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The Power of Political Voice: How Women in Politics Can Help Tackle Gender Crime

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Summary points

- Crimes against women are a persistent and even a growing problem in many developing countries. In India, research suggests that having female political representatives can be an effective tool to empower women in the battle against gender crime.
- Although it also results in higher rates of documented crime against women, this reflects the fact that a greater number of gender crimes are being reported.
- Police responsiveness to documenting and dealing with gender crimes is higher in areas with female politicians. Research shows that victims are more willing to come forward because they anticipate they are more likely to be heard.
- Women politicians have the biggest impact on giving a voice to female victims when they are present at the local government level, where they live in greater proximity to them.
- Reporting of crimes against women – especially domestic violence – is also a problem in developed countries, but institutional responses often discourage reporting and do little to reduce rates of domestic abuse.
- Political participation rates for women generally are low in both developing and developed countries. Reserved seats, followed by legislative candidate quotas, may be the most effective ways of encouraging more women to enter politics.

Introduction

Crimes against women are a stark reality in many developing countries, especially in India. On the night of 16 December 2012 in New Delhi, a 23-year old girl and a male friend boarded what appeared to be a passenger bus. The savage gang rape of the girl on the private bus and her eventual death made headlines across the world. As a media commentator observed at the time, what was unusual about the incident was not its brutality,¹ but that instead of the usual apathy, the attack elicited a strong response. Perhaps because of its sheer savagery, the case generated considerable public outrage and media attention both nationally and internationally.²

In the aftermath of the heated debate and discussion on policies to deter gender violence, the Indian government has placed its bets on a stringent law that calls for greater punishment of perpetrators of rape and violence against women, including the option of the death penalty.³ Others are demanding fast-track courts, increased policing on the streets and the use of CCTV cameras. In this charged atmosphere, a less dramatic but effective policy measure has been overlooked. Indeed, rigorous research shows that having more women elected to political office can make a significant difference.

How do female politicians affect the outcome of crimes against women?

Recent work by Iyer et al. (2012) finds that having more women political representatives in India makes a surprisingly powerful impact on the outcome of crimes against women.⁴ However, before considering their findings in more detail, it is necessary to address one legitimate question about causality. Such a claim must be based on a

comparison of outcomes in countries or situations with and without elected women representatives. A woman's election in a certain place and time may itself reflect (pro-female) changes in the preferences of the electorate, and/or the changing social status of women as a group. This may simply be mirrored in the outcomes of crimes against women; a woman leader herself may have little or no role in influencing crime – or for that matter, any other outcome. Indeed, it is not unusual for considerable scepticism to be expressed regarding what difference female leaders in developing countries have made to their citizens' welfare.⁵

The significance of the evidence presented in Iyer et al. (2012) stems from the nature of the legal reform under which more women assumed political office. In a law enacted in 1993, the Indian government introduced a mandate that women hold one-third of all positions in its system of local government, called Panchayati Raj.⁶ This meant that both one-third of all seats in these councils and one-third of all chairperson positions across councils were reserved for women. The result was a dramatic increase in the number and proportion of women in political office, given their previously low rate of participation.⁷

What makes the impact of women leaders plausibly causal in this context is that although the legislation was passed in 1993, it was implemented at various times across different states of the country, for reasons mostly unrelated to gender-related crime levels in individual states.⁸ The unique features of this reform in India make it the single largest worldwide experiment in creating an exogenous increase in the number and proportion of women in political office. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has been the focus for a host of studies on how female leaders affect public-good outcomes.

1 See Faleiro, S., 'The unspeakable truth about rape in India', *New York Times*, 1 January 2013.

2 See Burke, J., 'Rape protests spread beyond India', *Guardian*, 4 January 2013.

3 See Yardley, J. and Bagri, N.T., 'Notorious attack spurs India to approve new rape laws', *New York Times*, 3 February 2013.

4 Research findings on crime outcomes against women in developing countries reported here draws largely on Iyer et al. (2012), in which Anandi Mani is a co-author.

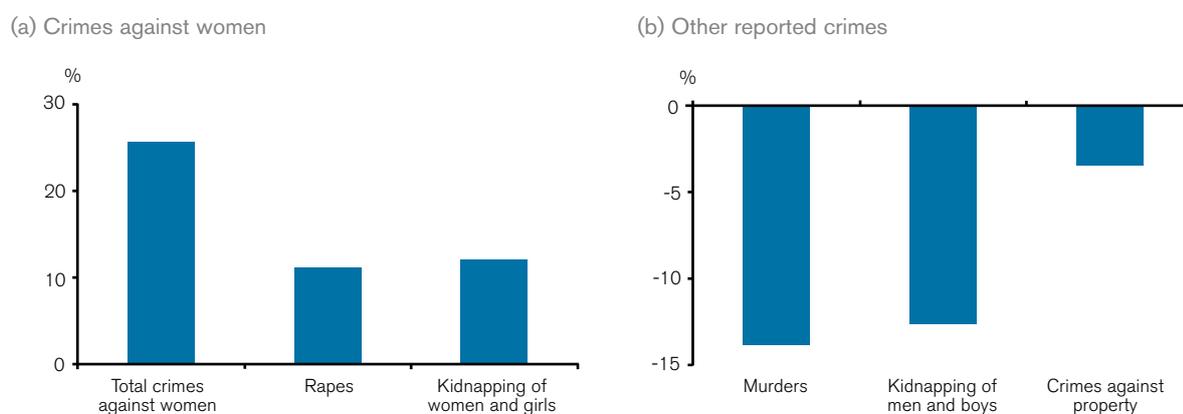
5 See Kristof, N.D., 'Women hurting women', *New York Times*, 29 September 2012.

6 Panchayati Raj includes elected councils at the village, intermediate and district levels (panchayats, panchayat samitis and zila parishads).

7 By comparison, in a setting in which there are no quotas for women, only 5.4% of members of the state legislature over the past three decades have been women.

8 States had varying pre-existing cycles of local government elections, which was one major reason for differences in the dates of implementation of the reform. In many of these cases, the state government waited for the term of office of incumbent local officials to expire before conducting fresh elections in compliance with the 1993 reform. Another reason for delays in implementation were lawsuits challenging specific aspects of the reform. For instance, Bihar conducted its first Panchayati Raj election only in 2001, since a lawsuit had been filed regarding the representation of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Figure 1: Change in reported crimes after the implementation of the Panchayati Raj reform



Source: Iyer et al. (2012).

Notes: Crime data are from the National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi. Crime variables are the number of crimes per 1,000 population (gender-specific population for gender-specific crimes). Results control for demographic characteristics, real per capita state GDP, policy strength per capita, state and year fixed effects and state-specific time trends.

On the basis of an intra-state comparison of crimes before and after the implementation of the reform, Iyer et al. (2012) find that having female political representatives results in a considerable *increase* in documented crimes against women. As highlighted in Figure 1(a), country-wide crime data showed an increase of 26%, including an 11% rise in the number of reported rapes and a 12% increase in the kidnappings of women.

How can a rise in gender crimes under female political representatives be good news?

At first sight, these statistics seem disheartening. One knee-jerk reaction is to wonder whether the data simply confirm what opponents of mandated representation for women in India had warned: women are inexperienced at governance, hence the mandate for female leaders can lead to worse outcomes overall. However, as Figure 1(b) demonstrates, there was no such crime surge in outcomes unrelated to women – such as economic crimes, kidnapping of men or murder rates. Another reaction is to interpret such data as being driven by a backlash against women entering political office.

Yet other data from multiple sources show that the observed increase in crimes against women is actually good news: it is due more to greater *reporting* of crime than to higher crime incidence. Considerable evidence supports such a conclusion. Indeed, in many cases there is an increase in the responsiveness of the police under female political representatives – which also encourages women victims to speak out.

A lack of police responsiveness has long been identified as a major problem in India.⁹ A study in the state of Rajasthan (Banerjee et al., 2012) found that only 50% of sexual harassment cases and 53% of domestic violence instances were registered by the police – and indeed only when a male relative reported it on behalf of a female victim. However, survey data from the same study analysed by Iyer et al. (2012) show that in villages with local government councils with female leaders, women are significantly more likely to say that they will lodge complaints with the police should they become victims of a crime.¹⁰ Significantly, women from these villages with female leaders do not appear to be the target of crimes at a higher rate than women from other villages. This supports the contention that higher documented crime rates under

⁹ Harris, G., 'For rape victims in India, police are often part of the problem', *New York Times*, 22 January 2013.

¹⁰ There are no differences in men's responses across councils with female as opposed to male leaders.

female political representatives is not driven by an increase in the rate of crime.

Another nationwide survey assessed actual interactions of women and men with the police. Women in villages with female council heads reported greater satisfaction in their contacts with the police as well as a lower likelihood of being asked to pay bribes.¹¹ Again, there was no difference in the experience of men in terms of the gender identity of the village council head.

National crime data on police *action* confirm the above perceptions of the police among women governed by female local political representatives: on average, arrests for crimes against women increased by 31% in a state after the implementation of political representation for women. Taken together, these three pieces of evidence suggest that female victims benefit from greater responsiveness and action from the police when more women participate in local governance. A further piece of evidence is brought to light in Figure 1(b), namely murder rates. Given that it is generally not easy to hide dead bodies, murder rates are unlikely to suffer from reporting biases, and here one can see a clear decline in crime rates since the advent of the 1993 reform.

How and where do women political representatives affect crime reporting?

To understand the mechanisms at work, it is instructive to look at related work in India which shows how female leaders affect women's political participation. Beaman et al. (2010) find that women are 25% more likely to speak up at village meetings if the village council leader is a woman. To be heard, one must first speak – and female council members and council heads seem to give women more confidence to do so.

The 1993 reform in India increased the participation of women in local government at the district, sub-district and village level, so it is important to understand at what tier women's participation in politics makes the biggest difference. To do this, Iyer et al. (2012) exploit the fact that

during any election cycle only a third of district council head positions within any state are randomly assigned to women (whereas a third of the members across all these councils are women). This makes it feasible to distinguish the marginal impact of a female district council head, over and above the impact of women leaders and council members at sub-district level. They find that female political representatives have the most effect on crime reporting, not so much in the highest position at the district level, but at lower levels. In other words, when it comes to giving an effective voice to victimized women, the proximity of women leaders does matter. This ties in with the findings in Beaman et al. (2010) that women are more motivated to speak up in village-level meetings led by a female council leader.

It is also consistent with other evidence that has been gathered on women's perception of when the police are likely to be more responsive. In the State of the Nation Survey (2009), women victims strongly believed that the police were 10 percentage points more likely to listen to them sympathetically and to take action if they went to the police station accompanied by a locally influential person. Nearly half of respondents identified their village council member as the locally influential person they would turn to in the event of difficulty.¹²

As Sonia Sotomayor, US Supreme Court justice, puts it: 'Our experiences as women or people of color affect our decisions ... Hence, one must accept the proposition that a difference there will be by the presence of women or people of color on the bench. Personal experiences affect the facts that judges choose to see' (Sotomayor, 2002). In the Indian context, it is clear that such a gender-identity-based mechanism is at work. Given that law and order is not a local government subject, local leaders have no authority over resource allocation decisions related to crime matters. It is thus quite remarkable how the female identity of a political leader alone evokes significant changes in the responses of women victims as well as of the police.

¹¹ Data are from the Millennial Survey (2002), which covers 36,542 households in 2,304 randomly selected villages in India.

¹² The State of the Nation Survey (2009) included 14,404 respondents from 17 major states of India.

The primary focus of this briefing paper is on gender-based crime – and with good reason. After all, the assurance of personal safety and fair treatment under the law are two of the most fundamental aspects of civil society. However, it is worth highlighting that having more women in politics can also make a difference in other important ways.

‘ The worldwide average for the proportion of female legislators today stands at 19%, clearly far below women’s share of the population ’

Two recent studies adopt a different approach to examining this issue. They compare post-election outcomes under male and female winners in constituencies with closely contested elections.¹³ On the basis of data for India, Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras (forthcoming 2014) show that having more female politicians in state legislatures results in lower rates of neo-natal mortality owing to better health infrastructure, access to information and a greater use of healthcare facilities as well as antenatal care visits. Brollo and Troiano (2013) show that in Brazil, cities with female mayors have better health outcomes and fewer irregularities in public procurement practices, and they also receive more discretionary federal transfers. Moreover, women mayors hire fewer temporary public staff members to achieve their objectives – in other words, they achieve better outcomes with fewer resources.

In the Indian local government context, objectors to mandated women political representatives had serious doubts about how independent and effective women

leaders would be. The contention was that politically inexperienced and otherwise disadvantaged women would simply be overruled or manipulated by their spouses or other powerful local interests. The influential study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) shows that this is not the case at all. Women village leaders under Panchayati Raj do orientate their public-goods provision more towards the expressed preferences of female voters, namely more water and roads in West Bengal, and more water but fewer roads in Rajasthan. This is despite the fact that female leaders had low literacy levels and socio-economic status, and little experience, ambition or political prospects until they assumed leadership positions.

Political participation: another case of missing women?

Despite the advantages that female politicians have been found to bring to the table, they remain considerably under-represented in government in most countries. Indeed, the worldwide average for the proportion of female legislators (based on 126 countries) today stands at 19%, clearly far below women’s share of the population.¹⁴

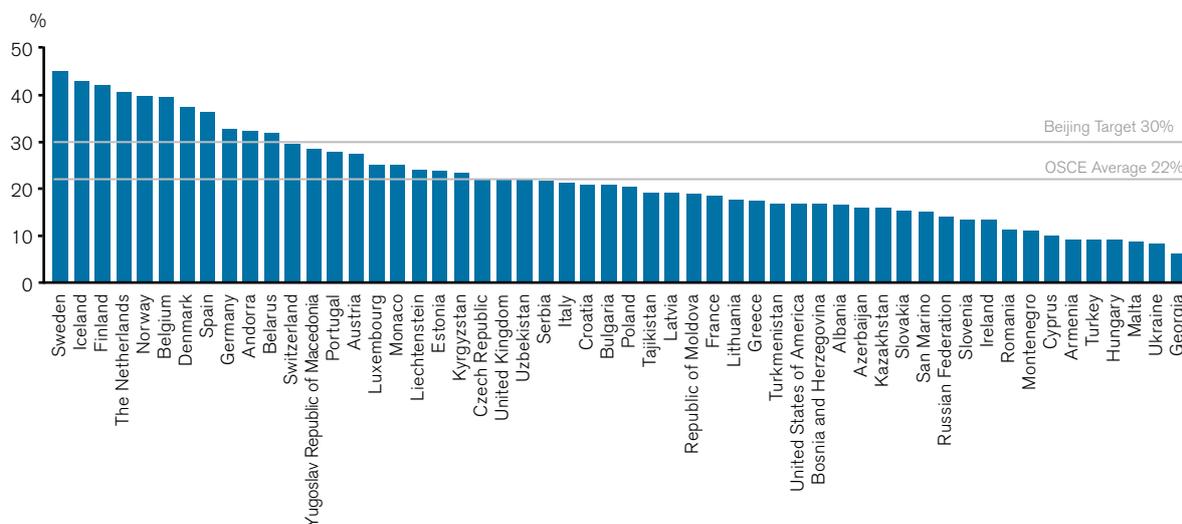
While the 1993 law in India has mandated that the minimum proportion of female politicians at the local level should be 33% (higher in some recent cases), women constitute less than 10% of political representatives at national level and 14% at the state level. Figure 2 shows political participation rates for women in lower houses of parliament in a large selection of developed and developing countries.

One striking observation from Figure 2 is that women’s political participation does not reflect any kind of pattern with respect to a country’s level of economic development: the proportion of female legislators in Japan’s parliament is 11.3%; in the United States it is 17%; in the United Kingdom it is higher, at 22%; and in Mozambique it is higher still, at 39%.

¹³ Again, the challenge here is to avoid attributing outcomes to a female politician that may be driven by some unobserved characteristics of the constituency that elected her. The underlying assumption is that the gender of the winner in a close election (with less than a 5% vote margin between the winner and runner-up) is quasi-random – which should eliminate unobservable differences across polls where women won and lost (to a man). Hence, post-election outcome differences may be reasonably attributed to gender differences across winners.

¹⁴ International Parliamentary Union, ‘Women in National Parliaments’, available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> (accessed 17 February 2014).

Figure 2: The proportion of women in the lower house of parliament, 2010



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union 'Women in Parliament' database 2010, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

There could be multiple (and related) reasons why women's participation in politics lags behind their population share. It may simply stem from a bias against female politicians among voters. And in multi-party democracies, it may also be due to a bias against female candidates across political parties. Moreover, women themselves may not aspire to hold political office, either as a consequence of these biases or for entirely other reasons.

Bhalotra et al. (2013) use data from closely contested elections to the state legislatures in India to examine which of these factors are keeping women out of politics. This is a process where there are political parties that make decisions on the pool of candidates they will field across different constituencies. The researchers find that having a female winner in a particular constituency does not induce major political parties to put forward new female candidates from the same or other constituencies. While female winners are 9.2% more likely to be fielded as their party's candidate for the next election compared with male winners,¹⁵ this likelihood drops to 4.3% by the subsequent election. So poor entry prospects for women seem to be a function of a lack of enthusiasm from political parties.¹⁶

Notably, voter turnout, male or female, is not affected by a candidate being female. In other words, voter bias does not seem to be the factor keeping women out in this context.

This is not to deny that female leaders will encounter some voter bias. In India, Duflo and Topalova (2004) found that villages with female local government leaders have lower levels of corruption and more public goods, of at least as good quality as in male-headed villages,¹⁷ yet female village leaders are rated lower than their male counterparts. In Brazil, Brollo and Troiano (2013) concluded that despite achieving comparable or better outcomes (in health and education, and in lower levels of corruption), female city mayors were 20% less likely to be re-elected than male mayors.

However, unfamiliarity with female candidates seems to play a role in this regard. Indeed, greater exposure to women leaders tends to reduce gradually voter bias. The work of Beaman et al. (2009) in West Bengal showed that male village voters with prolonged exposure to women as local council leaders (10 years, or two election cycles) were more likely to associate women with political roles in implicit association tests; in fact, they ranked political campaign speeches delivered in a female voice higher than

¹⁵ This is an important margin in India, where a substantial number of incumbents do not contest re-election.

¹⁶ Note that there are no political parties involved in local government elections in India – unlike at the state and national level.

¹⁷ Public-good quantity and quality were independently assessed by a citizens' interest group.

those with identical content delivered in a male voice. The end result was that villages in West Bengal with longer (10-year) exposure to women leaders had a significantly larger share of women council leaders than those with no exposure (18.5% versus 11%).

Finally, when it comes to Indian women's interest in seeking political office or rating their capabilities for it, they are not shrinking violets. Beaman et al. (2010) found that elected female village leaders in West Bengal reported feeling as competent as their male counterparts in executing their duties after a couple of years of experience. Bhavnani (2009) revealed that constituencies with one round of reservation in Mumbai saw a 7.5% increase in the proportion of female candidates contesting open seats the next time around. This was already building on a tenfold increase in the number of female candidates in the first round of reservation itself. Even in the villages of West Bengal, Beaman et al. (2010) discovered that twice reserved constituencies have double the proportion of female candidates than those with no reservation (10.1% versus 4.8%).

Returning to the three possible reasons cited earlier for why women may be absent in the political domain, the Indian mandated reservation experience suggests

that voter bias or women's lack of interest and/or political ambition cannot be the whole story. If anything, mandated political representatives for women appears to draw more of them into the political sphere – especially in contrast to selection processes that are subject to interference or manipulation by political parties and incumbent male politicians. Just as importantly, women's lack of extensive political experience does not seem to handicap their interest or performance either.

This is consistent with the international picture. Over the last 20 years, several factors have led to a push for political quotas for women. Among countries that do have political quotas, these take the form of voluntary quotas (61% of countries, often in combination with other forms of quotas), legislated candidate quotas (38%), and reserved seats (20%) – as in India (Pande and Ford, 2011). These authors show that while there is no positive correlation between the proportion of women in politics and a country's income level, political quotas are positively correlated with it (see Table 1). Among the different forms of quotas, reserved seats seem to have the strongest impact on participation, considerably higher than legislative candidate quotas (60–61% versus 19–20%, columns 2 and 4).

Table 1: Economic development and female representation

	Dependant variable: share of female legislators in the national assembly (lower house)			
	1	2	3	4
GDP per capita (2000)	0.000128	0.000130		
GDP per capita (2005)			0.000109	0.000111
Party quota dummy	1.396	2.23	1.529	2.317
Candidate quota dummy	5.711**		6.038**	
Reserved seat dummy	8.407***		8.321***	
Candidate quota (as % of seats)		0.189***		0.198***
Reserved seat quota (as % of seats)		0.609***		0.603***
Africa	-3.415	-3.612	-3.263	-3.499
Latin America	-4.113	-3.763	-4.108	-3.766
Middle East	-12.645***	-11.854***	-12.414***	-11.667***
Asia	-7.969**	-7.730**	-7.458	-7.186**
Observations	124	124	126	126
R2	0.24	0.313	0.234	0.305

Notes: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1. The excluded category for regional fixed effects is Europe and Western countries (USA, Canada, Australia).

Sources: Pande and Ford (2011). Data from Penn World Tables (version 6.3), the Global Database of Quotas for Women (<http://www.quotaproject.org/>), and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).

What about gender crime in developed countries?

Without a doubt, the status of women in developed countries is considerably better than that of women in most developing nations, including India. Nevertheless, the reporting of crimes against women here too is fraught with some unique challenges and complications.

A good starting point is to consider the most common form of violence against women in developed countries: domestic violence.¹⁸ In 2001, women in the United States reported 590,000 incidents of rape, sexual and other assaults at the hands of intimate partners. However, survey data in the United States suggest that only 20–50% of cases of such violence are actually reported to the police. And even more seriously, on average, four women are killed each day by a partner.¹⁹

Ironically, however, a solution that has been widely implemented across several US states over the past 20 years seems to have resulted in ‘too much’ police responsiveness: mandatory arrest laws.²⁰ Such laws require the police to arrest abusers when a domestic violence incident is reported. Iyengar (2009) finds that homicide rates are about 50% higher today in US states with mandatory arrest laws than those without. The main reason why they have backfired in tackling such violence is that they *reduced* the likelihood of victims reporting these incidents. In weighing the emotional and financial costs of losing their partners, many victims seem to have concluded that the certainty of their arrest was undesirable. As a result, incidents of abuse often went unreported until the level of violence escalated to homicide.

Even women who do report domestic violence – resulting in their partner’s arrest – frequently drop the charges. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s found that between 50% and 90% requested that the charges be withdrawn

by the prosecutor, despite evidence that women who drop charges are four times more likely to suffer future violence than those who do not.²¹ Women often return to the same partner as well. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000a; 2000b) found that victims of physical assault suffered an average of 4.5 years of victimization by the same partner, enduring seven assaults in that time period. ‘No-drop laws’ – where prosecution against a person charged of assault proceeds despite the victim’s stated wishes to drop charges – have induced a 14% increase in calls reporting domestic violence, but they have not had any effect on violence against women, as measured by homicide and hospitalization rates (Aizer and Dal Bo, 2009).

On a related note, in the US military, which was in the news in this regard in 2013, female victims, who are typically lower-level officials, were said to be widely discouraged from reporting abuse. Either on their own, or owing to active discouragement by their peers and seniors, victims often choose not to report abuse because of the emotional distress and the potentially adverse impact on their careers. Meanwhile, a new and vicious form of gender crime that has recently drawn considerable attention and discussion is online and multimedia-based abuse. Here, the lack of understanding of this new form of crime and the associated lack of police responsiveness has been a source of some frustration for female victims.²²

Overall, the picture that emerges suggests that the institutional responses for dealing with gender violence in developed countries have also not been very effective. Indeed, there is a pressing need for a more holistic and nuanced discussion about better policy tools to encourage reporting and reduce these crimes in developed countries. In the absence of good research evidence, one can only speculate as to whether the presence of more women in the political domain will lead to a more nuanced approach

18 In the United States, about 75% of all violence against women is perpetrated by domestic partners, with poor women disproportionately affected. According to a report issued by the World Health Organization, ‘intimate partner violence occurs in all countries, irrespective of social, economic, religious or cultural group’ (WHO, 2002).

19 Bureau of Justice Statistics (1998); 2002 Minnesota Crime Survey; and Tjaden and Thoennes (2000a), using data from the National Criminal Victimization Survey.

20 22 states and the District of Columbia have laws that mandate or at least strongly recommend that everyone accused of domestic abuse be arrested.

21 See Parnas (1973); Field and Field (1973); and Ford and Regoli (1992).

22 Hess, A., ‘Why women aren’t welcome on the Internet’, *The Pacific Standard*, 6 January 2014, available at <http://www.psmag.com/navigation/health-and-behavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170/>; see also Citron (forthcoming 2014).

to tackling this issue. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in the sexual harassment case in the US military in 2013, the key politicians who initiated legislative action were all women: Kirsten Gillibrand, Claire McCaskill and Barbara Boxer.²³

The reality, as Figure 2 demonstrates, is that when it comes to political participation, most developed countries do not fare significantly better than the cross-country average of 19% in the lower house of national legislatures. Quota systems in most developed countries are limited to the inclusion of women in party candidate lists, and some countries, such as the United States, have no quotas at all (Pande and Ford, 2011). It is maybe not so surprising that, in contrast to the Indian local government experience, the proportion of women entering politics or expressing an interest in doing so rose little in the United States between 2001 and 2008 (Lawless and Fox, 2008). Evidence from other developed countries, such as Spain and France, also suggests that candidate quota systems are subject to manipulation by political parties. Here, male politicians who may lose out to female competitors seem to play a role in keeping the proportion of elected female politicians low.²⁴ Both countries have set time limits to achieving established quota targets, so there is hope that women's participation rates will improve over time, but other developed countries would do well to seriously consider initiatives to expand women's political participation.

Conclusion

Crimes against women remain a stubborn concern in developing countries and, to a lesser extent, in developed countries. A significant part of the problem is that reporting such crimes is challenging for women for a number of reasons, ranging from a lack of nuanced police responsiveness to a host of other psychological, emotional and economic costs.

In most developing countries, a lack of police action has been widely seen as a significant part of the problem. In this context, recent research in India has shown that having a larger proportion of women in political office

results in a significant increase in female victims' willingness to report crimes, as well as a determination by the police to intervene in such matters. Similarly, in developed countries, domestic and other forms of violence often seem to suffer from severe under-reporting – sometimes because levels of police responsiveness are too aggressive, as is often the case with mandatory arrest laws.

There is thus a crying need for the discussion and debate to focus on the development of more nuanced policy tools not only to encourage the reporting of gender crimes but also to help reduce its incidence over the longer term. In today's changing social terrain, gender relations are often under strain because such changes defy long-existing social norms about men's and women's roles (Bertrand et al., 2013). Avoiding violent fallout from these social stresses requires a nuanced policy response, and increasing women's presence at the policy-making table therefore has to be an essential component of any solution to combat gender crime in future.

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²³ 'Reports of military sexual assault rise sharply', *New York Times*, 7 November 2013.

²⁴ See Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) on Spain, and Frechette, Morelli and Maniquet (2008) on France.

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