

[Oxfam India 'Mind The Gap – State of Employment in India'](#) report

In Oxfam India's second 'India Inequality' report, 'Mind the Gap – state of Employment in India' investigates the structural inequalities in India's labour market and focuses on the gender disparities that continue to exist. The report has found that employment opportunities in India continue to be marked by identities including gender, caste and class. Although India's economy is growing at an average of 7 percent, this growth has not affected everyone equally. On average, women in India are paid 34 per cent less than similarly qualified male workers for performing the same tasks. However, the caste-based earnings gap is even larger than the gender earnings gap.¹ In 2015, the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBC) earned only 56 percent, 55 percent and 72 percent of upper caste earnings. Social identity and roles, such as caste and gender, continue to be important determinants of occupational profiles for both men and women, especially in sanitation, rag picking and the leather industry.

Oxfam's report states that social institutions such as gender, caste and religion have played a crucial role in determining what kinds of work one can and one cannot do. Typically, socially disadvantaged groups continue to face barriers from entering into 'higher caste' occupations. Privileged higher caste individuals have the flexibility to move into better paid and 'clean jobs', unlike Dalits who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy. Notions of purity and pollution, which are central to the caste system, continue to shape labour markets. Therefore, Dalits, SC/ST and Muslims are compelled to work in stigmatized occupations areas such as manual scavenging and sanitation, butchering and tanning, and rag picking. As the workforce is mainly governed by informal conditions of employment, they do not have access to the social security provisions, paid leave, gratuity, and pensions. Further, the stigmatized workforce faces acute challenges given their low social status, abysmal working conditions which exposes them to death like situations or life-threatening diseases.

Throughout India, there are about 5 million full-time-equivalents of sanitation workers that predominantly come from Dalit communities. During 2017-2018, one person has died every five days while cleaning sewers and septic tanks across the country.² State authorities contravene contract labour regulations by subcontracting out the sanitation workforce. Workers are then deprived of all social security benefits and protections. Dalit women face double the discrimination due to gender and caste hierarchy and are forced to take up unclean occupations such as manual scavenging and sanitation work. They are prone to various diseases because of coming in contact with hazardous substances and unsafe environments. Civil society and workers' organizations have highlighted the plight of these workers and, the state has intervened with legislations. However, the bureaucratic apparatus ensures that none of these provisions reach the workers. SC and ST workers receive, on an average, 15% lower wages than other workers in both public and private sectors and the latest available data shows that the disparity in incomes for most social groups and women has either increased or remained stagnant.³

The report stated that there is also a strong overlap between caste and bondage – Dalits are overwhelmingly bonded labourers.⁴ Brick kilns are extremely oppressive labour environments and often involve bonded and unpaid family labour with most of the workers from marginalized communities. Bricks are paid for on a piece rate basis. Although the man is the 'worker' the whole family works to mould the bricks. Throughout the industry 'recruitment is debt based, child labour is very common, wages are less than the prescribed minimum, basic amenities are also absent.'⁵ In the leather industry, although women

¹ State of Working India Report 2018

² National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)

³ National Commission for the Enterprise in the Un-organised Sector (NCEUS) 2007

⁴ India Exclusion Report 2013-14

⁵ Anti-Slavery International report (2017) on brick kiln workers

and children are prohibited from working, they are hired anyway. As this is illegal, employees cannot claim legal protection or benefits under welfare schemes.

The report observed that employment relations in the countryside are shaped by a political-economy of difference based on gender, caste and class. This is particularly true for Dalits and especially Dalit women.⁶ Women are held captive in local village-based economy due to care and reproductive economy responsibilities and continue to do wage labour. 'The very institution of labour market that is supposed to be a possible way out of poverty and humiliation ends up reiterating these inequalities' as women farmers and agricultural labourers are paid 22 percent less than male farmers and agricultural labourers.⁷

Ultimately this report highlights that the Indian government 'has failed to address the inequalities and job insecurities that SC, ST, Muslims, OBCs and women face through its social security and welfare programmes.' The State cannot ignore the issue of patriarchy and how it affects female workforce participation. Gender needs to be understood as intertwined with caste and class. Inside India's villages, poverty, unemployment and unfreedom have a female face. As long as these prejudices persist, other measures can only be palliative and not transformative.

⁶ NCEUS 2007, 2008; Mehrotra 2013, 2017

⁷ Pandey 2018, DownToEarth, citing figures released by the Ministry of Agriculture