

India: Nirbhaya Fund could help improve women's safety - but money allotted for schemes is underutilised

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Since its inception in 2013, the Nirbhaya Fund, set up to finance projects to improve the safety and security of women, has seen significant underutilisation and slow operationalisation of approved projects.

The government's current spending on women-specific interventions that address violence against women is not even 25% of the actual requirement, according to a [recent report by Oxfam India](#). Up to 90% of the current spending is accounted for by the Nirbhaya Fund itself.

The lockdown months saw an unprecedented increase in violence against women, particularly in domestic violence. Data from the fifth National Family Health Survey shows that six states and Union Territories saw a rise in domestic violence, and nine saw a rise in sexual abuse, between 2015-16 and 2019-'20. India's rank on global gender indices remains low.

In this situation, it is important to reassess the Nirbhaya Fund as a policy and budgetary strategy for addressing violence against women.

Reduced allocations

While the rate of fund utilisation for Nirbhaya Fund schemes began to improve since 2018-'19, annual budgetary allocations for many of the schemes show a declining trend. In 2021-'22, three Nirbhaya Fund schemes under the Ministry of Women and Child Development – One Stop Centre Scheme, women helpline and Mahila Police Volunteers – have been merged into a new umbrella scheme called [SAMBAL scheme](#), along with four other schemes for women. Allocations for SAMBAL in 2021-'22 are 10% less than the combined allocations for all these schemes in the previous year.

The set of schemes implemented by the Ministry of Home Affairs under the Nirbhaya Fund saw a major decline of 88% from the previous year's allocation. Fast Track Courts set up under the Ministry of Justice to dispose of pending cases of sexual abuse received an increase in allocations from Rs 150 crore in 2020-'21 to Rs 200 crore in 2021-'22.

It should be noted that the home ministry schemes are not reported in the Union government's Gender Budget Statement. Allocations for fast track courts were reported the previous year, but are missing from this year's Gender Budget Statement. These omissions reflect a lack of coherence within the government's larger framework for gender-responsive budgeting. To foster accountability, it is important for all such allocations to be reported in the Gender Budget Statement.

Prolonged underutilisation

All ministries and department implementing projects under the Nirbhaya Fund have seen underutilisation of funds. As per the latest available data, the rate of utilisation out of released funds varies from 79% for the home ministry, which receives the largest share of funds, to zero for the department of justice.

Cases of crimes against women have a pendency rate of 91.3% and conviction rates of 22.2%, [according to National Crime Records Bureau](#). In all, [1,023 Fast Track Courts](#) have been approved under the Nirbhaya Fund, at an estimated cost of Rs 767 crore. But states have continually reported zero utilisation under the scheme, which raises questions about the functioning of these courts.

Sanction, release and utilisation of Nirbhaya Fund

The quantum of funds released is itself a small proportion of total funds approved for the schemes and projects. For instance, just under half the sanctioned funds for Ministry of Women and Child Development schemes have been released, and of the released amount, only 27% has been utilised. Of funds released from Ministry of Women and Child Development, West Bengal, Puducherry and Lakshwadeep have reported zero utilisation.

While the mechanisms of One Stop Centres, helplines and female police volunteers might be in place in most states, fund utilisation rates for these schemes suggest that the implementation and coverage are sub-par. Delhi, Maharashtra and Karnataka account for 14% of total calls registered on the Women's Helpline but all three states have reported zero utilisation since the inception of the scheme.

Uttar Pradesh, which has the highest number of One Stop Centres and accounts for 50% of the cases reported to these centres, has utilised a mere 12.5% of the amount of Rs 50.7 crore allocated to it over six years.

A total of 25 states/Union Territories have reported less than 30% utilisation of available funds under this scheme. Chhattisgarh, the state where the first One Stop Centre was set up, has received more funds than most states, and in 2020, it had the highest utilisation at 73%.

Haryana, which was the first to implement the Mahila Police Volunteer scheme, is the only state to report 100% utilisation. Although the scheme was supposed to be taken up by all states after its pilot, in 2020-'21, only 13 states/Union Territories reported any fund release from the Ministry, and nine of those states reported zero utilisation.

Mahila Police Volunteers have the capacity to contribute to a safer environment for women, greater reporting of crimes, and improved awareness, as they form a link between the police system and the public. But the pattern of low utilisation, followed by zero fund release in 2020-'21, has not allowed for any major breakthroughs.

Limitations in design

The projects proposed under Nirbhaya Fund are required to have the following features: "optimum use of existing infrastructure" and "innovative use of technology", apart from directly impacting the safety concerns of women. These guidelines appear to encourage low-cost interventions oriented towards surveillance, and reporting and investigation of crimes.

Such interventions lead to an inordinate focus on urban crimes in public spaces, whereas most violence against women occurs in domestic spaces. Few of the approved projects involve the

provision of medical, legal and counselling services to women in distress, or seek to address the structural causes of gender-based violence.

Budgeting and planning processes must be informed by a deeper understanding of violence against women. The guidelines governing the use of the Nirbhaya Fund should be broadened to incentivise interventions in other areas, such as education, health, sanitation, public infrastructure and economic empowerment of women. For instance, Kerala, in its Gender Budget for 2021-'22, has allocated resources for medical care for women victims of violence, gender awareness in police stations and basic amenities in public places for women.

A shift in approach is required towards preventing crimes against women, with a focus on behaviour change and sensitisation. Central ministries and states can be provided training on how to design and implement projects in these domains, in alignment with their specific needs. Annual allocations for the Nirbhaya Fund should be increased progressively so that existing projects can be strengthened and new projects in a wider range of domains can be financed.

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