

IMPROVING POLICING IN THE MIDST OF PATRIARCHY

In India, creating designated women’s help desks in police stations increased the registration of crimes against women, particularly when staffed by female officers.

Featuring an evaluation by [Sandip Sukhtankar](#), [Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner](#), and [Akshay Mangla](#)

Globally, many countries face both rising levels of gender-based violence (GBV) and weak law enforcement, which often leads to underreporting of violence against women. In many settings, women may be hesitant to report crimes to the police due to stigma or low trust in policing, while the police themselves are often unresponsive to women’s concerns or are themselves perpetrators of this form of violence.

Police reforms that incorporate gender targeting, generally in an effort to increase police accountability and accessibility to women, have been commonly introduced to tackle rising levels of GBV globally. These interventions aim to reduce barriers to reporting and to improve police response to incidents of GBV, typically by either increasing women’s representation within mixed-gender police forces or creating gender-segregated services like all-women police stations. However, evidence on increasing women’s representation in police forces has been mixed—some studies suggest that creating gender-segregated services may further isolate women and limit the reach of their cases in broader law enforcement structures.^{1, 2, 3}



PHOTO: SANDIP SUKHTANKAR

In India, Sandip Sukhtankar (University of Virginia, J-PAL), Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner (University of Virginia), and Akshay Mangla (Oxford) partnered with the Madhya Pradesh Police Department to evaluate the impact of offering designated women’s help desks (WHDs) within mixed-gender police stations, alongside training for officers, on police accountability and accessibility to women.

KEY RESULTS

The WHD program led to more registrations of cases of violence against women. Stations with WHDs registered 1.5 civil cases per month on average compared to just 0.05 in stations without WHDs, and they registered 4.4 criminal cases per month on average compared to 3.8 in stations without WHDs.

These increases were driven by woman-run WHDs. While civil case recording increased in both male- and female-led WHDs, criminal case recording increased only in woman-run WHDs.

Female officers became more likely to state a desire to take women’s claims of violence seriously. Female officers were less likely to express the belief that women often file false claims against men after receiving the intervention, but men’s attitudes did not change.

Women’s perceptions of police treatment improved in some stations. Women’s self-reported levels of comfort, satisfaction, and respectful treatment increased in WHD stations with high training and implementation quality.

Women were no more likely to report cases of GBV, nor did arrests increase. Despite increases in case registrations, the rates at which women approached the police and arrests for these crimes did not shift during the study period.

EVALUATION

On one prominent measure of international gender inequality, India is currently ranked 140 out of 156 countries.⁴ It also faces high rates of GBV, with an estimated 4 in 10 women reporting domestic violence over their lifetime.⁵ Meanwhile, women make up a small share of the Indian police force, at just 7 percent.⁶

In India, police register incidents of GBV in two main ways depending on the nature of the complaint. Filing a First Information Report (FIR) at a police station opens a criminal investigation. A Domestic Incident Report (DIR) initiates civil proceedings and referrals to social services and may eventually also lead to criminal proceedings. The DIR is a relatively new procedure, initiated by a 2005 legal reform, and so it is unfamiliar to many officers.

Before the intervention, officers registered very few cases related to crimes against women. At baseline, there were close to zero DIRs and fewer than four GBV-related FIRs registered per police station (which serve 130,000 people on average) per month. In qualitative research accompanying the randomized evaluation, researchers found that officers often resisted recording cases, despite their legal obligation to do so, due to capacity constraints, lack of training and legal knowledge, and political pressure to underreport crime prevalence.

Researchers collaborated with the Madhya Pradesh Police Department to conduct a randomized evaluation to test the impact of gender-targeted police reforms, in the form of WHDs, on police accountability and accessibility to female complainants. The WHD intervention consisted of four primary components. First, stations created private spaces,

1 Wagner, Natascha, Matthias Rieger, Arjun Bedi, and Wil Hout. 2017. "Gender and Policing Norms: Evidence from Survey Experiments among Police Officers in Uganda." *Journal of African Economies* 26, no. 4, 492–515.

2 Jassal, Nirvikar. 2020. "Gender, Law Enforcement, and Access to Justice: Evidence from All-Women Police Stations in India." *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 4, 1035–1054.

3 Ceccato, Vania and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris. 2020. *Transit Crime and Sexual Violence in Cities: International Evidence and Prevention*. New York: Routledge.

4 World Economic Forum. 2021. *The Global Gender Gap Report 2021*. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

5 Kalokhe, Ameeta, Carlos Del Rio, Kristin Dunkle, Rob Stephenson, Nicholas Metheny, Anuradha Paranjape, and Seema Sahay. 2017. "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Systematic Review of a Decade of Quantitative Studies." *Global Public Health* 12, no. 4: 498–513.

6 Common Cause and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. *Status of Policing in India 2019: Police Adequacy and Working Conditions*. New Delhi: Common Cause and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

HELP DESKS



- Private from rest of station
- Room or cubicle
- In some cases, staffed by women
- Designed for female complainants

OFFICER TRAINING



- Overview of FIRs and DIRs
- Training on communication with state and civil society agencies
- Gender sensitization modules

COMMUNITY OUTREACH



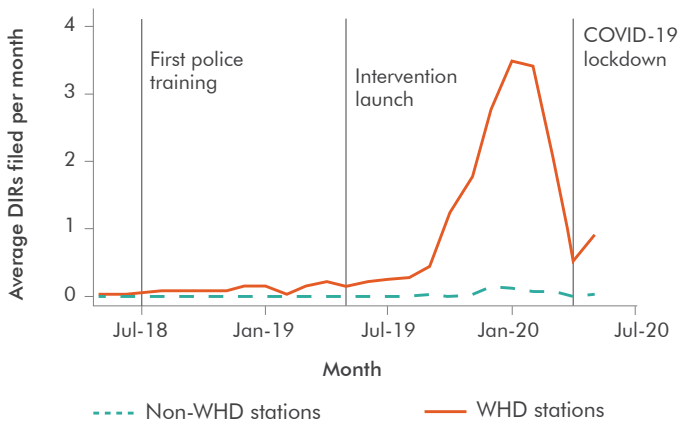
- Run by police, local community groups, and a social justice-oriented NGO, ActionAid
- Pamphlets and loudspeaker announcements from police
- Creation of community groups

such as a dedicated room or cubicle, for women seeking assistance. Second, officers received training on how to properly register cases involving crimes against women. Third, police and local community groups conducted outreach to local women's and community safety networks to alert them to the new desks. Fourth, in some stations, women were staffed to run the help desks.

The Madhya Pradesh Police Department selected 12 of the state's 51 districts to take part in the intervention, choosing districts that were representative of Madhya Pradesh's geography and demographics. Within these districts, 180 police stations participated in the intervention, excluding fully rural stations that the department considered too remote to justify a new, continually staffed WHD. Researchers randomly divided the stations into three groups: 61 stations received the first three intervention components described above, 59 received these three and also had female officers assigned to run the desks, and 60 served as the comparison group.

RESULTS

Figure 1. After WHDs were implemented, DIR filing increased sharply



WHDs led to more registrations of cases of violence against women.

Stations with WHDs registered 1.5 DIRs per month on average compared to just 0.05 in stations without WHDs, where knowledge of DIRs was very low. This resulted in 1,905 additional DIRs filed during the study. Officers in WHD stations also registered 14 percent more FIRs in cases of crimes against women, with an average of 4.4 per month compared to 3.8 in stations without WHDs. This accounted for an additional 3,360 FIRs registered during the study period. Importantly, both FIRs and DIRs initiate (criminal or civil) court proceedings, thus ensuring a critical first step in women’s access to the justice system.

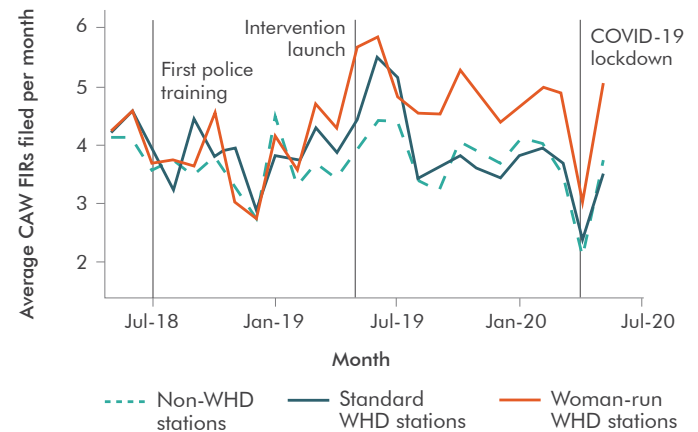
These increases were largely driven by woman-run WHDs.

The increase in FIR registrations was driven almost entirely by woman-run WHDs. By contrast, increases in DIRs occurred across both male- and female-led WHDs. Qualitative research suggests that the commitment of female officers was particularly important in filing FIRs, which—because they initiate criminal proceedings—require more time and effort from officers than DIRs to complete and also push against entrenched patriarchal norms related to “protecting families” that might be broken apart by criminal cases.

Female officers became more likely to state a desire to take women’s claims of violence seriously.

Overall, officers in stations with WHDs were no less likely to express the belief that women often file “false” complaints against men. However, after the intervention female officers in WHD

Figure 2. FIR filing increased within woman-run WHDs but not standard WHDs



stations were less likely to express such beliefs than female officers in comparison stations. This suggests the intervention may have been more effective at changing female officers’ beliefs and that women may have been more sensitive to police training. Both male and female officers in WHD stations indicated greater awareness of the shortcomings of policing with regard to women’s cases; for instance, they were less likely to report the police as being helpful to victims of crimes against women.

Women’s perceptions of police treatment improved in some stations.

Expressed levels of comfort, satisfaction, and respectful treatment all improved significantly among those WHD stations with greater training and implementation quality.

Women were no more likely to report cases of GBV, nor did arrests increase.

In citizen surveys, women were no more likely to report experiences of GBV following the intervention. Nor were women more likely to visit police stations with WHDs than those without help desks, according to video footage. There were no detectable changes in citizens’ reported attitudes toward police, although this may reflect the relatively short duration of the intervention. Furthermore, using administrative records, the number of arrests in cases of crimes against women did not change significantly within the time frame of the study.

POLICY LESSONS

Dedicated police services can help to combat GBV when combined with continuous support and training. Officers were more likely to record both DIRs and FIRs after the introduction of WHDs and placed higher emphasis on GBV as a significant issue requiring attention. However, these changes were not realized through the introduction of desks alone but rather as a result of systematic training on officer best practices. For instance, DIRs were largely unknown before the intervention, and trainings allowed for the adoption of a new administrative practice.

Women should be at the frontlines of policing. The increase in reported FIRs was almost entirely driven by woman-run WHDs. As FIRs automatically open a criminal case, which requires significantly more police time investment, this result suggests that women officers may be more willing to invest the time necessary to more effectively combat GBV. However, it is not enough to just place women at the frontlines—broader training, infrastructure, and support is also needed. Providing these resources alongside the introduction of female officers, and placing new officers in mixed-gender stations rather than segregating them within all-female stations, may have helped to increase attention paid to women’s security in police work.

More research is needed on how to encourage women to report crimes and on how to ensure police follow up on them. Though the intervention increased police registration of crimes, it may have been less impactful on women’s reporting of crimes to police. In addition, researchers did not observe any increase in arrests in response to the intervention. More research is needed to understand how the registration of cases can more effectively lead to arrests and reductions in violence against women.

SCALE-UP

Based partially on the results of this intervention, the Madhya Pradesh Police Department has scaled up the WHD program across the state, with 950 police stations (serving almost the entirety of the state) now designated to implement WHDs. Researchers are studying the scale-up process to understand the intervention’s persistence, spread, and sustainability. Future research will also explore whether similar interventions produce similar results in other Indian states.

Featured Evaluation: Sukhtankar, Sandip, Gabriele Kruks-Wisner, and Akshay Mangla. 2022. “Policing in Patriarchy: An Experimental Evaluation of Reforms to Improve Police Responsiveness to Women in India.” *Science* 377, no. 6602 (July): 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abm7387>.

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