

What enables rape reporting?

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Apr 28, 2015



People at the protest rally over the alleged rape of a six-year-old girl in a public school, and increase in assault, rape and sexual aggression against women, at the Freedom Park, in Bangalore on July 20, 2014. — Photo: K. Murali Kumar

The Nirbhaya agitation of 2012 not only removed the stigma surrounding rape but also gave women the hope that their complaint would be heard.

The anti-rape agitation in India that followed on the heels of the Nirbhaya gang-rape incident in New Delhi in 2012 was the biggest such movement seen in global history. However, did the movement change the manner in which rape was perceived and reported in New Delhi? In this piece, we look at evidence from the data on rape compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau to find out.

We begin with some caveats. First, we have no reliable data on what the real numbers and rate of rape are in India since it remains an underreported crime. Second, there is some weak evidence that some cases reported as rape might not be so. To estimate this across the country would mean looking at every single FIR filed for rape and then somehow judge if the case is real or false. The process will undoubtedly be riddled with inaccuracies. Third, we can get around the problem mentioned above by looking at actual convictions. However, a rape case registered in one year may be decided many years later. So, this makes it harder to estimate the real incidence of rape in any

given year. We also run into the issue of how whimsical the conviction and trial process really is, where much depends on the sitting judge, and the evidence or lack of it. Because of these reasons, we are treating the NCRB's recorded rapes as the actual number of rapes in the country for this analysis, while we are painfully aware that only a fraction of rape cases is reported.

What the numbers say

The available data reveal some interesting patterns. Overall, in India, total crime against women increased by 26.72 per cent between 2012 and 2013. Between any two previous years starting from 2001, the highest leap in total crime reported was 12.47 per cent (2006-2007). So, it is quite evident that something interesting has taken place between 2012 and 2013, given that over the last 12 years, the reporting of crimes against women never exceeded a 12.5 per cent increase.

Besides this, the reported rape statistics over time tell their own story. Of the 763 police districts that we have analysed, 25.68 per cent of them have either flatlined or experienced a fall in number of reported rapes in 2013 compared to 2012. Most of these districts are in West Bengal and in conflict zones in smaller States such as Mizoram. The fall in rape here may be a function of several factors, such as an absolute lack of reporting of such crimes, or a political climate where victim-blaming statements made by leaders (as in West Bengal) may dissuade victims from coming forward.

However, 567 districts across India showed an increase in the number of reported rapes over time. But something unique happened in 2012, especially in New Delhi. Delhi is home to 1.5 per cent of the women in India, but accounts for 4.1 per cent of the total crimes against women in the country. The nine districts in Delhi that we looked at and where data is consistently available have shown an increase in the number of rapes per 1,00,000 women (rate of rape) between 2012 and 2013. Of the nine districts, New Delhi district showed the highest increase between 2012 and 2013 (289 per cent). Overall, Delhi had a reported increase in the rate of rape between 2012 and 2013 at 125.4 per cent.

If we look at the absolute number of reported rape incidents, there is a 131.73 per cent jump in Delhi between 2012 and 2013. In previous years, the highest recorded jump was between 2011 and 2012 (23.43 per cent).

The total number of reported crimes against women in Delhi more than doubled from 5,959 in 2012 to 12,888 in 2013 (a 116.3 per cent increase) unlike in any of the previous years. On an average, there were between 6 and 10 incidents of rape reported per 1,00,000 women between 2001 and 2012. For 2013, the number of rape cases per 1,00,000 women varies from eight in North West Delhi to 31 in New Delhi district.

Again, it must be noted that these findings apply to an urban setting. We still have very little understanding of how rape is constructed and executed in rural areas and in tier two and tier three cities, where rape could be a weapon of social control, upper caste dominance, and where the state is less likely to respond to an act of rape within the family.

We do not know to what extent the actual number of rapes in Delhi has increased in these periods, since rape is underreported. All we can focus on is the reporting of rape and make a limited claim about what explains the impressive jump this number makes between 2012 and 2013, compared to previous years.

Lesser stigma

We suggest that the reporting of rape in New Delhi has increased markedly because of a cluster of variables. First, we think that the anti-rape agitation pulled off a remarkable coup — it turned rape into something that carried lesser stigma. Rape victims, traditionally seen as “bad girls”, began to be seen as actual victims of a heinous crime and less as women who “got what they deserved”.

Second, the legal reforms ushered in by the Justice Verma Committee report could have created enabling conditions for women to come forward and report rape because it changed their cost-benefit analysis. Now, more women in urban areas are sure that “something” will be done if they report it, unlike the apathy with which rape has been treated in previous decades, where the reporting of rape itself meant subjecting a victim to further trauma and abuse. Third, the anti-rape agitation has changed institutional responses to rape and the discourse surrounding it. Now, there are gender sensitisation programmes in police training, which run over the stipulated one or two modules. “Rape” is no longer a word spoken in whispers. Women, through the widely publicised agitation, know what constitutes rape, harassment and assault, and they are more widely informed about what to do about it (although many still choose not to report it).

What this tells us is that a woman must have enabling conditions that make the reporting of a crime like rape easier. Essentially, women are more likely to report rape when the costs of the reporting are low (society doesn’t ostracise the victim, there are sympathetic police personnel in nearby precincts) and the benefits gained from the reporting are high, that is, the crime is recorded, action taken, and a proper legal process is begun, which can result in a real conviction.

While we are convinced by looking at the data that the anti-rape agitation changed the manner in which rape victims see themselves in relation to social stigma and may have started evaluating their own power vis-à-vis the perpetrators, and we think that this did influence the reporting of rape in New Delhi, we still have no way of estimating what the real incidence of rape is in India. Consider, for instance, that while 95.8 per cent of the female population in Delhi is urban, only 1 in 675 women reported any crime committed against them in 2013.

We can only hope that with more targeted interventions in the area of sexual violence, where victims are enabled to step forward, we may in time be able to get a handle on one of the biggest risks to women’s security in India. (This article was originally published in *The Hindu*, and can be accessed [here](#).)

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