1968; Lipsky 1980) and critical sites of citizen-state relations (Soss & Weaver 2017), the police have received much recent attention in scholarship on institutional change (González 2019; Blair et al. 2021; Blair et al. 2022). A large body of work considers gender-oriented reforms, pointing to the considerable ambiguity that surrounds the police's role in women's security and justice (Santos 2004; Ahmad 2022). The police are charged with protecting women's rights even as they perpetrate violence against women (Lake 2022); they are a gateway to the broader justice system but also often an obstacle to women's legal claims (Menjívar & Walsh 2016; Jassal 2023).

The empirical record on gender-oriented police reforms is mixed. Studies from advanced industrial settings have found that increasing the female police force is associated with greater reporting of GBV (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty 2006, Miller & Segal 2019). However, in resource-constrained settings the record is less conclusive. In India, research on all-women police stations has found no increase in registered cases of crimes against women (Jassal 2020). A study in Liberia similarly found that incorporation of more female officers did not alter

gender sensitivity within the police (Karim et al. 2018), while survey experiments in Uganda found little difference in how male and female officers assess cases (Wagner et al. 2017). Indeed, there is ample global evidence that female police, like their male counterparts, frequently blame or dismiss victims of GBV (Santos 2004; Jassal 2021), and that women citizens may not express greater confidence in female than male officers (Jassal & Barnhardt 2023; Karim 2020).

India is a critical site to study these dynamics, as it is one of the world's most gender unequal countries – ranked 140 out of 156 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index. India is rated among the most unsafe countries for women, topping a 2018 expert survey on risk of sexual violence (Goldsmith and Beresford 2018). A meta-analysis suggests that 40% of Indian women have experienced domestic violence by a partner or family member (Kalokhe et al. 2017). National Crime Records suggest that on average one woman dies *every hour* in a "dowry-related" dispute, two are raped, four are molested, and one is harassed (Behl 2019). These official statistics are certainly undercounts. An anonymized survey across cities in MP found that one in eight women reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the past year (Neville et al. 2015), while a survey in Delhi found that 95% of women reported feeling unsafe in public spaces, and 51% of men admitted to perpetrating violence or harassment (UN Women 2021).

Adding to the societal challenge of GBV, police agencies in India are severely understaffed and resource constrained. With just 1.2 officers per 1000, India has one of the lowest police to population ratios globally, and just 10% of officers are female. Under conditions of resource scarcity, frontline officers may be less inclined to take on cases on behalf of women and other marginalized groups. This is manifest in officer hesitancy to register women's complaints, leading to a serious under-recording of GBV. Comparing National Crime Records to women's responses to national household surveys, an estimated 96-99% of cases of sexual violence are not recorded by the police (Neville et al. 2015). Much

of this is attributed to unwillingness on the part of women to report violence, often fearing social sanctions or other retribution. Yet, as we will show, even when women do report, their cases are often dismissed by the police.

Gendered policing in Madhya Pradesh

Our study setting, Madhya Pradesh, stands 25th out of 34 Indian states and union territories in terms of registered crimes against women.[7] Higher crime registration, however, may indicate a greater willingness among women to engage the police (Elman 2013). Indeed, MP ranked in the top three states on an index of "disposal" (timely processing) of cases of crime against women, and in the middle (13 out of 22) for citizen satisfaction with the police (CSDS 2019). Yet, as elsewhere in India, there are significant barriers to police registration of women's cases.[8]

Police stations in MP face serious resource constraints. Acute personnel shortages lead to conditions of overload (Dasgupta & Kapur 2020), with officers working 14-hour shifts while managing multiple tasks (Mangla & Kapoor 2024). This particularly impacts officers handling crimes against women (CAW), who must respond, with little or no training, to complex cases that require time, investigative resources, and coordination with other agencies (e.g., for medical, social, or child support). Registering such cases typically requires a First Information Report (FIR), in which police formally document the complaint, initiating investigation and criminal proceedings.[9] Filing FIRs of any kind requires significant investments of officer time, but these requirements are often greater for CAW cases given their complexity. Senior officers often push local stations to clear complaints quickly to avoid backlogs,[10] further discouraging registration of time-intensive CAW cases.

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[7] National Crime Records Bureau, 2020 data.

[8] For qualitative evidence of these barriers drawn from our study sites, see Appendix 3, Table A7.

[9] An FIR is the first record, written by the police, of allegations of "cognizable" offenses, which under the Indian Penal Code are serious crimes for which police have the authority to arrest the accused without a warrant.

[10] Field observations of District SP, December 2018.

Capacity and time constraints are compounded by political barriers to case registration. Senior officials face pressure to keep crime rates low (Ansari et al. 2015), particularly regarding gender-based violence (Lodhia 2015). One senior officer in MP, for example, recalled how as a District Superintendent his initiatives to encourage women's crime reporting led to criticism from senior administrators who worried that rising crime statistics in his district reflected poorly on the police.[11] Frontline officers also reported political interference, particularly when powerful local figures were accused. In focus groups, officers cited "political interference" (*rajnetik hastakshyep*) as the most common reason for not registering sexual harassment cases.[12] Officers described working in a climate of caution, constantly assessing the political risks of filing cases.

Common narratives circulating within the police also suggest that filing women's cases may be undesirable. Many officers believe women file "false cases" to "punish" men or gain social leverage. Complaints are often dismissed based on perceptions of women's "dress," "tone of voice," or "demeanor," rather than seeking to determine the facts. Some officers refuse to file cases in the absence of evidence of *"visible harm,"*[13] while others consider domestic disputes to be "matters of the home" (*ghar ka mamla*) to be resolved in private. Mediation through "family counseling" (*parivar paramarsh*) is often preferred to formal legal action. Officers express concern that legal proceedings could break families, with "saving families" (*parivar ko bachana*) a common refrain. These various narratives of dismissal lead to officers' refusals to register women's cases, delays (e.g., asking women to return repeatedly), or other forms of dissuasion, including demeaning treatment at police stations.

Female officers themselves are also marginalized in their workplaces and within the broader police organization. Women make up less than 10% of field officers in MP. Often, they work alone or get posted with only a few other women

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[11] Interview with District SP, July 2017.
[12] MPP Training Academy, Bhopal, April 2017.
[13] Station interview, B_T2_C_F, February 2020.

to a station, where they work long hours under inhospitable conditions (e.g., often without access to women's toilets). As elsewhere in the world, they face a "masculinist" police culture (Santos 2004), navigating gendered workplace norms (Ahmad 2022). They are often socially isolated and professionally sidelined, while at the same time delegated a near impossibility of tasks. Police procedures in India require that female officers assist in all cases involving women, for example witnessing women's statements or serving as medical or court escorts, while also requiring female officers' presence at public events. With so few female personnel, the demands on their time are constant.

Women's Help Desks: intervention and study

Gendered policing norms and practices in MP make it an illustrative setting in which to explore efforts to improve police responsiveness to women. To do so, we partnered with the MP Police to study a program that established Women's Help Desks in local stations, combining investments in resources and training with new roles for female officers. Our partnership was invited; senior MPP officials approached our team to suggest collaboration, along with civil society partners working to support victims of GBV. The WHD program, as well as many aspects of data collection, were co-designed by our team and MPP's Research Cell, enabling a locally and ethically grounded design that took into account existing conditions and practices.[14]

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[14] For more on research ethics, partnerships and researcher positionality, see Appendix A2.

Figure 2. The Women's Help Desk Intervention

The WHD program had four components (Figure 2): physical spaces within stations (rooms or partitioned areas) to establish desks, along with material inputs (furniture, equipment, signage); newly appointed Help Desk Officers (HDOs); training for the HDOs and other officers on gender sensitization, legal requirements, and standard operating procedures for the desks; and community outreach to inform the public about the desks.[15]

MPP established the WHDs in 2019 as part of an RCT.[16] MPP purposively selected twelve districts (out of 51) in which to establish the program: those with the four largest cities, and eight others representative of geography, demographics, and socioeconomic conditions across the state. Within each

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[15] For more detail on the design of the WHD program and its implementation, see Appendix A1.

[16] Details on the experimental design are reproduced from Sukhtankar et al. 2022 in Appendix A4. Training for the WHD program began in July 2018 and was complete by May 2019. Endline data were collected between February and March 2020, just before and after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

district, our research team worked with MPP to randomly assign police stations into three groups: 61 received "regular" WHDs that had no requirement about the gender of the HDO (by default most – 72% – were run by men); 59 received the same intervention but were mandated to assign female officers as HDOs (with a compliance rate of 90%); and 60 received no intervention, serving as controls. In total, these 180 stations served a combined population of 23.4 million, and covered all the major geographic zones in the state.

The RCT design separated resources from representation. Resources were available to all WHDs, with no significant differences in monetary or material inputs to those that were "regular" or "women-run." Almost all stations received additional personnel to run the desks, but only those in the second treatment arm were required to assign this role to a woman.[17] The WHD program did not attempt to create gender parity in those stations, where female officers remained a minority. Yet increases in women personnel were significant; for example, stations that initially had just one female officer doubled their female force. As importantly, female HDOs were assigned public-facing roles, significantly increasing the likelihood that a woman entering a police station would encounter a female officer.

The aim of the RCT was to evaluate the impact of the WHD program on the responsiveness of police officers to women, drawing on administrative data on crime registration and a survey of officers at baseline and endline, along with citizen surveys. Overall, we found that stations with WHDs registered significantly more FIRs in cases involving women.[18] Baseline data show FIR registration for women was very low: just four cases per month in stations serving an average of 130,000 people. Compared to this, stations with WHDs saw a 14% increase in FIRs for CAW and another 10% increase in all cases filed

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[17] Although the WHD program did not mandate the allocation of additional officers, most stations received extra personnel to fill newly created HDO positions. Stations without the gender mandate predominantly received male officers, while those with it received female officers.

[18] These results are presented in full in Sukhtankar et al. 2022. The RCT was registered with the American Economic Association's RCT Registry at: https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/3357. See Appendix A4 for pre-analysis plan, empirical strategy, and data.

by women.[19] In all, stations with WHDs filed 3,360 more FIRs involving women than control stations over the course of eleven months – the study period following the launch of the program. These are modest but statistically significant effects, given low baseline rates of case registration as well as low reporting by women.[20] The relationship between WHDs and arrests in CAW cases was also positive, although not statistically significant.[21] While this may indicate a limit to police responsiveness to women, it also reflects the complex factors that shape whether an arrest is appropriate or desired (including the nature of the case and whether complainants want perpetrators to be arrested).

These results reveal small but substantive changes in responsiveness in stations that traditionally have been inhospitable to and dismissive of women. While just one step, FIRs are of first order importance since they precede other legal action including investigation, arrests (where deemed appropriate), and criminal proceedings. Filing an FIR all but guarantees access to the justice system, since nearly all (over 98%) result in court cases.[22]

Methodology: beyond the RCT

While the RCT showed a significant increase in registration of women's cases, it cast little light on *why* stations with WHDs filed more FIRs, particularly in light of the capacity constraints, political pressures, and dismissive narratives described above. How did the presence of a WHD shape officer behavior in resource-constrained police stations operating with entrenched patriarchal norms? What role did female officers play in settings where they are typically

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[19] There was no displacement between types of cases; rates of FIRs for other types of cases did not change as FIRs for women increased.

[20] A study in MP's major cities found that, while 13% of women stated they had experienced intimate partner violence and 23% experienced public harassment or violence, only 1% had reported this to the police (Neville et al. 2014).

[21] The coefficient on arrests is positive, but standard errors are large ($-0.58, 1.11$).

[22] Access to the court system is not, of course, a guarantee of justice itself, which depends on the timely processing and resolution of cases in court, as well as non-judicial factors affecting compliance with court mandates (see Section 7).

marginalized? In short, how did a public agency with a long history of neglecting women become more responsive to their needs?

To explore these questions, we take a multi-method approach that extends beyond the RCT. Our approach contributes to a growing set of studies combining field experiments with qualitative research, which aids in contextualizing an intervention and interpreting outcomes (Seawright, Druckman, and Green 2021); in explaining null effects and obstacles (Rao et al. 2017; Arkedis et al. 2021); in analyzing complex causal processes and mechanisms (Paluck 2010; Bamberger et al. 2010; Gottlieb 2016; Pierotti, Lake and Lewis 2018); and in observing unintended outcomes – including those that may not be quantifiable or which were not pre-registered (Rao et al. 2017; Bamberger et al. 2010).

Our qualitative research was integral to all stages of the project, from theory building to program design and piloting, studying implementation over time, and exploring mechanisms and counterfactuals to build and bolster our theory. [23] Our approach was iterative, moving from open-ended observations and focus group discussions to semi-structured interviews to more structured qualitative data collection woven into the experimental design. This iteration helped open up the inner workings of police stations and embed station-level behaviors within the wider organizational context of policing in MP.

We began with scoping work, in conversation with senior MPP officers, including extended visits to police stations and accompanying officers on beat duty, which shaped our research questions and design. In the pilot phase, we interviewed and observed officers and attended police trainings, building our understanding of everyday conditions and police practices that would shape the operation of the WHDs. This helped inform the refinement of the program design, including the development of standard operating procedures and training modules, as well as the design of baseline officer surveys. With the program's formal launch, we then intensively studied eight selected police stations. The

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[23] We included the rationale and plans for qualitative work in our pre-analysis plan (Appendix 4).

stations were selected to mirror the experimental design (Appendix 3), including those with WHDs run by female and male officers, as well as with no WHD. Stations were spread across two districts, including both rural and urban areas. This allowed us to trace similarities and differences across treatment groups over time and across space.

Qualitative fieldwork in those stations involved semi-structured interviews and observations, allowing us to process-trace WHD implementation (Falleti 2016). Station-level observations enabled attention to how officers received and handled women's cases in stations with and without WHDs, as well as the day-to-day operations of the desks, including their locations, infrastructure, and deployment of resources. In our interviews, we asked male and female officers about their work experiences and opinions related to gender and policing. Additional interviews with assigned HDOs focused on interactions with female complainants, their views of the WHD program, and assessments of how it affected their work and professional trajectories. This approach gave rise to unanticipated findings about the role of recognition – the core mechanism in our theory – which was not built into the experimental design of the WHD program but emerged organically from our interviews and observations of the program's development and implementation.

Station-level qualitative research was primarily carried out by two Research Assistants (RAs), one male and one female (Appendix 2). RAs visited stations biweekly over a 10-month period, an average of 21.25 day-long visits per station. RAs interviewed 46 individual station-level officers of different ranks. To ensure we captured women's perspectives within the police, female officers comprised a significant proportion (22%) of our sample.[24] Interviews were in Hindi and lasted for one hour on average; most officers were interviewed multiple times. The PIs also visited a small number of stations, primarily during pilot stages and in field visits roughly every two months of the study period. In

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[24] For interview sample characteristics, see Appendix 3, Table A3.

addition, we interviewed 18 senior officers across districts and 20 more in state headquarters, and observed training and monitoring sessions.

We are cognizant of a potential Hawthorne effect, where researcher presence could influence police behavior. However, we are confident that our qualitative research did not drive the results of the RCT. First, interviews in just eight out of 180 study stations are unlikely to affect aggregate changes in police behavior, especially given strong barriers to case registration. Second, were a Hawthorne effect at work, we would expect it across all stations; yet as we will show (section 5), the increase in women's case registration primarily occurred in female-run WHDs. The greater concern is that researcher presence in stations where RAs made repeated visits could have shaped officers' reactions, biasing our qualitative findings. While we cannot fully rule this out, our RAs received extensive training on how to build rapport with frontline officers and collect data in unobtrusive ways (Appendix 3). Moreover, in qualitative interviews respondents did not hesitate to share concerns and criticisms of the WHDs (Appendix Table A9), signaling they were not holding back in the presence of our research team. It is possible that our engagement with senior officers influenced behaviors. However, an intervention working at scale with government requires senior support, without which implementation is impossible. We interpret senior officer engagement as signaling commitment to the program (Section 6), rather than a performative reaction to researcher presence.

We analyzed our qualitative data using grounded theory practices, moving from open to more structured coding (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Goulding 2002; Gioia 2021). We worked iteratively with RAs to interpret the data (Appendix 3), reviewing field notes weekly as a group and highlighting themes for follow-up interviews. We engaged in collective open coding to distill core concepts, drafting thematic memos on emerging patterns. We then revisited the interviews to aggregate our codes into higher-level categories and analytical themes (Tables A4-A6). As our categories solidified, we created tables to observe how the data aligned with our codes. To ensure inter-coder reliability, we engaged a third RA

unfamiliar with the research site. Having fresh eyes revisit our data helped us to consolidate our codes and remove coding errors.

Given limitations of space, we cannot present our qualitative data in full, and so we provide additional interview evidence in Tables A7-A11. We complemented the qualitative data with statistical analysis of officer surveys (n = 1950) prior to the start of the WHD program and at the study endline (n = 1961), with an additional survey of all assigned HDOs (n = 120).

The Interplay of Representation and Resources

A closer look at the RCT data reveals that, while stations with WHDs registered significantly more women's cases than control stations, this effect was driven almost entirely by the second treatment arm composed of women-run WHDs. While stations with "regular" WHDs were statistically indistinguishable from control stations, those run by female officers filed 18.6% more FIRs in CAW cases and 10.5% more FIRs by women over the study period (Figure 3).
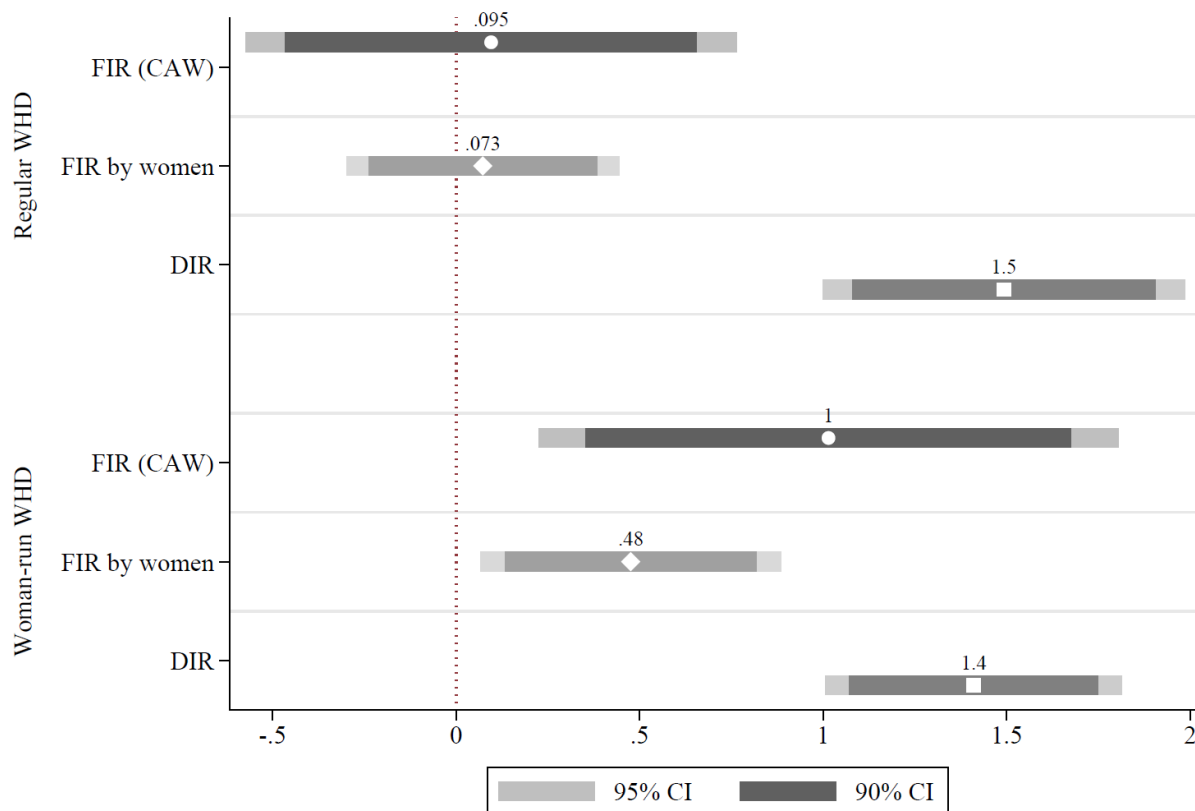
Notes: Data from Sukhtankar et al. 2022. X-axis is the number of registered cases per month. WHD = Women's WHD. FIR = First Information Report, the formal criminal registration of a complaint. FIR (CAW) = FIR in a "Crimes Against Women" case, referring to specific categories of crimes in the Indian Penal Code.

Figure 3: Case registration is driven by women-run WHDs

Creating and equipping physical space for women

All stations in the program established physical desks, and there were no significant differences between "regular" and "women-run" WHDs in the presence of HDO officers, numbers of trainings, or hours of operations (Table 1).

Table 1: WHD human resources

	(1) HDO at desk	(2) Hours open	(3) # Trainings
Woman-run WHD	-0.011	-0.669	0.928
	(0.089)	(1.367)	(0.961)
Observations	105	116	109
Adjusted R-squared	-0.023	-0.072	0.177
Regular WHD mean	0.264	13.005	6.236
Strata controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes:

HDO at desk indicates whether the Help Desk Officer was at the WHD at the time of the interview.

"Hours open" refers to the number of hours in a day the WHD was open.

"# Trainings" is the number of station-level trainings on WHDs.

Data from endline survey of police officers.

Full model and estimation equation in Appendix A4.

However, beyond these basic indicators of program compliance (details in Appendix A1), there were significant differences in the quality and depth of program implementation. Women-run WHDs were significantly more likely to have their own room, as opposed to a cubicle or just a desk (Table 2). Allocating room for the desks within stations made their work visible to other officers. In one police station, for example, the desk's room was near the entrance of the main building, making it visible to all in the station. The room was well equipped, with curtains covering the windows and doorway, allowing for privacy, and seating for complainants and their family members. A male officer posted at the station took note, commenting: *"Physical infrastructure has improved…There is a separate room for the help desk."*[25]

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[25] Station interview, B_T4_SI_M, October 2019.

Table 2: WHD infrastructure and location

	(1) Separate room	(2) WHD outside	(3) Toilet	(4) Board outside	(5) Board inside
Woman-run WHD	0.146**	-0.152	-0.043	-0.032	0.176**
	(0.073)	(0.103)	(0.087)	(0.090)	(0.087)
Observations	117	93	117	105	105
Adjusted R-squared	0.097	0.061	0.172	0.086	0.047
Regular WHD mean	0.729	0.558	0.508	0.302	0.660
Strata controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes:
"Separate room" indicates whether the WHD has its own room within the station.
"WHD outside" indicates whether the WHD is in a building outside the main station.
"Toilet" is an indicator for whether the police station had a women's toilet for the WHD.
"Board outside (inside)" is an indicator for whether the WHD had a board advertising its presence outside (inside) the station.
Data from endline survey of police officers.
Full model and estimation equation in Appendix A4.

The allocation of rooms for WHDs not only enabled privacy, conducive to establishing better rapport with visitors, but also signaled the importance assigned to the program in cramped settings where officers often compete for space. In women-run WHD stations, rooms were also more likely to be clearly marked by a banner advertising the desk – making it visible to the public when visiting the station (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A demarcated WHD room, and a female HDO at her desk

Having dedicated space also helped to focus and motivate officers' work on women's cases. In one station, for example, the desk was positioned with a view of the main entrance gate, so that whenever a woman entered the station the HDO could set her other work aside to attend to the complainant's case. A female officer in a different station remarked, *"One feels good sitting in that brand new room, which looks clean and tidy."*[26] The presence of a women's toilet, while statistically not different across women-run and regular WHD stations, was particularly impactful for female officers. As one explained, *"We lady officers had a tough time with common toilets which were not maintained hygienically…. We feel so respected that we have our own private toilet in the police station itself."*[27]

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[26] Station interview, A_T3_HC_M, October 2019.
[27] Station interview, A_T4_HC_M, February 2020.

Table 3: WHD resources

	(1) Documents	(2) HD furniture	(3) HD items
Woman-run WHD	0.208	0.312	0.625**
	(0.238)	(0.213)	(0.251)
Observations	104	105	105
Adjusted R-squared	-0.037	0.133	0.397
Regular WHD mean	5.364	2.415	2.283
Strata controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes:
"Documents" is an index tallying whether the WHD kept copies of i) SOPs ii) daily register iii) intake forms iv) after hours form v) inter-agency form vi) outreach guide vii) outreach plan. "HD furniture" is an index tallying whether the WHD had i) chair for visitors ii) table iii) computer/printer iv) cupboard for personal items v) cupboard for office items vi) couch. "HD items" is an index tallying whether the WHD had i) first aid box ii) sanitary napkins iii) common medicines iv) tea and snacks.
Data from endline survey of police officers.
Full model and estimation equation in Appendix A4.

All WHD stations received operating budgets to furnish their spaces. Most stations invested in tables, chairs, computers, and printers. Most also had basic supplies like stationery and copies of WHD documents, including operating manuals and activity registers. But women-run WHDs also had *additional* items available; an index of these items including sanitary napkins, a first-aid box, medicines, and tea and coffee for visitors, is significantly higher given a female HDO (Table 3). This reveals a greater willingness of female officers to invest in the desks and an awareness of what would increase women's comfort when visiting the police station.

Enlarging cognitive space for attention to women's cases

The WHD program also expanded the cognitive space, along with knowledge and skill, for officers to attend to women's cases. Establishing the post of HDO was particularly impactful, given severe staff shortages that leave officers overburdened and often unable to process the many demands on their time. With newly appointed HDOs, police stations could focus more attention on women's

complainants. One female HDO described: *"It is better now as manpower has increased, and I am fully dedicated to the desk."*[28] Several HDOs we interviewed expressed the view that *"the desk allows me to focus."* As another HDO elaborated: *"I like the help desk more than [working in] a normal station without the desk, because the work on crimes against women has become more structured and my working pattern has become more organized."*[29]

This work was facilitated by a set of standard operating procedures developed by the senior MPP program team, who engaged seasoned police trainers, legal and gender experts in civil society organizations, as well as local officers. The procedures included directives on gender-sensitive practices to guide the intake of women's cases (e.g., ensuring privacy, offering refreshment, readily available medical supplies, and procedures for referrals to medical and social services), as well as on legal requirements pertaining to how to handle and register crimes against women. The procedures were simplified through checklists and flow charts, in a language familiar to local officers.

Training on those procedures took place at multiple levels: state, district, and police stations.[30] This brought trainers directly into local stations, in contrast to the typical approach where stations send a few officers to central training sites. These repeated rounds of training helped to reinforce legal and practical knowledge regarding how to record and handle crimes against women. In one female HDO's words: *"Now the ladies come to us, and we are able to concentrate on her case with more focus. For example, if she needs medical assistance or legal support, we are able to assist her, which has only been possible because of [the help desks]."*[31] Station-level training also ensured that knowledge was not confined just to the assigned HDOs. Instead, other officers within the station also gained exposure to the program. As one female HDO observed, *"It has been reinforced that the program is meant for women in need, and all officers*

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[28] Station interview, A_T4_UDO_F, September 2019.
[29] Station Interview, B1HCG_Support UDO, November 2022.
[30] For more on WHD training, see Appendix A1.
[31] Station interview, B_T1_UDO Support Officer_F, November 2022.

and [Station Heads] *have started thinking that the help desk is now an important wing of the police station.*[32]

Recognition as Catalyst

What drove and enabled female officers to utilize WHD resources differently, and why did female HDOs appear to embrace the work of the desks more fully? We argue that investments in resources and representation at the WHDs were jointly activated by changes in how women were seen and valued within the police agency. As one female HDO described, *"Now with the help desk program, crimes against women's cases have a special and prominent identity, like having a support officer like me."*[33] This reveals a central mechanism enabling active representation at the WHDs: a deepening of the institutional recognition of women. In this section, we ask: how was this recognition produced within the police, how did it operate, and why did it appear to matter differently for female than male officers?

Recognition from above and below: symbolic space for women

Resources allocated to the WHDs created and enlarged spaces for women: physical space within stations and cognitive space to attend to women's cases. The program also, we argue, also enhanced symbolic space within the police agency by acknowledging and prioritizing women's needs and by building the professional standing of female officers. As we describe below, these shifts were multi-scalar and multi-sited, occurring from above (through senior officer commitments) and from below (through station-level behaviors). Supplementary evidence from interviews is given in Appendix 3 (Tables A9-A10).

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[32] Station interview, B_T4_UDO_F, February 2020.
[33] Station interview, B1HCG_Support UDO, November 2022.

Recognition was not formally part of the WHD program or RCT design and, as noted, was an unanticipated mechanism. That said, the process of building recognition began with intentional action by senior officers, who not only sanctioned resources but also publicly signaled their commitment to the program. The program emerged in the context of heightened political attention to women's security, given media and civil society scrutiny of high-profile cases of rape, murder, and other atrocities against women. Yet, senior politicians and officers within the MPP faced mixed incentives. On the one hand, there was an urgent need to be seen to be doing something to address the crisis of GBV, and police agencies across India had begun experimenting with reforms for women's security. On the other hand, senior officers operated in an environment in which reform activities around women's cases were not rewarded historically. Postings to the Crimes Against Women branch within the MPP headquarters, for example, were widely perceived as being lower status and less desirable compared to other positions. In addition, the concern persisted that initiatives leading to increased women's case registration could give the police a "bad reputation" (*bhigadi chavi*).

In this context, the number of officers within MPP headquarters who initially took an active interest in gender-oriented reforms was small. Yet, this group included some of the most senior officials – including the Director General of Police (DGP), Special DGs for training and human resources, and the director of the training department. This group seized on a moment of heightened political salience of women's issues to push forward the WHD program. Through conversation with these senior officers, it became clear that, while they cared about gender issues from a normative perspective, the WHD program also presented a strategic opportunity to reframe dominant narratives about crime registration. Instead of indicating police apathy or rising violence, they believed that higher rates of recorded crimes against women could be re-interpreted by politicians, media, and the public as a sign of more accessible and responsive policing.

Senior MPP officers established the policy vision and groundwork for the WHDs, including the allocation of resources for the desks, trainings, and officer postings. A senior program team worked across subdivisions to mobilize resources, demarcating special budgets (totaling $1.82 million) for WHD infrastructure, materials, and training.[34] Skilled officers from MPP's Training Department were assigned to manage program operations. Beyond those initial allocations, public statements and actions by high-level officers signaled their commitment. Notably, the DGP held press conferences to launch and inspect the desks, which were covered in state and local media. These commitments were made credible to district and frontline officers through continued rounds of monitoring. Districts were required to regularly collect "scrutiny reports" on WHD performance from local stations and to report their findings to the police headquarters. District Superintendents were called to monthly video conferences with the Special DG for training, who publicly praised well-performing districts and admonished laggards.

District Superintendents, in turn, played a central role in pushing local stations to perform. Superintendents held regular meetings with Station Heads, obtaining monthly WHD progress reports from each station, and included reporting on the WHDs in their weekly crime meetings in which all stations reviewed active cases. Superintendents also appointed a nodal officer as District Coordinator to manage training and monitor help desk implementation. Based on this monitoring, Superintendents rewarded certain stations, including handing out commendations to particular HDOs. Importantly, none of these rewards at either the headquarters or district level were formally part of the WHD intervention design; instead, these practices unfolded at the discretion of senior officers, signaling their commitment to the program.

Station-level actors responded to those signals and, through their resource utilization, further amplified the recognition of women's cases. By allocating

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[34] For more on WHD budgets, see the Appendix (A1).

physical spaces, budgets, and dedicated officers to attend to women's cases, the WHD program ascribed importance to women's needs within the scope of a station's broader work. The resources channeled to the desks not only built officers' capacity to handle cases but – in a resource-scarce environment – ascribed value to their work. In one station, for example, the help desk was in a back room; but since it had the only photocopier, officers from the whole station routinely visited. The female HDO posted there joked, *"See, now everyone is coming to my room!"*[35] In other instances, WHD resources became the subject of contestation – signaling how valued they were. In a striking example, a female HDO chained her desk and chairs to the wall so that others in the station would not take them, fighting to maintain the resources assigned to the WHD.

Recognition of female personnel

Theoretically, the same signaling of commitment from senior officers and increases in the visibility of women's cases could have also motivated male HDOs to invest more deeply in their work. That this did not occur reveals a key difference in responsiveness of male and female officers. We argue that this reflects a *differential* effect of institutional recognition for women within the police.

Male officers posted to the WHDs – despite receiving the same resources and messages as their female counterparts – did not appear to derive the same value from work at the desks. This may reflect that male officers tended to have broader avenues to gain institutional recognition, and so did not need to rely on the WHD program to build their professional standing. Some male HDOs, moreover, may have felt that WHD work was a distraction from "real" policing. Given the historical tendency to marginalize women's cases, some men may have perceived their assignment to the WHDs as a demotion or signal that they were *les*s valued in the stations.

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[35] Station observation, Bhopal, August 2019.

In contrast, the WHDs were among the few arenas in which female officers – long sidelined within the police force – could gain recognition. Leading a help desk became a way to distinguish themselves. In one station, for example, a female HDO stated: *"I am the most remembered and recognized woman constable in the station because of help desk work…. I have earned a good name in handling crimes against women."*[36] Notably, many of the WHDs had posters listing the name of the HDO alongside her photo.[37] In one thana that PIs visited, we saw such a poster alongside another with reproductions of news coverage concerning the WHD – all centrally featuring the female HDO (Figure 5). In stations where the names and photos of the largely male leadership are regularly displayed, this visual acknowledgement of female officers stood out. As one summed up, *"I feel very proud being a female police officer."*[38]

Figure 5. Female HDO stands beside posters acknowledging her role and work

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[36] Station interview, B4CF_Support UDO, September 2023.
[37] This practice was not part of the WHD design but developed organically as stations implemented the desks.
[38] Station interview B_T2_C_F, February 2020.

The public-facing and centrally visible position of HDO also afforded female officers a unique opportunity to build their work profiles. Prior to the WHD program, female officers were typically assigned to routine station work (e.g., office or paperwork), and to law-and-order duty at public events. And while female officers are typically required to be involved in women's cases (e.g., accompanying a woman for a medical report), few were assigned to fully handle the case – e.g., to register the FIR, to ensure investigation, and to follow the case through the courts. Assignment to the WHDs and accompanying training therefore substantially expanded female HDOs' responsibilities and legal and procedural knowledge.

Notably, the WHD program also drove shifts in gendered patterns of communication within local police stations. When filing an FIR, for example, HDOs had to seek sign-off from the Station Head. Since most heads are male, this meant that female HDOs had to communicate regularly with senior male colleagues. For example, in one station, we observed the female HDO routinely approach the Station Head for guidance on legal questions, which raised her confidence in handling women's cases.[39] Female HDOs also coordinated with other male staff when investigating cases. This represents a notable change in workplace dynamics in settings where women are typically sidelined.

Discussion

Police responsiveness to women at the WHDs, we have argued, was the product of an interactive mix of representation, resources, and recognition. While all three components were necessary, none were sufficient on their own. To demonstrate, we briefly consider a set of counterfactuals. First, our RCT design

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[39] Station Observations B_T1.

allowed us to directly assess the impact of representation by comparing regular and women-run WHDs, which, as we have shown, enabled more case registration. Yet descriptive representation alone is unlikely to drive responsiveness. Elsewhere in India, for example, all-women stations staffed entirely by female officers do not appear to perform as the WHDs do. Instead, research suggests that these stations may deter the filing of women's cases by enabling ordinary (mixed gender) stations to deflect responsibility for gendered crimes (Jassal 2020). A direct comparison of the WHD program to all-women's stations is beyond the scope of this paper. Our study design focused on ordinary as opposed to specialized police stations, of which there are very few in MP. Typically, there is only one all-women station per district located in urban centers, making them physically inaccessible to most women. Nonetheless, the example of all-women stations is instructive, as it demonstrates that simply posting female officers does not automatically generate responsiveness to women's cases.

Second, while we cannot isolate the impact of resources within the RCT given that all WHDs received the same inputs, our interviews with female officers at baseline and in control stations reveal the severity of resource constraints. Officers frequently cited the lack of station-level resources impacting their work, including under-staffing, absence of basic supplies such as stationary or gas for vehicles, and long working hours.[40] While these constraints affected all officers, they were particularly acute for women who, as noted, are among the most overworked within a station. A female constable in a control station, for example, recounted: *"My duty is 24 hours…. I cannot give time to anybody in my family and friends. I cannot commit time to reach home."*[41] Resource constraints also materially impacted female officers in differential ways, for example, due to a lack of toilets for women in most police stations, creating discomfort and demoralizing working conditions. As these examples

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[40] See Appendix 3, Table A7.
[41] Station interview, B_T2_C, September 2019.

show, resources are essential for policing; but, as their lesser utilization in regular-WHDs reveals, resources are not automatically channeled towards women's needs.

Third, to demonstrate that recognition is necessary, we must consider how the WHD program would have functioned absent the agency-wide shifts in the visibility and standing of women that we observed. Our RCT design again does not permit us to directly assess this scenario. However, the example of all-women stations offers a plausible counterfactual. A key difference between the WHDs and all-women stations, we suggest, lies in the institutional recognition that surrounds the initiatives. As Jassal (2021: 631) has observed elsewhere in India, all-women stations "marginalize gender issues from the mainstream," making women's cases less rather than more visible, while leaving female officers isolated and unsupported. Despite their resources and being staffed fully by female officers, all-women's stations appear not to have enhanced the recognition of female personnel or of women's issues more generally.

To be sure, formal recognition alone is also insufficient. Here, we can learn from prior attempts by MPP to establish women's help desks. In 2008, senior officials issued a circular calling for the creation of such desks in one station per district. Beyond written circulars, however, no dedicated budget was sanctioned. And while additional female officers were supposed to be posted, these posts largely remained vacant. Most help desks therefore existed "*on paper only*," if at all.[42] The effort was renewed in 2012, following a gang rape case in Delhi that gained national media attention. A circular sanctioned the creation of help desks in 184 police stations. However, this declaration from police headquarters was not accompanied with substantive commitments to reform. A senior officer reflecting on these efforts called them a "*publicity gimmick*" in response to "*public hoopla*."[43] Recognition through public statements and policy

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[42] Interview with senior official, Police Headquarter, Bhopal, July 2017.
[43] Interview with senior official, Police Headquarter, Bhopal, July 2018.

proclamations did little on its own to build responsiveness without substantive investments to build capacity and representation in local stations.

Could other factors beyond resources, representation, and recognition also have driven responsiveness to women? We cannot exhaustively show that it is only these three components that impacted the implementation and performance of the WHDs, which, as we have described, was complex and multifaceted. We do argue, however, that these were the *central* factors at work, as opposed to a number of other alternative explanations.

First, perhaps women, newly aware of the WHDs, came to the police station more often – particularly if they learned that a female officer was posted to the desk. If so, case registration could have been driven by increased reporting by women rather than behavioral changes among officers. We rule out this possibility by looking at the rates at which women came to police stations with and without WHDs. Analysis of CCTV data, from cameras routinely placed by police at station entrances, shows no difference in women approaching police stations (Sukhtankar et al. 2022). Any change in case registration is therefore most likely attributable to changes in police – rather than public – behavior. This, however, highlights a limitation of the WHD program: inadequate community outreach by officers,[44] in addition to a lack of impact on the social factors that inhibit women's reporting.

Second, perhaps female officers, rather than responding to the dynamics of recognition as we described, were intrinsically motivated by a sense of gender solidarity. We cannot rule out that some female officers were driven by empathy towards other women. However, our baseline survey suggests that this was not widespread. In fact, female officers were *more* likely (55%) than male officers (45%) to believe that women report "false cases" against men. Prior research on police in India and elsewhere also documents the prevalence of patriarchal

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[44] Community outreach failed to reach substantial portions of the public; only about 10% of citizens had heard of WHDs, and there were no differences between treatment and control groups in awareness, nor the number or proportion of women visiting police stations (Sukhtankar et al. 2022).

beliefs among female officers embedded in male-dominated stations (Hautzinger 2007). Notably, however, female officers were the only ones at the study endline to express a change in beliefs about false cases, aligning their views with their male counterparts. This suggests that it is possible that female officers, as they became more exposed to women's cases and narratives at the WHDs, became more sympathetic to them – even if dismissive beliefs were not wholesale eliminated.

Third, perhaps the increase in FIRs reflected a change in bureaucratic incentive structures. For example, officers could have filed more women's cases to attempt to gain promotions. This, however, is implausible, since police promotions are almost entirely based on seniority or part of formal recruitment drives. In addition, incentives against filing FIRs remained strong, as evidenced by how rare an event they remained – even with the WHD program. Nonetheless, it would also be incorrect to say that officers' incentives did not change with the WHDs. Indeed, we argue that institutional recognition did shift incentives, but in a manner disconnected from formal institutional mechanisms such as promotion or transfer. Instead, recognition provided informal inducements, such as gaining prestige or respect within the police station.

However, there can also be downsides to recognition within public agencies. When personnel are empowered to serve marginalized groups, for example, their visibility might provoke resentment and even backlash from dominant groups (Brulé 2020). As Kanter (1977) noted, minority personnel can face a high degree of scrutiny and pressure. The politics of difference that gives way to recognition, moreover, could paradoxically end up reinforcing segregation within the workplace (Jassal 2021) while reifying social identities (Islam 2012).

Some female officers expressed concerns along these lines. For example, some appeared to resent being assigned "women's work," stating their preference to engage in a wider variety of tasks outside of the station, such as "beat duty" patrolling neighborhoods. Others worried about being partitioned off rather than integrated into the station, while still others felt that the desks created an

excuse for men to offload work on them.[45] Some cited the added pressures of having to perform help desk work alongside their domestic duties. As one female officer put it: "*It's very challenging to balance work and personal life. I have to provide my family lunch, but I also have to be here in the station.*"[46] While these critical views were expressed by a minority of female officers, they illustrate important heterogeneity in the experiences of the WHD program (Small and Calarco 2022). Meanwhile, some male officers dismissed the WHD program's contributions, while diminishing the value of female staff in their stations. As a Station Head exclaimed, "*It is one of the worst things that the MPP has done by increasing [the hiring of] female police!*"[47] These attitudes reflect the potential for backlash against gender-oriented reforms.

In addition, recognition from above – while essential – also introduces contingency to the reform process. The WHD program required continuous inputs and scrutiny from senior officials; but if such high-level attention fades, the value ascribed to women's cases and the standing of officials assigned to that work may likewise erode. Much rests on whether the politics of recognition associated with the WHDs becomes institutionalized in a manner that integrates rather than sidelines women within the police. In a sign that commitments to the WHD program have been partially institutionalized, MPP has, since the completion of our study, scaled the program from the original 180 stations to over 1,000 stations, covering the full state. Yet, questions remain about the program's persistence and expansion, and whether it can withstand backlash and other reactionary pressures.

There are, moreover, limits to the responsiveness engendered at the help desks, which did not fundamentally alter patriarchal norms within the police. The WHDs did challenge certain norms; for example, dismissive narratives leading to officer refusals to register women's cases. Yet the program also

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[45] For qualitative evidence of criticisms and backlash against the WHD program, see Appendix 3, Table A9.
[46] Station interview, B_T3_UDO_F, December 2019.
[47] Station interview, B4_SHO_M, December 2019.

conformed to other norms; for example, the posting of female HDOs may have reinforced the notion that women's cases are best handled by other women and not of equal concern to male officers. The WHD program, in addition, did not produce observable changes in the rates at which women approached the police – suggesting that little shifted in women's willingness to report violence within our study's timeframe. This may reflect inadequate community outreach by the police but also is a function of myriad factors that inhibit women's access to justice, including social pressure not to report, limits to women's collective mobilization (Walsh 2008; Roychowdhury 2021), and the gatekeeping role of men in patriarchal settings (Cheema et al. 2022).

The scope of gender-oriented reforms within the Indian police is further limited by barriers emanating from a severely overburdened justice system that systematically inhibits women's access to justice (Roychowdhury 2021). In a long, multi-agency process, women may become disillusioned if initial progress on a case is stymied at later stages (Jassal 2024), and gendered justice gaps may be shifted rather than diminished (Gunderson & Huber 2024). Yet, despite these limitations, the WHD program demonstrates the possibility of change within the police. While the gains in responsiveness are incomplete, they nonetheless "poke holes in the blanket of impunity" (Gallagher 2023) that surrounds violence against women.

Conclusion

The WHD program provides a unique window into a longstanding question in the study of governance and institutional reform: how might public agencies become more responsive to marginalized citizens? We propose a theory of bureaucratic responsiveness, in which institutional recognition catalyzes representation of marginalized social groups as well as resources to actively serve those groups. We illustrated the theory in the crucial domains of policing

and gender, where women's concerns are routinely dismissed by officers embedded in capacity-constrained and patriarchal agencies. Against this backdrop, WHDs in local police stations increased the registration of crimes against women. This, we have shown, was primarily driven by female officers who built their professional standing by utilizing resources to more effectively serve women.

We expect, broadly, that institutional recognition will play similarly critical roles regarding other social groups (beyond women) and in other public agencies (beyond the police) under three sets of conditions. First, the catalytic effect of recognition will be more pronounced for groups for whom it has been historically absent or muted; that is, recognition will matter most for those who have gone unseen and unheard within an agency. Second, institutional recognition requires visible commitments from senior management, particularly under conditions of organizational hierarchy where frontline personnel are acutely attuned to signals from above. Third, such commitments are more likely when there is an enabling sociopolitical environment signaling support for reforms.

All three of these conditions hold in the case of the WHDs and within the MPP: patriarchal norms and practices have long rendered women invisible within the police, making recognition particularly important to female officers; senior officers responded to an environment of civil society pressure and electoral demands for attention to women's security; and the police is a steeply hierarchical organization, which makes signals from above highly salient to frontline personnel. Elsewhere, other studies of policing infer recognition's importance by highlighting its absence. In Pakistan, for example, female officers were professionally stymied rather than rewarded due to agency-wide stigmatization – as opposed to recognition – of work on women's cases (Husain 2024). Similarly, Blair et al. (2021) explain null effects of community policing across the global south by highlighting gaps in police capacity (insufficient resources) undergirded by a lack of prioritization of reforms by police leadership

(lack of recognition). Efforts to integrate officers from ethnic minorities (representation) did not alter these dynamics; indeed, a study in Liberia found that community patrols with minority officers were *more* likely to discriminate against minority civilians (Blair et al. 2022).

Beyond policing, our research contributes to the study of gender and policy change (Htun & Weldon 2012; Brulé 2020), offering insights into what it takes to move from passive presence to active representation within public agencies (Riccucci & Meyers 2004). Other work in the context of deep-seated gender inequalities suggests a similar interplay between resources and representation, where each is insufficient without the other, and where neither is activated absent shifts in recognition. Reforms in India's school system, for example, have promoted specialized programming for girls with broad mandates for female staff, but often without gender-oriented training and field support needed to fulfill those mandates (Mangla 2022b), while in Uganda, efforts to hire more female teachers have similarly been stymied by approaches that "add women and stir" while reinforcing divisions and marginalizing female personnel (Datzberger & LeMat 2018). In Pakistan's healthcare sector, Lady Health Supervisors are charged with carrying out ambitious national vaccination campaigns but have no dedicated space within government hospitals to do their work (Husain 2024). In all these cases, policy proclamations are transmitted to descriptively representative local agents who – in the absence of recognition – are too constrained or demotivated to embrace their mandates. The result, quite often, is performative governance rather than substantive institutional change (Ding 2020).

Beyond gender, our study casts light on broader dynamics of how social inequality is reproduced within public agencies, and how it might be challenged by attention to the dynamics of institutional recognition. Future research should investigate whether and how racial and ethnic inequalities in public agencies might similarly be shifted. Our central contribution is to identify the catalytic role of institutional recognition in activating representation and mobilizing

resources. Calling on the politics of difference, presence, and dignity, recognition lays bare the needs of marginalized social groups, acknowledges their presence within public institutions, and affirms their social worth. Precisely how this unfolds will likely vary given different political and social contexts (for example, the political salience of caste is different than that of gender in India), as well as different forms of marginalization: histories of neglect and invisibility, for example, are different than histories of outright discriminatory targeting, which suggest that recognition may play different role with regard to gender than caste or religion in India (Jensenius 2017; Chakrabarti 2024), or race in other contexts (Soss and Weaver 2017). We argue, though, that any effort to build responsiveness to marginalized citizens must contend with whether and how those citizens are seen and valued within and by a public agency. Our research highlights public agencies as critical arenas for citizen-state relations, sites where social inequalities are reproduced and greater responsiveness is sorely needed (Park 2022). Attention to the politics of recognition within these spaces, we contend, can illuminate long-standing injustices as well as attempts to correct and mitigate inequality.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit see Appendix.

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The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the University of Virginia (mu SBS #2548), University of Oxford (SSH_SBS_C1A_18_065), and the Institute for Financial Management and Research in India (#7107). The authors affirm that this article adheres to the principles concerning research with human participants laid out in APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research (2020).

ON ETHICS AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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