

# Big Talk, Small Action: Modi Govt's Work on Women's Empowerment in the Last 9 Years

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File photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the National Women Livelihood Meet 2019, Uttar Pradesh. Photo: PTI.

analysis

## Women

The recent stirring images of protesting women wrestlers being manhandled by police reflects the attitude of the BJP government towards women. While its 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' is a mere platitude, the situation of women on various counts has only gone from bad to worse.

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The month of May 2023 marked nine years in power for the Narendra Modi-led Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). May 28 marked a day on which the new parliament building was inaugurated with glorified rituals conducted by the prime minister himself.

It was also a day that brought national shame upon its women when India's iconic women wrestlers and sporting icons who led a peaceful march to the parliament – protesting against sexual harassment charges levied against an elected BJP MP – faced violent police brutality and aggression on the streets.

Stirring images of police manhandling women on the streets reflect a state of 'apathy' and indifference on the part of a government that leaves no stone unturned to crush any form of protest against its own.

Also read: India's Women Olympians on the Pavement Again: Where Are Those Who Are Proud of Them?

This is not the first time that the Modi-Shah 'double engine' government has used police brutality to crush dissent.

From the CAA-NRC protests led by the elderly women of Shaheen Bagh; the Satyagraha protest movement against the Farm Laws also anchored by thousands of women farmers, the present government used force to crush any form of 'dissent or contrarian action against its own conduct'.



An elderly anti-CAA protestor gestures, while she talks to Supreme Court-appointed interlocutors, during an interaction, at Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. Photo: PTI

As most protest movements over the last few years have been anchored and led by women on the streets, incidents of police brutality, aggression, violence, abuse, against those standing up to those in power are being normalised to an extent where 'such incidents' hardly evoke any mentions of support or acts of solidarity from others in the fraternity (sports in this case).

A question arises: Given its recent history of meting out ill-treatment towards women protesters, including women wrestlers, who have won national accolades and medals for the country, how has the Modi government, in its nine years of being in power, performed on its own promises to 'empower' women?

### **Modi government's track record in enabling women's empowerment**

When the Modi-Shah-led government to power in 2014, the BJP manifesto promised big on anchoring/ensuring 'women's empowerment' at all levels across the country.

The use of the term 'empowerment' itself presupposes a lack of a level playing field for women, amidst the unfreedoms and structural inequality observable in India's various social, political and economic landscape orientations.

A presupposed, paternalistic, patriarchal construct of 'empowerment' also raises various connotations given the party's own understanding of power designed in a paternalistic warped form, where only the powerful assume to 'empower' others and not be able to serve or promote equality as equal, elected representations of the people.

It can also be said that the current BJP's governmentality and applied ideological core of Hindutva practiced in the Modi-Shah years is one based on 'Shakti Ki Gita' (On Notion of 'Absolutist' Power), with an executive guided on Rule *by* Law than Rule *of* Law.

This author has recently written and explained how this pattern in the "way of governing" can be comparatively seen in context to not just India but other authoritative-populist regimes, that tend to 'control' their own electorate often by the brute force of the police, with the same applying against anyone who either tries speaking truth *to* power and/or truth *about* power.

One of the central tenants of the BJP's 2014 manifesto emphasised the role of women as 'nation builders' and stated that BJP recognised "the important role of women (Nari Shakti) in the development of the society and growth of the nation and remains committed to give a high priority to women's empowerment and welfare".

Looking for what outcomes were seen as important for the party to ensure 'women's empowerment', details in the BJP's election manifesto focused on reducing 'high rates of crimes against women', 'increasing female education' and 'women-employment levels'; and 'introducing a constitutional amendment to allow for 33% reservation in parliamentary and state assemblies.

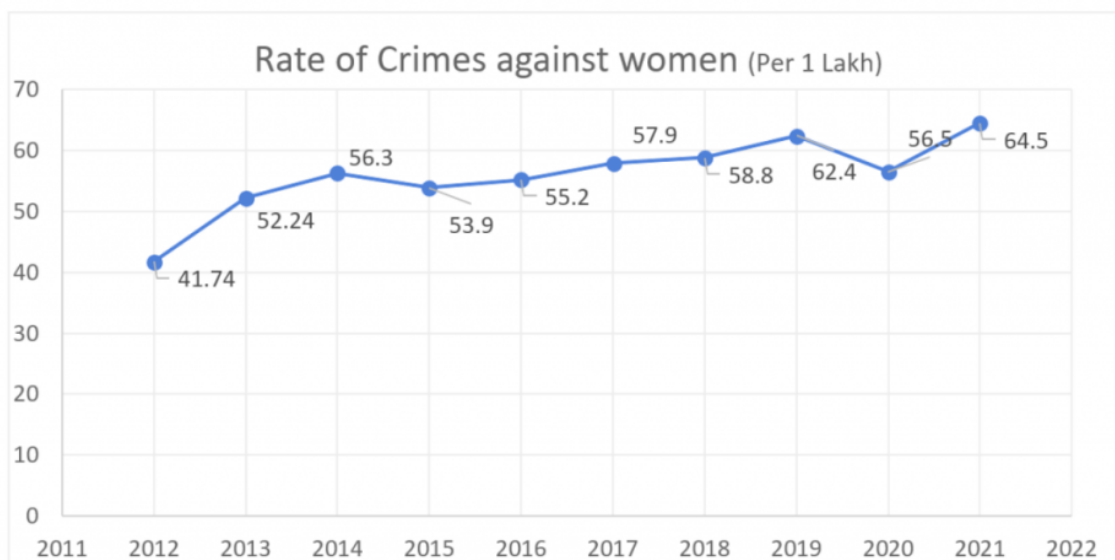
Let's have a look at how they have fared in these categories in the last nine years.

### **Rising reported crimes against women**

The BJP's 2014 election manifesto stated that under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, "crimes against women have(d) reached unacceptable levels" and blamed this decline onto a "gross misuse and total denigration of government and institutions", yet in their nine years, crimes against women have only increased.

As per the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) records, in 2012, 2.44 lakh crimes against women were reported. This number jumped to around 4.28 lakh in 2021, implying a 42.96% increase in total crimes reported in years since the BJP came to power.

Moreover, the rate of crime committed against women, per lakh population, was 41.74 in 2012 and it rose to 56.3 in 2014. In years since then, the crime rate has fluctuated, but as per the latest NCRB report 2021, the rate increased to 64.5 in 2021.



Source: Author's calculations (NCRB data: <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india>)

Keeping aside the fact that usually an 'increasing trend in reported numbers' from before reflects an 'improved confidence in the policing system' (which is a State-List subject of governance in India), still, the persistently rising trend in reported crimes against women hasn't received much of the Union government's focus on initiating or undertaking any actionable measures that yield positive results.

[Also read: Nirbhaya Fund Money Isn't Being Spent, Women's Security Schemes Not Implemented](#)

On the contrary, when the police are seen brutalising and manhandling women on the streets, including women-sport icons and Olympic champions for leading a peaceful protest, it reflects quite poorly on the government's ability to walk the talk on its own promises on promoting women safety – and the PM's credibility to stand on his own words.

### **On economic and political participation of women**

India's FLFPR (Female Labor Force Participation Rate) has remained woefully low for decades, but this trend has further declined during the last nine years of the Modi government.

As per the World Bank data, reported LFPR in 2012 was observed to be at 27% which dropped to 22.9% in 2021. However, in 2022, the FLFPR increased to 23.9%. Research from [CEDA, Ashoka University on analysing PLFS](#) data shows that this increase in labour force reporting can be attributed to an increase in women's participation in the agricultural sector.

This is concerning as most women working in the agricultural sector are affected adversely by working in areas of low productivity, poorer wages, in some instances on unpaid, deeply exploitative work contracts. India also has one of the largest proportions of female-based informal employment-population [amongst the LMDCs](#) (Like Minded Developing Countries) and the lowest levels of women entrepreneurs working in the organised, industrial space.

The [hidden cost of the pandemic](#) affecting women in the worst possible across different labour markets. The Centre for New Economics Studies, in its research, documented the nature of troubling scenarios experienced over the last three years by [female domestic workers, daily-wage worker based mazdoor mandis, ASHA workers, Anganwadis, nomadic communities, street vendors](#), et al. amongst those occupied by the unsecured, unorganised, informal work space.

Post COVID-19 pandemic, [women shifted](#) from salaried employment (with a less significant wage gap of 34%), to casual employment (where the wage gap here is 50%) and [self-employment](#) (wage gap here is 160%).

[Also read: How Can India Reverse Falling Female Workforce Participation?](#)

The trend reflects [a desperate need](#) amongst those women entering/returning to the workforce – [due to lack of 'good jobs'](#) in the organised sector – are seen to be absorbed by the unorganised, informal space, often, at lower wages, and under much [harsher, exploitative work conditions/contracts](#).

[Mehrotra et al \(2014\)](#) also argue how rural women are in a more precarious condition, joining the workforce during times of economic crisis – as 'shock absorbers' – and exiting the workforce during high-growth periods (most [growth-generating sectors](#) have highly skewed male-female ratios, as seen since the 2003-04 and 2011-12). This [pattern hasn't changed](#) over the last nine years, and in fact, worsened.

On the political representation spectrum, a lesser representation of women across the political, policy decision-making arena, observable across different Union, State, local level governing bodies has been a long-standing issue.

It was hoped that the current government pitching a 'reformist' agenda would ensure (as promised in its manifesto), "33% reservation in parliamentary and state assemblies through a constitutional amendment" as part of [a 14-year journey for the Bill](#). Note how Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the 1999-NDA government was keen to work towards this issue then, but couldn't because of a lack of clear consensus, and mandate in the Parliament.

This still did not come to pass under Modi.

Not only did the Women's reservation bill lapse once in 2014 and then again in 2019, but BJP also has never come close to even giving out 33% women representation in the tickets offered to candidates for local, state, or national level elections. Most other parties have miserably failed in this regard too (leaving aside some state assemblies like Kerala that have done well in ensuring decentralised women representation in policy, political decision making).

In 2014, during the 16th Lok Sabha election, women accounted for 11% of the elected representative share in the parliament, then in post 17th Lok Sabha elections, women accounted for 12.45% of the total elected representative-share in the parliament. Additionally, in the 2014 elections, only 8% of candidates who contested on the BJP tickets were women, and only 12% of the candidates who contested for elections from the BJP in 2019 were women.

Another area, where you observe a marked difference in the BJP's *kathni* (words) and *karni* (actions).

### **Supporting social welfare schemes essential to women**

A tweet posted on May 30 by Prime Minister Modi listed the accomplishments of the BJP government in the last nine years. One of them was about the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY 2016) under which the Union government aimed at distributing LPG connections to women of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families.

As of 2023, the Union government distributed 96 million cylinders. However, out of the cylinders distributed, 9.6% of beneficiaries of the scheme took no refills and 11.3% took only one. Although, as per PMUY, 12 refills are part of the provided subsidies, 56.5% of beneficiaries took no more than four refills. Increasing costs have been a serious issue.



File photo. Prime Minister Narendra Modi distributes the free LPG connections to the beneficiaries, under PM Ujjwala Yojana in Ballia on May 1, 2016. Union Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Kalraj Mishra is also seen. Photo: PTI

As per the PMUY, the LPG coverage increased from 62% on May 1, 2016, to 99.8% on April 1, 2021. However, as per data available on refills availed by customers and beneficiaries of the PMUY scheme, Indian households are still not heavily reliant on gas cylinders.

This has been attributed to the high costs of gas refills.

Firstly, the price of refills was Rs 410 in 2014 and rose to Rs 1,060 in 2022, implying that a four-member household that will need at least seven cylinders a year must incur a charge of Rs 7000 per year more than what one used to pay earlier.

Additionally, even the beneficiaries of the PMUY fund need to pay in full for the refill first and the subsidy reimbursement happens much later. In many cases, this 'reimbursement' does not happen in the case of all beneficiaries. As per this report and RTI data, 13% of the households under the PMUY scheme did not receive their subsidies and 23% were unaware of whether or not they had received them.

In the case of other essential social welfare schemes too, where women are disproportionately higher – from nutrition to MGNREGA to those critical in healthcare-based allocations – this Union Government has spent much less than, perhaps, any other government in the past.

### **Hindutva's paternalistic lens and patriarchy**

The campaign Beti Bachao Beti Padhao [Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter] launched in 2015 was aimed at preventing gender-biased sex selective elimination, ensuring survival and protection of the girl child, and ensuring education and participation of the girl child. The Ministry of Women and Child Development explicitly states that this campaign focuses on “challenging mindsets and deep-rooted patriarchy in the societal system”.

Also read: For the BJP, ‘Women’s Rights’ Are Really All About the Men

In the same year Modi strongly endorsed a small grassroots campaign started in Haryana called #SelfieWithDaughter where fathers were asked to tweet photos with their daughters and subsequently asked to upload these to the Foundation website. This received widespread media coverage nationally and internationally.

As argued by Amrita Chhachhi in a recent paper,

*“These campaigns aimed to present a progressive modernity which strategically feeds into the Hindutva project of India being recognised as a global player and garners acceptability and recognition by international development organisations.*

*“Modi mentioned the campaign when he addressed the CEOs in Silicon Valley and in Wembley and the Times Magazine reported this as a personal crusade for gender equality the PM had started since, he came to power. Scholar Hussain (2015) notes that this functions as ‘face work’ in ‘impression management’ which creates a social image ‘that aligns with the Indian’s aspirational economic image of a neoliberal powerhouse.’”*

In addition, *“the personalized alignment of Modi with these campaigns and other social policies fosters a new ‘paternalist’ contract.*

*Not only does this campaign reinforce the role of the father as protector, which then segues into a gendered discourse of safety, surveillance and restriction, but more significantly it constructs and reinforces Modi as the ‘father figure’-a benevolent patriarch -a role he plays out in many arenas. This trope is deployed as well in the welfare programs instituted specifically for women.”*

### **Addressing the burden of care work for Nari Shakti to thrive**

As one of the authors of this piece argued recently, any policy interventions made to ensure ‘gender equality’, ‘equal opportunity for women’ of all strata, identity, and under all socio-economic conditions may first require an honest effort on the part of the government to recognise the structural nature of the underlying problem(s) – and make an honest assessment of its own policy errors (this is what we mean by designing a consequentially sensitive policy ecosystem).

Any government intent on women’s welfare should employ its fiscal and other social policy-based interventions towards developing a robust ‘care’ infrastructure that allows women (and other gendered groups) to have enough time endowment for undertaking



'paid work' while having the opportunity for pursuing 'freedoms' integral to their well-being.

However, in terms of social welfare and care what one has observed under the governance framework of the last nine years is a major shift from rights-based welfare (social citizenship and employment-based entitlements) offered to those in need to an institutionalisation of a neoliberal process of market-based entitlements, where who gets what is based on ad-hoc, instrumental, documentation-sensitive means, as against 'rights' and 'capability-enhancement needs'.

Enabling an ecosystem where more women live in an environment of 'unfreedoms' and witness police brutality (when protesting against those in power) signals a cowardly, insecure government, which merely projects 'women empowerment' and 'women safety' as a public relations goal aimed at an electoral gain and favourable international image posturing. However, in reality, it presents an apathetic conduct of a government that actually cares very little for the interest and welfare of 'women' (and other gendered groups).

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