

Fighting rapes with politics

In the



Photo: AFP

aftermath of the brutal Delhi gangrape, there have been numerous demands for effective policy measures that can prevent crimes against women. The government is placing its bets on a stringent law that calls for greater punishment to culprits of rape and violence against women, including the option of death penalty. Others are demanding fast-track courts, increased policing on the streets and CCTVs. In its wisdom, the Mumbai Police passed orders to crack down on unmarried couples in isolated spots, a measure that was quickly revoked after it met with widespread criticism.

Amid the din, there is little discussion of policy measures that have been proven to be effective through rigorous research. One such remarkably effective solution is something so familiar that few could have guessed it: political representation for women.

In a recently published paper in a leading economics journal, Harvard professor Lakshmi Iyer and her co-authors study crime data from 17 major states in India and over 22 years (1985-2007) to find the effect of political reservations for women at the local level on crimes against women. They find the reservations, as mandated by the 73rd constitutional amendment, enabled significantly more women to get crimes against them recorded, and resulted in more effective police action — both in terms of the number of arrests and the quality of women's interactions with the police.

The study's first finding initially shocked the researchers. "We were hoping to find that this (reservations for women) would reduce crimes against women," says Iyer. "But we found exactly the opposite." They found

that after the implementation of reservations, documented crimes against women (per 1,000 population) shot up by 46 percent, including a 23 percent increase in rapes and 13 percent increase in kidnapping.

Analysing their data for crimes not associated with women (like property crimes) or crimes that are less likely to be under-reported (like murders and suicides), and piecing together information from a few other studies, the researchers conclude that the spike in the figures reflect more accurate reporting rather than an increase in actual crimes committed against women after reservations were implemented. This is both due to greater police responsiveness to crimes against women and a greater willingness of women to report crimes in the presence of local female leaders.

The study also finds a remarkable impact on the effectiveness of police action. After the implementation of reservations for women, the number of arrests for crimes against women rose by 30 percent without any drop in the quality of police action as reflected by a constant rate of chargesheeting. Moreover, women living in villages with a female pradhan displayed greater satisfaction in their interactions with the police.

What make these results even more interesting is that local elected representatives have no formal authority over the police, which operates under the mandate of the state government. These results, therefore, point to a significant leverage that local leaders have over the police through informal channels of influence, and suggest an even stronger possibility of such influence if the state representatives (MLAs) were also women.

The findings add to the significant body of evidence emerging in the past 15 years, which shows that political reservations at the local level has benefited women in multiple ways. It has significantly improved their participation at various stages of the political process (not just elections), and has weakened stereotypes about gender roles in the public and domestic spheres, among others. Taken together, they make a compelling case for the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill that will extend political reservations for women to state and national legislatures.

The MPs who passed the 73rd constitutional amendment Act two decades ago may have relied on the hope and promise of women's empowerment through political reservations. The ones in Parliament now can do better: they have hard evidence that political representation significantly improves the voice of women in the criminal justice system. Will they choose to act?

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