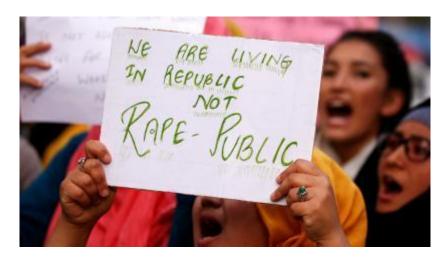# Modi's government claims it's improved the lives of women. But here's the reality

On July 20, as the Narendra Modi government faced its first no-confidence motion in parliament, it began its defence by underlining its track record on women's empowerment.

Rakesh Sharma, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member of parliament from Jabalpur, argued that the Modi government's Ujjwala Yojana and Swachh Bharat (Clean India) programmes had improved the lives of millions of Indian "mothers and sisters."

Launched in 2016, Ujjwala Yojana provides cooking gas connections to poor households to nudge them away from the use of firewood or coal, which leads to respiratory diseases. The cleanliness scheme, on the other hand, addressed India's chronic lack of toilets, the ill-effects of which were being borne by women, Sharma said in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament. He also cited the example of Madhya Pradesh's recently adopted law to award death sentences to those found guilty of raping minors, a landmark decision in a state that recorded the highest number of child rapes in 2016.

But have things really improved for Indian women?

For one thing, the government has made no move to address India's low female political participation. India ranks 147 out of 188 countries when it comes to the number of women in parliament, with both the lower and upper houses having just about 12% each, according to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Despite its significant majority in parliament, the government did not move to pass the women's reservation bill that would have reserved 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for female candidates. That bill has been languishing in parliament for over two decades, even though research has shown that female legislators are better for the Indian economy.

And when it comes to health and safety from sexual harassment and assault, Indian women continue to fare far worse than many of their counterparts abroad.

"New laws have been brought in, and schemes launched. However, what is needed is a wider acceptance that women have rights, and those rights need to be protected," Meenakshi Ganguly, south Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said in an email. She argued that India needs better enforcement of laws and policies to give women equal opportunities and protect them against domestic violence and other abuses. Most importantly, the traditional status of Indian women as secondary to men has hardly changed, and patriarchy is still responsible for much of the misery women face.

"We have underestimated the power of culture," said Deepa Narayan, author of Chup: Breaking the Silence about India's Women. "To me what has been missing or declining is the cultural respect for women in all the roles they choose for themselves other than mother; to go beyond the notion of respectful women only as mothers, as Mother India."

And that is very evident in the alarming rise of violence against Indian women of all ages.
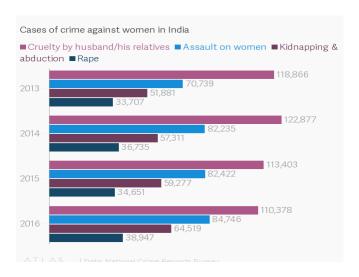
Women's safety

It's not for nothing that experts and activists polled this year by the Thomson Reuters Foundation perceived India as the world's most dangerous place for women, citing retrograde cultural practices, sexual violence, and trafficking. When the same poll was conducted in 2011, India ranked fourth after Afghanistan, Congo, and Pakistan.

Just a day after the no-confidence motion in parliament, yet another harrowing incident of gang-rape was reported in Chandigarh, the latest sign of the crisis of women's safety in India. A 21-year-old woman has said she was locked up in an isolated guest-house and raped by around 50 men between July 15 and July 18. This comes just after the horrifying months-long gang-rape of an 11-year-old child in Chennai made national and international headlines.

This combined with two other recent incidents of sexual assault against minors shows the troubling rise of violence against young girls, even as the government's flagship Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (save daughters, educate daughters) scheme seeks to protect them. In fact, in one of the cases, a lawmaker from the BJP itself was among the perpetrators. He was only arrested after the Uttar Pradesh government was criticised for its inaction.

When it comes to crimes against women, almost all categories have seen an uptick in recent years, with thousands of cases of dowry harassment, assault, kidnapping, and rape registered in the last year alone. And given the prevailing social stigma surrounding assault, as well as the ordeal it is to seek justice, it's extremely likely that the extent of the crisis is being under-reported. Last year, a report by Human Rights Watch showed that survivors of sexual assault in India have to brave insensitive treatment from the police, doctors, and even lawyers throughout the process of holding perpetrators accountable. And when crimes are committed by powerful men, there's often little or no recourse.

"The key question to ask is do women in India feel safer today than four years ago? I think the answer is no, not just (in) physical safety but psychological safety, the freedom to express their opinions," Narayan said.

Cases of crime against women in India

Cruelty by husband/his relatives ■ Assault on women ■ Kidnapping & abduction ■ Rape

2013
118,866
70,739
51,881
33,707

2014
122,877
82,235
57,311
36,735

2015
113,403
82,422
59,277
34,651

2016
110,378
84,746
64,519
38,947

ATLAS | Data: National Crime Records Bureau

Women's health

India's expenditure on health care has remained dismally low for years and this hasn't changed under Modi.

One of the most prevalent health issues is the extent of anaemia among women, a result of malnutrition. Despite long-running efforts to combat the problem, more than half of Indian women of reproductive age suffer from the condition, according to the 2017 Global Nutrition Report (pdf). India has the world's largest number of anaemic women. And though government officials have said that reducing its prevalence is a priority, not enough has been done. The traditional

familial role of Indian women, which hasn't changed in recent years, complicates things further. For instance, women often eat only after the rest of the family has been served.

While India has seen a significant reduction in maternal mortality in recent years, it still accounts for a large share of the global burden of maternal deaths, and many women still lack access to quality maternity care. For instance, only 21% of the mothers had full antenatal care, according to the 2015-2016 National Family Health Survey (pdf). For rural women, the figure dropped to around 17%.

And when it comes to the health of Dalit women, the situation is worse. These women face discrimination in access to health care and die younger than upper caste women, according to data from the National Family Health Survey.

Women and work

The Modi government made economic growth a priority when it came to power, but the importance of including women in the process hasn't received as much attention. India's female labour force participation rate is among the lowest in the south Asian region. In 2015-16, only 24% of India's women were employed, down from 36.3% in 2005-06, according to the latest Economic Survey (pdf). Last year, India dropped 21 spots on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index because of the lower participation of women in the economy.

Equal opportunities for women could add as much as $770 billion to the country's GDP, according to an April report by the McKinsey Global Institute. But many Indian women continue to bear the burden of traditional gender roles that confine them to their homes or force them to juggle multiple responsibilities, making work an added burden.

For the women who do work, the Modi government's expansion of maternity leave to 26 weeks from the previous 12 weeks is not entirely an advantage. While widely lauded as a step forward to make offices more inclusive of women, the law could have the opposite effect in the short-term. A recent survey by TeamLease Servicesshowed that up to 1.8 million women could lose their jobs because of the expanded benefit, which is also deterring startups and small businesses from hiring women.