

Beyond Boundaries: Caste, Gender, and the Human Rights Challenges of Dalit Women

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ABSTRACT

Dalit women in India face a unique combination of caste and gender discrimination, resulting in severe marginalisation and systematic injustice. This study offers a worldwide investigation into the multiple obstacles faced by Dalit women, situating their experiences within the larger framework of human rights abuses and socioeconomic inequities. Drawing on comparative analyses and case studies from diverse places, this study investigates how caste-based discrimination interacts with gender inequality to worsen Dalit women's vulnerability and exclusion. The article examines legislative frameworks, policy measures, and grassroots movements to show the persisting disparities in Dalit women's protection and access to justice in India. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of global solidarity and collaborative action in addressing the structural causes of caste and gender-based oppression, advocating for transformative approaches that prioritise Dalit women's voices and agency in the pursuit of social justice and human rights for all. Finally, this study adds to wider discourses about social justice, human rights, and intersectionality by including the perspectives and experiences of Dalit women in global discourse. It asks for national and international cooperation to eliminate caste-based discrimination, combat gender inequality, and protect the human rights and dignity of all people, regardless of caste, gender, or socioeconomic background.

Key words: Dalits, Marginalization, Caste, Gender, Human rights, Empowerment.

Introduction

Women empowerment is central to achieving the target of inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. It is not only a national goal but also a global agenda under Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 of United Nations. As per "UN Declaration of the Decade of Women" in 1975, creating conditions that are favourable for the full, active, and unhindered participation of women in social, economic, political, and public life is quint essential for benefit of the society. The UN Women Annual Report 2018-19 states that although over the years the quest for gender equality and women empowerment has accelerated - with vigorous public debate, social mobilization, and awareness-raising to transform social norms and strengthen accountability - but inequalities still remain acute, as a result of which women across the globe still struggle to live life with dignity (Mukherjee, 2020). The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993 (DEVAW) provides an internationally well-endorsed definition of VWA, as to include all acts of violence which may "result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women" either "in public or in private life. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes, and consequences (UNSRVAW) has played a pivotal role in the highlighting VWA as a major human rights violation. (Wankhede, 2018). The plurality of 'woman' as a category, and the need to address the diversity within this category, including how different groups of women have different access to citizenship and other rights, different identities, and different problems, is now recognized all over the world as an important issue in feminism.

Evolution of Distinction Among Women's Issues

The emergence of Distinction in Women's Concerns Those who focus on the economic and social oppression of women, as well as African American and non-Western scholars, criticised the mainstream feminist discourse in the West for failing to acknowledge the racial dimension of the gender question. Black feminists' works have centred on the unique issues faced by women from marginalised groups, who share similarities

with other women on certain levels but differ in other ways due to factors including race, colour, social origin, ethnicity, and nationality. (Walby 1996). Many of the theoretical formulations that represented the consciousness and experience of white middle-class women were contested by black feminists in the North American setting. In India, Dalit women are "unique social organisms." Their identity is based on the intersectional oppression of two groups: women and Dalits, which gives them distinct lived experiences. Because of their dual marginalisation, they belong to a different category; their experience as Dalit women cannot be explained by the fact that they are "Dalit" or "women." Their identity includes the interrelations and interactions of these two identities that reinforce each other. The awareness of Dalit women's issues has been submerged under the logic of universal sisterhood propagated by the Indian feminist movement. The Dalit literary movement has also been largely patriarchal; Dalit men are at the center of most prominent works. Thus, the issues of Dalit women did not have a place in the agenda of the Dalit movement or the Women's movement. They remained outsiders and within (Sharma, 2021). The proponents of the women's movement in India have generally confined themselves to seeking changes in laws relating to gender relations, marriage, domestic violence, economic empowerment, and sexuality; they have been mostly silent on the public violence and discrimination that Dalit women so frequently endure (Sabharwal & Sonalkar et al., 2010). In the early 1990s, Dalit women began to question the mainstream women's movement because of its failure to recognize the distinctive character of the problems of Dalit women. Dalit women's discourse recognizes the problem of gender exploitation by their men, and therefore, the Dalit women's movement, like the 'mainstream' women's movement, addresses the issue of patriarchy, which prevents women from asserting their choices and participating in decision making in both the community and the family. However, writers on the problems of Dalit women have argued that low-caste women, particularly the untouchables, have suffered from not only gender discrimination and economic deprivation, but also discrimination related to prescribed customary provisions in the institution of caste and untouchability. They suffer triple deprivation owing to gender, poverty, and caste. While all women experience patriarchy, its impact varies based on their social identities. In the Indian context, much of the discourse on women's issues has been framed through the lens of Brahmanical patriarchy. However, Dalit women's experiences are shaped by both Brahmanical patriarchy in mainstream society and Dalit patriarchy within their own communities. The term Brahmanical patriarchy was introduced by Chakravarti who argued that, unlike traditional views of patriarchy as a standalone system of oppression, Brahmanical patriarchy intertwines caste and gender, reinforcing each other. This perspective provides an intersectional framework that highlights caste as a central factor in Indian women's oppression, challenging previous literature that universalized women's experiences. (Mangat & Gill, 2024)

Challenges Faced by Dalit Women: Battling Multiple Forms of Discrimination

In South Asia - that is, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka - Dalits have endured discrimination based on work and descent for centuries, and this discrimination continues today. The Dalits - known as 'untouchables' or 'outcastes' - number around two hundred and sixty million people in South Asia. Because of their caste, they experience discrimination, social exclusion, and violence daily. Although economic growth in the region has been strong over the past decade, caste disparities remain and are in fact increasing. The situation of Dalit women in these countries needs urgent and special attention. They constitute one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world and face systemic and structural discrimination thrice over: as Dalits, as women, and as poor. The caste system declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure and 'untouchable', therefore socially excluded. In class terms, most Dalit women are poor; many are landless daily wage labourers who are systematically denied access to resources. As women, they are subjugated by patriarchal structures. Due to this intersectional discrimination, Dalit women are specifically targeted for daily, egregious, community honour residing in women, dominant caste violence against Dalit women functions to punish the entire Dalit community and teach Dalits a lesson of obedience to caste norms. Moreover, Dalit women are discriminated against not only by dominant castes on account of their caste, class, and gender, but also by their own communities on account of their gender. Dalit women have less power within the Dalit community in general. When considering discrimination and violence against Dalit women, one can state that impunity is the key problem Dalit women face today - not only while seeking legal and judicial redress for violence, but also while attempting to access and enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms. Perpetrators enjoy virtual immunity from prosecution for violence against Dalit women, as the police, who themselves often harbour caste prejudices, wilfully neglect to enforce the law. Not only the police, but perpetrators and their communities use their political, social, and economic power to silence Dalit women, thereby denying them access to justice. The nature of collusion between state and dominant caste actors is such that the modern rule of law has no place in the hierarchical order of socio-economic and political power relationships, as caste-based power supersedes state-derived executive authority. (Haije, 2007). The contemporary Dalit women's discourse shared common problems with the mainstream feminists with respect to gender, economic empowerment, and patriarchy. But Dalit women also recognized and articulated their problems related to their limited access to permanent sources of livelihood; their high dependence on wage labour with limited social security; their caste and untouchability-based discrimination in multiple spheres; their subjection to caste-related violence and atrocities, particularly the institutionalized sexual exploitation through the devadasi system (temple prostitution). The issue of 'freedom

of the individual' versus the 'rights of the community' affects Dalit women differently, because their bodies are often used as a means for the upper castes to assert their dominant position over the lowest castes in the hierarchy. (Sabarwal & Sonalkar, 2015). On the other hand landlessness is a pervasive feature of Dalit households in rural India. Landlessness is foundational to the existence of Dalits as a distinct social group in the rural areas; it forms the material basis for the domination and exploitation of Dalits in the non-economic spheres as well. The caste system thus contains elements of both social oppression and class exploitation. (Kumar & Kambal, 2012). Dalit rural women have very limited access to and control over land, which in turn leads to food insecurity. They also lack access to other communal resources; when those resources are in non-Dalit areas, the women are attacked for attempting to use them. When it comes to infrastructure and resources in Dalit communities, the government often overlooks those areas and does not allocate the necessary funds to ensure equality of access to resources. Further, Dalit women lack employment options and other livelihood opportunities. They have the highest poverty levels, are landless and depend on the dominant caste for employment, wages and loans. Their access to resources or even their efforts to access them are often met with violence. (CEDAW). Last but not the least concern related to justice that Caste and Gender Bias in the Courts. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Women are often also unaware of the laws; their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and, as illustrated by the cases below, by the judiciary. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge's own caste and gender biases, can lead to acquittal, regardless of the availability of evidence or witnesses. The failure to successfully prosecute cases of rape also allows for crimes against women to continue unabated, and in the caste context, encourages the use of rape as a tool to punish and silence Dalit communities. (human rights watch, 1999).

Problem within their own community

When writing about problems in their own communities, Dalit women writers tend to gravitate towards feminist issues as their experiences are not rooted in caste alone; they exist at the intersection of caste and gender. The Dalit community has obvious gendered social practices that are oppressive and are also responsible for the repression and exploitation of their women. First, from intrinsic conventional patriarchy by Dalit men that perpetuates silently and is generally acceptable; Second, from the extended patriarchy of the upper-caste men and the caste councils or Panchayats. The second category of patriarchy is severe and unquestionable. Regardless of their dutiful and selfless conduct, they are victimized by their husbands. Tormenting and thrashing one's wife is common and an everyday occurrence in Dalit households. A culture of violence, silence, and impunity prevails for women in the Dalit community, and numerous heart-wrenching cases have been put forth by the authors. (Sharma, 2021, p. 30). Dalit women disproportionately experience discrimination at work, even in urban settings and in skilled work. Dalit women earn half the average daily wage earned by non-Dalit castes. Dalit women sustain intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination, particularly in the workplace. For instance, Dalit women often work in modern slavery and are key targets for trafficking. They are often used as debt slaves in brick kilns, garment industries and agriculture. 98% of those forced into the dehumanising work of manual scavenging - removing human waste by hand - are also Dalit women. Dalit women may also be born into temple prostitution as 'Devadasis' (sex slaves) in India or be branded prostitutes in Nepal due to their caste status. According to the ETI Base Code guidance: caste in global supply chains, in the garment industry, low-caste Dalit girls and women are recruited under the "Sumangali Scheme" suffering multiple violations in the spinning mills in India, which supply the global garment industry. Employees were found to work a 68-hour week, with no contracts or pay slips, no social security benefits, and no bonus. They were locked inside factory and dormitory compounds during working and non-working hours. At the mills investigated, there were violations of freedom of movement and freedom of association, amounting to conditions of forced labour. The workers felt that the supervisors were threatening and hostile, and there were reports of sexual harassment. Tragically, several girls committed suicide. (HRC, 2020). Especially for Dalit women has been pointed by Dalit activists and intellectuals that Dalit women suffer the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. They have been called the "Dalits of the Dalits", the "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" and the "the slaves of the slaves". So both the concepts; the social movement and feminism don't apply completely on them. A social movement can be thought of as an informal set of individuals and/ or groups that are "involved in conflict relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks, share a distinct collective identity. Feminism is "embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system.

The feminist waves time to time such as:

1. **SUFFRAGE:** 19th and early 20th century focused mainly on suffrage alongside other legal rights. Mostly active in the UK, Canada, and United States. Movement succeeded in gaining women the right to vote & other legal liberties.

2. **EQUAL PAY:** Began in the US. then spread to Europe, Asia focused mainly on sexuality, reproductive rights, and the wage gap Movement succeeded in securing career options for women, and many reproductive rights.

3. **PATRIARCHY:** Fights for equality by focusing exclusively on female victims of gender-neutral issues Mostly on Tumblr + Facebook by Mostly middle/upper class US Rejects labelling by adopting labels and identities. Everything is the Patriarchy's fault, also rape culture. Early women's movement comprised of the women from upper caste and class strata who distanced themselves from party politics and confrontational mode of assertion. The theme of "woman as an individual in her own right" did not crop up till very late. Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions

1. Gender, because of patriarchy.

2. Class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities.

3. And caste, coming from the lowest caste, (Oza, 2012)

The gendered division of labour is the most common but complex oppressive practice that engages women in various household activities such as cooking, fetching water, cleaning, washing, managing raw materials, taking care of family members, fulfilling their emotional and physical needs, and so forth. Perspectives of Dalit women writers show that gendered labor subjugates women from their childhood. Girls are usually married at a very early age. Marriage to them means the multiplication of their difficulties. Dalit women perform difficult labour, which is made even more intricate because of their poor economic conditions and peripheral locations. Amidst all these difficulties, many Dalit women also have to endure unwanted pregnancies and difficult motherhood. Biological reproduction is a life-long process for these women. They lack the essential facilities needed for a safe birth. They do not have cotton or cloth pads, so they often continue to bleed. Many young girls on the threshold of life succumb to death. Dalit Women Speak Out (2011) is another significant study that analyses the narratives of 500 Dalit women to present the complexities of their lives. The text underlines that many Dalit wives suffer economically from their husbands' habitual drinking, as the earnings of the family are squandered on alcohol rather than used to meet household needs. Because of this, the responsibility of running the household and managing the resources is left to women. Deprived conditions and Dalit women's struggle for resources are the prime concerns. (Sharma, 2021, pp. 31-35)

Human Rights, violence, and Dalit women

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women. These include extreme verbal abuse and sexual epithets, being paraded naked, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft. Dalit women are also threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes, but sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls occur within their own communities too. The devadasi (or jogini) system of forced temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. Despite its severity and frequency, most cases of violence against Dalit women are not registered. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. As the women are often unaware of the laws, their ignorance is easily exploited by their opponents, the police, and the judiciary. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge's own caste and gender biases can lead to acquittal. Violence against women (VAW), in particular, Dalit Women in India remains a major human rights violation despite recent legislative and legal reforms in wake of mass agitation by civil society against the rape incidents in India. Violence against Dalit women (VADW) takes a graver form given its intersection with caste-based discrimination, making it a larger systemic problem. It is also demonstrated by lack of enforcement and low conviction rate in Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 (Atrocities Act), a special legislation to combat caste-based violence against Dalits, especially women. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) finding that most numbers of crimes committed on Dalit community in India are sexual offences committed on Dalit women. VADW flows from the intersectional violence faced by them due to gender-caste and gender class-caste discrimination leading to targeted violence and compound violence. Targeted violence is also carried out against rights assertive Dalit women as a form of a lesson to conform to the caste norms (Wankhede, 2018). Dalit women are majorly the victims of triple fold violence i.e., on the basis of caste, class and gender in India. The population of Dalit women in India as per the 2011 National census is 9.79 crore out of the total female population in India which is 58.7 crore. Dalit women are oppressed by the people of so called "upper castes" for being Dalits, by the rich and affluent for being poor, and face patriarchal oppression from men of all communities, including their own, for being a woman. Dalit women are also a subject of violence at the hands of so called upper caste and class women, making them a highly vulnerable section of society. Just like racism in any other part of the world, casteism and untouchability still prevails openly in India even after its criminalization. Untouchability is still being practiced in the state in multiple forms. Discrimination while fetching water, in Anganwadis, schools, colleges, shops, markets, etc. is common. Dalits are expected to maintain distance from NonDalits and are beaten and committed violence against if they try to assert their space. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data of 2019, 10 Dalit women and minor girls are raped in India every day. (NCRB, 2020)

Some testimonies related to sexual, domestic and caste based violence.

Ms. Sandankoti Hajamma told her story of being dedicated as a jogini, a temple prostitute: I was eleven years old when they decided to dedicate me to the goddess. I had no idea what it meant. How could I? The older joginis, who had been through this experience, told me to run away. But what could I do? Where could an eleven-year-old girl run to? Where could I hide? So, the ceremony took place. I was like a goddess that day. Dressed in wedding-like finery. Flowers and shiny fake jewellery. I felt like a princess. But the old women cried. There were around fifty of them. Old joginis who had been used up and thrown out. No one to even give them a meal. Despised and humiliated. Then the men would come and pester me, proposition me. I had no peace. Harassment all day and often at night. It is your duty to come with me, they would insist, after all you are a jogini. One day I met the man I loved. He loved me too. We wanted to get married. But the community was furious. "You can't", they told us. The whole village will be cursed. Everyone will die."

Ms. Hikati Devi was one of the first women to stand up to the violence towards Dalit men and the violence and rape of Dalit women in her village: We worked for the Yadav caste in their fields. One day, a group of Yadavs came shouting into our village. They raped four women and beat up the educated youth to teach them a lesson. I went to the village head to complain. He said that he would look into it, but one of the rapists was his brother-in-law. He came to my house and abused me in the filthiest language: You bitch, whore, who do you think you are, approaching my in-laws? Just wait, we'll teach you a lesson'. Soon after this a gang arrived at night. We sent our men into hiding for fear we would all become widows. So we women were alone in the village with our children and old folk. Two men raped me. When I screamed they shoved a cloth in my mouth. Over the years, I had saved 3000 rupees in cash for my son's wedding. They took everything. The next day I went to the village head again and told him, 'I am going to the police'. He laughed and said: The courts are for the rich people.' I went to the police station, but was chased away. No case was registered.

Ms. Ranjan Parmar told her story of domestic violence. She explained how Dalit women are especially vulnerable and have no means of getting out of violent situations. Like the other speakers, Ms. Ranjan Parmar does not see herself as a victim: I was only sixteen years old when I was married off. I realized immediately that my husband could not stand the sight of me. He never slept with me, could not bear the thought of touching me. He said: 'If you come close to me, my skin will become as black as yours, keep away.' He treated me worse than a servant. / Was the daughter-in-law. I had to cover my face with my sari. I was asked never to show any part of my body. Not to speak with anyone outside the house ever. I had to fetch water from the well with my face covered, veiled with the end of my sari. I had to make eighty big rotis every day for all the family members and to eat last, when everyone had finished. I used to wash the clothes of twenty people every day. I had to wake up at four in the morning and sleep last, after all the work was done. I slept alone. My husband hated me. I told my mother about the state of things, but I didn't want a divorce because this would bring shame on my mother and my entire family. My mother's brother got me to sign the divorce papers. He slapped me to bring me to my senses. I signed and was divorced. I went back to working as a tobacco field labourer. Then I came into contact with an organization that works for Dalit rights, Navsarjan Trust. They heard my story and invited me to work for women's rights. Fighting for exploited women has given me meaning in my life. My only aim is to help other women. This is my whole life now. (Haijer, 2007. Pp. 31-35)

National and International actions in favour of Dalit women

The issue of women empowerment has become a centre stage in the contemporary period of globalization and information technology. The Dalit and gender consciousness led them to launch social movements in India in the 1990s called „National Federation of Dalit Women“ and „All India Dalit Women's Forum“. The establishment of these organisations proves that the issues and the concerns of Dalit women are beyond the arena of the Indian feminist movement. To put in the words of Vidyut Bhagwat Women from lower castes considered so lowly and degraded in life that their body was a free terrain of the colonisation. In the 1990s, several assertions were made for Dalit women's identity and voiced their issues, including the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), All India Dalit Women's Forum, and Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana in 1995, Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad in 1996, the Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, an organization of Dalit Christian women that was founded in 1997 (Bompilwar, 2018). In March 2006, Dalit organizations and Dalit women's organizations called on the international community for solidarity which Dalit women's concerns. The Dalit Network Netherlands (DNN) responded to this request. The network members Justicia et Pax. Cordaid, and CMC organized an international conference on the human rights of Dalit women in The Hague in close co-operation with Dalit organizations and networks from India. After the world conference against racism in Durban (2001). where discrimination against Dalits was put on the international agenda for the first time, and the national conference on violence against Dalit women in New Delhi (2006), The Hague conference on Dalit women's rights represented the next step in the struggle for the human rights and dignity of Dalit women. It was the first time that Dalit women were able to give their testimonies to the international community and ask for its support. (Haijer, 2007. P. 2)

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its observations on India has noted concern about "the ongoing atrocities committed against Dalit women and the culture of impunity for perpetrators of such atrocities" as well as concern "that despite a law banning manual scavenging, this degrading practice continues with grave implications for the dignity and health of

the Dalit women who are engaged in this activity.(IDSN).UN call for leaving no one behind, IDSN has launched the hashtag: #NoCasteLeftBehind. IDSN's priority agenda on Dalit women reinforces the argument that combating gender and caste discrimination is key to achieving the SDGs. See relevant report here. Moreover, the OHCHR report highlights the Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination, which was created in close cooperation with the Dalit communities. This result-oriented document aims to address key challenges and strategic approaches to combat caste-based discrimination and analogous forms of discrimination. This document has helped the OHCHR to shed light on problems such as the electoral violence against Dalits in Bangladesh in 2018, and increasing harassment and targeting of minorities, such as Dalits and Adivasis in India. (HRC, 2020). Norwegian Human Rights Fund brought together, activists, experts, trade unions and several international NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, IDSN and OSF. in a session dedicated to addressing caste based discrimination, the exploitation of Dalit women in work settings, was raised by speakers at the global Women at Work conference in Nepal, stressing the urgent need to address the situation. (INDS, 2022)

Side event on Dalit women in the 23 Human Rights Council, United Nations Geneva, June 7, 2013 The UN High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, made a very strong argument in favour of Dalit women by locating the intersections of caste and gender, not from the angle of violence alone, but by rightly pointing out structural causes of inequity and oppression. In her statement presented at the Side-event by Dalit women, at the 23rd session of the UN Human Rights Council the UN High Commissioner points out, 'Due to pervasive sexism combined with their caste status, women from discriminated caste groups have limited access to land, inheritance and other economic resource and their usually higher illiteracy rates further exacerbates their economic vulnerabilities. (UNHRC, 2013) In the world summit in New York Asha Kowtal stressed that caste-based sexual violence is a full-fledged human-rights crisis that has been perpetuated throughout centuries. The two women explained that Dalits are essentially seen as voiceless and are stripped, beaten, spat on, raped with objects, and even burned alive. Their minds and bodies are constantly violated. The audience at the Summit in New York were behind the women and shouted out Dalit Women Fight in unison at the end of the talk. "We have to end the silence," said Asha Kowtal in conclusion. (world summit, 2014). The Fund for Gender Equality UN Women multi-donor Fund for Gender Equality (FGE) was launched in 2009 to fast-track commitments to gender equality. It supports and advances women's economic and political empowerment at local, national and regional levels through the provision of grants – provided on a competitive basis.

Evaluation of the Fund's "Dalit Women's Livelihoods Accountability Initiative" In India, the Catalytic Programme "Dalit Women's Livelihoods Accountability Initiative (DWLAI)" was selected to be evaluated. The DWLAI is a two-year US\$ 492,000 programme implemented in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Andhra Pradesh (AP), implemented by two non-governmental organizations: Gender at Work and Dalit Sthree Sakthi (DSS) through Mitra Service Society (MSS). The programme seeks to improve Dalit women's economic conditions by improving their leadership and capacity to claim their rights to employment as provided by a recently instituted national employment guarantee act. (Ojha, 2012).

Conclusion

Caste oppression and its impact on gender justice, or vice versa, is matter which is complex. In this respect, Ambedkar "viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated," and sought to "move beyond the binaries of sameness/difference". Similar views are presented by Gorringer who is of the view that the issues around gender justice and women empowerment is intertwined in nature. For him, "Subjecting the social structures of caste to critical scrutiny and revealing the intersections of caste-class and gender, will advance our understanding of contemporary social formation and inequalities. The ideas about caste, gender and their complex interdependence was portrayed by Ambedkar himself in his book "Annihilation of Caste". He noted that "caste rests upon endogamy". In this sense, as Velaskar (2016) observes, women feature "as gateways to caste through whom caste purity could be threatened and caste status could be claimed. (Mukherjee, 2020). Finally, there is an urgent need to address the numerous issues that Dalit women experience in India, which come from the junction of caste and gender inequality. Through comprehensive worldwide research, it reveals the widespread nature of their marginalisation and systemic injustices, emphasising the importance of collaborative efforts at both the national and international levels. The study examines legislative frameworks, policy measures, and grassroots movements to reveal persistent disparities in Dalit women's protection and access to justice, arguing for transformative approaches that prioritise their agency and amplify their voices in the pursuit of social justice and human rights. It also emphasises the importance of global solidarity and joint action in addressing the systemic origins of caste and gender discrimination.further study advocates for inclusive strategies to eliminate caste-based discrimination, combat gender inequality, and uphold the dignity of all individuals, regardless of caste, gender, or socioeconomic status, by incorporating Dalit women's perspectives and experiences into broader discourses on social justice, human rights, and intersectionality.

Way forward

Atrocities and the criminal justice administration It's crucial to improve data collection by disaggregating information on gender and caste, particularly regarding crime and socioeconomic indicators. Strategies should be developed to combat impunity within the criminal justice system, with a focus on Dalit women, including effective implementation of existing laws and establishment of an ombudsperson for atrocities. Prevention efforts should prioritize education for law enforcement, empowerment programs, increased representation, sensitization of criminal justice mechanisms, proactive UN involvement, and pushing for the ratification of relevant conventions.

Land rights Surplus land must be allocated to Dalits in proportion to their population. Legislative amendments should align with optimal land ownership levels for sustainable livelihoods, with robust implementation of land reform acts and the establishment of independent monitoring bodies, ensuring equal representation of Dalit women and men. Legal titles to land should be issued to Dalit women or jointly to Dalit men and women for the land they possess and utilize. Adequate budgets should be allocated for land purchase targeted at Dalit women, alongside policies aimed at bolstering agricultural practices, capacity building within Dalit communities, and facilitating market support. Additionally, governments must enact legislation to prevent the displacement and land alienation of Dalits. Such measures are crucial for fostering the genuine empowerment and advancement of Dalit women.

Domestic violence Firstly, enact domestic violence legislation with special provisions acknowledging the heightened vulnerability of Dalit women. Implement and monitor these laws actively, involving Dalit women in the process. Allocate adequate resources for law enforcement, ensuring protection officers can focus solely on addressing domestic violence. Additionally, Dalit men must undergo a shift in mindset, prioritizing women in the community and openly addressing issues of violence and gender disparity. Dalit women must assert their rights, reject discriminatory practices, and unite to combat domestic violence, establishing supportive social systems for survivors.

Access to Education and Awareness Programs Education plays a key role in empowerment. Scholarship programs, community schools, and mentorship initiatives can ensure Dalit girls receive quality education and career opportunities. Example: Savitribai Phule, a 19th-century social reformer, pioneered women's education in India, focusing on Dalit and marginalized communities.

State budget allocation for the MDGs (employment, education and health) To ensure equitable representation and empowerment of Dalit women it is imperative to allocate separate budget provisions in both national and international budgets, with a minimum of 50% dedicated to Dalit women, aligned with population proportions. These allocations should prioritize crucial areas such as land distribution for the landless and women, comprehensive education access, employment opportunities with training provisions, robust infrastructure guarantees, inclusive economic development strategies considering diversity and market inclusivity, and prioritized healthcare addressing pre-natal, infant, and maternal mortality rates. Additionally, a concerted national campaign aimed at caste sensitization and eradication of caste-based discrimination is paramount for fostering an inclusive and just society.

participation in governance This can be achieved through the creation of a dedicated Dalit women's movement, ensuring their active participation and leadership roles in Panchayats and other political arenas. Establishing informal platforms where Dalit women can freely discuss and address community issues is imperative. Additionally, advocating for proportional representation, with at least 50% of Dalit representatives being women, both in parliament and local governance, should be a priority. This endeavor should be supported not only through proportional budget allocation but also by funding agencies.

Political Representation and Leadership Encouraging Dalit women to take leadership roles in politics and governance can amplify their voices and concerns. Reservation policies must be effectively implemented at all levels. Example: Mayawati, the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has been a significant Dalit leader who has worked towards Dalit rights and representation.

Last but not least a multifaceted strategy that addresses legal, social, economic, and political injustices is needed to empower Dalit women. A more equitable and just society will result from bolstering institutions, encouraging leadership, guaranteeing safety, and elevating their voices. They should be honoured for their tenacity and their role in bringing about societal change.

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I dedicate this article to the countless Dalit women who have endured generations of oppression, discrimination, and injustice. Their resilience in the face of systemic marginalization and their continuous struggle for dignity and equality serve as a powerful reminder of the strength and courage embedded in their lives. This work is a humble tribute to their voices—voices that have long been silenced but continue to fight for justice and recognition. May this article, in whatever small way, contribute to highlighting their oppression, struggles and reinforcing the need for a more just and inclusive society.

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