

Gender-based Violence against Women and Governance: The Case of Kolkata

Abstract

Gender-based crime, particularly sexual assault in India has captured national and international attention. The Park Street rape in Kolkata, Nirbhaya gang rape in New Delhi and Shakti Mills gang rape in Mumbai are some of the incidences which have created headlines in the last few years and are still afresh in public memory. It was the brutal gang rape and death of a college student in Delhi (rechristened Nirbhaya by the media) which generated nationwide protest and called for reforms in rape laws. It also brought the issue of sexual violence into the public discourse which had largely remained confined to the women's movement in India. It situated gender-based violence as a governance issue highlighting the provision of a safe environment for women as the obligation of the government. Responsive governance towards victims of gender-based violence reflects the constitutional commitment to gender equality. In post-liberalized India, with rising literacy levels, emphasis on women's empowerment and governance, crimes against women are also on the rise. The normalization of everyday violence against women in India (particularly domestic violence), with Nirbhaya like incidents of exception (as brutal gang rape and murder), in the fabric of everyday life inspired me to take a relook at violence against women as an area of contemporary social and public policy-oriented research. Literature suggests that governance response to violence against women is an important but understudied area of public policy.

Considering these aspects, I seek to understand governance response to gender-based crime against women in an Indian city. With transformations in Indian culture and society, the role of multiple actors in preventing gender-based violence cannot be ignored. Towards this objective, a governance paradigm is applied in this research as it recognizes the role of multiple agencies in organizing and undertaking women's safety and security. Recognizing the complexity of studying violence against women and governance, I study the research problem from both a macro and micro level perspective to get a comprehensive view of the governance response. At the macro level, data analysis of crime against women using descriptive statistics is done. For the macro-level analysis, secondary data from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) is used to provide a temporal context against which gender-based crime can be looked at. I draw upon NCRB data to analyze the trends and patterns of gender-based crimes in India. Achieving gender

equality is one of the Constitutional mandates in India. This finding is retested in the case of Indian states by simple data analysis of variables of gender inequality and the rate of crime against women in the respective states. For this purpose, UNDP's Gender Inequality Index (GII) is adopted to analyze state level data on crime against women. The findings show that the rates of crime against women (CAW) have grown while general crime rates have decreased over the years. Further the distribution of states by GII does not follow a pattern. States with low and high GII show similar average CAW rates while moderate GII states show the highest average CAW rates. The CAW growth rates however, are lowest for low GII states but continue to be the highest for moderate GII states. The results implied that while changing gender inequality is unimportant for the existing level of CAW, it plays a key role in controlling the growth of CAW rates.

To gather a deeper understanding of how governance, in reality, works in responding to gender-based violence, I conducted fieldwork in Kolkata using anthropological methods like interviews, informal interactions, and observation. I chose to explore the micro level situation in relation to rape. In-depth interviews with rape survivors, police, NGO, judiciary, media and activists were conducted over a period of 14 months. Analysis of field data presented in the form of themes provides insights into how a patriarchal ideology and organizational culture support rather than challenge violence against women.

The findings indicate that rape victims still face an unresponsive government despite a number of legislative changes regarding rape. The unresponsiveness of government is regarding its inability to take care of the victims' emotional, legal, financial and social needs. My findings are consistent with literature which credits patriarchal ideology and organizational culture, structure, logic, and practices of prosecutors and police for the unresponsiveness of government. However, rape victims have some respite in the response of civil society, women's rights organizations in particular, which seeks to address women's different needs. Though a multitude of stakeholders is involved in the governance of gender-based violence against women, most of them act in silos with little and insignificant coordination between them. The lack of coordination revealed itself in my interviews in bits and pieces. I emphasize that preventing gender-based crime against women require a multi-pronged strategy and appropriate governance through coordinated agencies, both public and private.