

WOMEN POLICE STATIONS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: AN ANALYSIS FROM INDIA.

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Abstract

Violence Against Women (VAW) remains a persistent concern in India. Crimes against women are widely underreported due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, and institutional constraints within the policing system. In response to these challenges, the government introduced All-Women Police Stations (AWPS) with the objective of providing a more accessible and supportive space for women to report crimes. This paper examines the role, functioning and effectiveness of AWPS in addressing VAW, particularly domestic abuse.

Keywords: Violence Against Women, Domestic Violence, Women Police Stations, Gender-Sensitive Policing, Reporting of Crimes.

1 Introduction

Violence Against Women (VAW) not only affects the health of a woman but also violates her human rights (Krantz & Garcia Moreno, 2005). As per the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, VAW means, *“any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”* The most common type of VAW is domestic violence (DV) or violence against women within the household (Fried 2003). India recorded 48,755 cases of crimes against women in 2022, which shows approximately 12 per cent increase from 2021 (NCRB Report, 2022). The majority of cases were registered under 'Cruelty by Husband or Relatives', i.e. 32.6 per cent. Many factors, such as poverty, addiction to drugs, infertility in women, low education, and a sudden decline in family income, could lead to abuse by a husband/relative. (Kazemi Dastjerdehei et al., 2020).

As data suggest, many women still face domestic abuse in India, but hesitate to report it. Fear of being blamed, pressure to save the marriage, and fear of retaliation often stop them. On top of this, the institutional framework, especially policing, humiliates women, making them even more hesitant to seek help. This persistent issue of underreporting encouraged the government to establish an All-Women Police Station (AWPS). The first-ever AWPS was inaugurated in Kozhikode, Kerala, in 1973, which laid the groundwork for safer and more accessible avenues for women to file complaints. This initiative later expanded to other states, and India now has more than 700 AWPS. The presence of women officers facilitates reporting, as they are often perceived to offer greater empathy and emotional support. Understanding the intersection between WPS and domestic abuse reporting is therefore crucial. It is important to address the key question of whether WPS can improve reporting, support and justice for women.

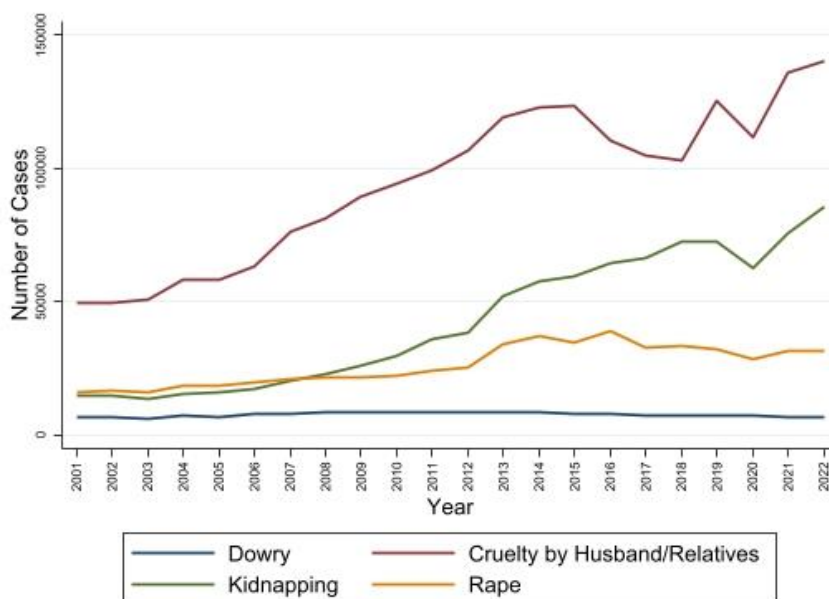
Women Police Stations represent a move toward gender-sensitive policing in India. The rationale behind WPS is that regular police stations often fail to adequately respond to the crimes against women. By setting up police stations staffed mainly by women officers, WPS aim to make women feel more comfortable, reduce procedural difficulties, and encourage them to report violence. At the same time, WPS functions within the wider police system and handles both supportive and administrative work. This dual role as safe entry points for women and as part of regular policing makes WPS an important institution to study in the context of violence against women. This paper provides a literature-based review of Women Police Stations in India and their role in addressing violence against women (VAW), particularly domestic

violence. It first traces the historical evolution of women police stations and the rationale behind their establishment. The paper then discusses how WPS differ from regular police stations in terms of structure, mandate, and functioning. Drawing on existing literature, it further evaluates the effectiveness of WPS in improving reporting, police responsiveness, and access to justice for women facing violence. The paper contributes to the ongoing debate on whether gender-specific policing institutions can meaningfully address violence against women in India.

2 Violence Against Women (VAW) and Gendered Barriers in Policing

According to the World Population Review, India ranks 81 globally in overall crime incidence. NCRB (2023) also shows the seriousness of the situation, reporting that a crime occurs every five seconds in the country. In 2023 alone, 4,48,211 cases were recorded under crimes against women, with the highest numbers reported in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. These cases encompass a range of offences, including rape, abduction, kidnapping, assault with intent to outrage modesty, and violations under POCSO. Figure 1 shows the trends in crimes against women from 2001-2022 using NCRB Crime data. A particularly troubling aspect is that a substantial proportion of violence occurs within the household itself. “Cruelty by husbands or relatives” continues to account for the largest share, approximately 29.8 percent of all crimes against women (NCRB, 2023).

Trends in the Number of Crimes Against Women Cases in India (NCRB)



A major barrier to reporting violence against women in India is women's fear of the police and the male-dominated nature of the policing system. This is reflected in a case study documented by CHRI (2020), where a 23-year-old girl was gang raped, and the FIR was not registered. The SHO reportedly said :

'Procedure hota hai ki inquiry ke baad hie FIR hoti hai, nahi toh koi bhi aayega aur bolega rape hue unke saath aur fir compromise ho jayega'.

Such incidents can make victims feel uncomfortable reporting offences to the police. In addition to this, violence within households is often seen as a "private matter," which creates strong family pressure on women to avoid police action and protect family honour. Women are commonly urged to adjust, compromise, or reconcile with the perpetrator, even in cases of repeated abuse. Despite the widespread nature of such violence, many women do not report their experiences due to social stigma and fear of retaliation. Fear of judgement and victim-blaming further discourages women from filing complaints. Even when women overcome family and social pressure, police officers often resist formally registering cases (CHRI, 2020). Patriarchal norms within policing encourage officers to prioritise family preservation over women's legal rights, leading to an emphasis on reconciliation rather than justice (CHRI, 2020; Jassal, 2021; Cause, 2018). In many cases, survivors are blamed, or their accounts are questioned. As a result, police stations are widely perceived as intimidating, unsympathetic, and hostile spaces for women. Many women feel uncomfortable sharing experiences of sexual or domestic violence with male police officials. This underreporting underscores the need to examine institutional reforms that can support women more effectively, not only by encouraging reporting but also by ensuring a safe environment, accessible legal mechanisms, and timely justice.

3. Women Police Stations in India: Role and Functioning

All-Women Police Stations (AWPS) are police stations that are staffed by women officers and are established to handle crimes against women. Their primary aim is to offer a safe and approachable environment where women can report domestic violence, dowry harassment, trafficking, etc. These stations help women's access to justice through better communication, sensitive case handling, and quicker responses. WPS also have mediation centres to deal with matrimonial disputes, and the office of the Protection-cum-Prohibition Officer functions there to address cases related to dowry and domestic violence.

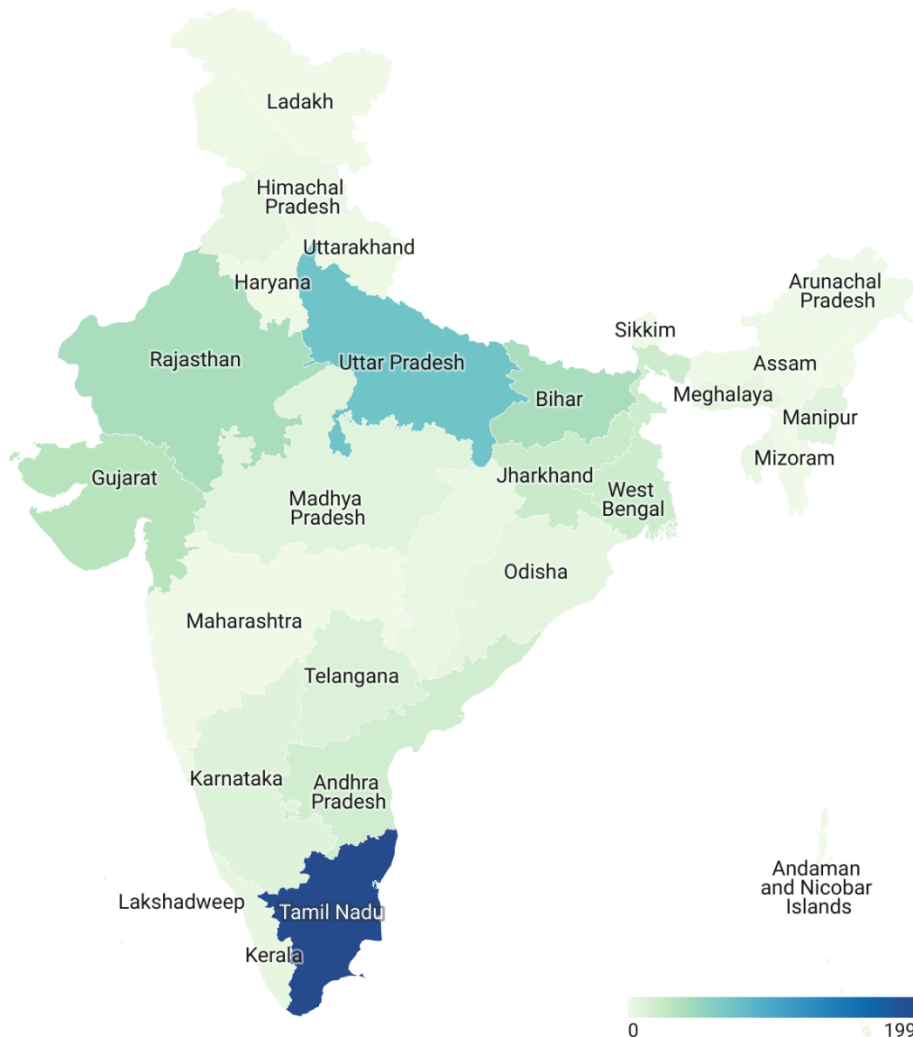
The first WPS in India and in Asia was inaugurated in Kozhikode, Kerala on 27 October 1973

by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. M. Padminamma was the first sub-inspector in WPS who noted that most cases involved family issues and that women face a male-dominated environment in standard police stations. The introduction of AWPS, therefore, was meant to make reporting easier and more comfortable for women. Since then, several states adopted this model of AWPS, and now India has around 745 women police stations. The statewise spread of AWPS is given in Figure 2. Although the capital region of India does not have any WPS so far, reports suggest that there may soon be a WPS in each district of Delhi (The Indian Express Report, 2025).

Fig. 2. State-Wise Spread of Women Police Stations (as on 01.01.2015)

State-Wise Spread of WPS (as on 01.01.2015)

The figure shows the intensity of Women Police Stations across states and UTs.



Source: DoPo, BPRD (2015) • Map data: © OSM • Created with Datawrapper

The institutional design of Women Police Stations differs from standard police stations in several ways:

1. WPS are staffed by female police officers intended to reduce discomfort while reporting. However, standard police stations are predominantly staffed by male officers and a few female officers.
2. While regular police stations handle a wide range of crimes, WPS focus mainly on crimes against women such as domestic violence, dowry harassment, and sexual offences.
3. Regular police stations are meant to aim at law enforcement and crime control, whereas Women Police Stations seek to provide access, safety, and emotional support to women.
4. Unlike regular police stations, which follow formal criminal procedures, WPS place greater emphasis on mediation, counselling, and reconciliation, particularly in marriage-related disputes, where compromise is often encouraged.

4. Effectiveness and Critiques of WPS

The existing literature presents a mixed assessment of the effectiveness of All-Women Police Stations (AWPS) in India. Several studies suggest that AWPS have contributed to higher reporting of crimes against women, such as domestic violence and dowry-related abuse (Amaral et al., 2021; Jassal, 2020). At the same time, the evidence does not point to a corresponding increase in arrests or formal charges, indicating that improved access to reporting does not necessarily translate into stronger legal outcomes (Amaral et al., 2021).

Women Police Stations were established with the objective of providing a safer and more accessible institutional space for women facing violence. Literature suggests that women may find it easier to approach these stations and communicate their grievances, especially when they are staffed by women officers (Jassal, 2020). However, studies also highlight that AWPS often operate with limited autonomy and remain embedded within the broader police hierarchy, which restricts their capacity to independently pursue investigations or file charges (Jassal & Barnhardt, 2024). As a result, while AWPS may facilitate initial contact between victims and the police, their role in advancing cases through the criminal justice process remains constrained.

Research further indicates that all-women police stations do not consistently lead to an increase in registered crimes and may involve certain practical limitations. Jassal (2020) notes that the concentration of women's complaints in specific stations can raise travel costs for victims and

may encourage informal resolution or mediation in place of formal legal action. These patterns suggest that AWPS function more as specialised entry points rather than as fully empowered investigative units within the policing system. From a theoretical perspective, feminist legal scholars have cautioned that the creation of specialised institutions alone may not be sufficient to transform gendered power relations within law enforcement. In this sense, while AWPS may improve accessibility for some women, broader changes in everyday policing practices are often left unaddressed. This concern is also reflected in legal provisions, which state that complaints related to violence against women should, “as far as possible,” be recorded by a woman police officer, indicating accommodation within existing structures rather than a fundamental restructuring of authority (Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law, 2013). Evidence also suggests that AWPS frequently coordinate with regular police stations, particularly in serious cases. Transfers across police stations, sometimes for reasons beyond territorial jurisdiction, have been documented in states with all-women police stations (Jassal, 2020). Institutional theories emphasise that authority without sufficient autonomy can limit organisational effectiveness (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, AWPS often occupy a constrained institutional space, where they provide initial support, counselling, and mediation, while core investigative powers remain with mainstream police units. Feminist organisational theory further notes that women-dominated institutions are often assigned care-oriented roles, placing additional emotional labour on women officers (Hochschild, 1979). In the case of Women Police Stations, this may reinforce expectations of counselling and reconciliation alongside, rather than instead of, formal law enforcement functions.

Conclusion

Women Police Stations in India mark an important step toward gender-sensitive policing, aimed at creating safer spaces for women to report violence and seek justice. The institution of WPS has undeniably improved accessibility for women, providing a supportive environment where complaints of domestic violence, dowry harassment, and sexual offences can be voiced without fear or intimidation. Empirical evidence suggests that these stations have facilitated higher reporting rates and better communication between women and the police, particularly in cases that are underreported due to fear of social stigma. Women Police Stations provide a critical, though partial, solution to the challenges of underreporting and institutional insensitivity toward VAW. They mainly emphasise mediation, counselling, and family reconciliation. These stations help make first contact with the police easier and more supportive for women. However, on their own, they are not enough. Broader legal, social, and organisational reforms are necessary to ensure that reporting leads to real protection, accountability, and long-term empowerment for women in India.

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