

Current scenario of Dalit women in India

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Dalit women are placed at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy in India as they face systemic and structural discrimination threefold: as Dalits, as poor, and as women. The population of Dalit women in India as per the 2011, National Census is 9.79 crore which is 48.59% to the total Dalit population in India. As per the 2011 National census, the total female population in India is 58.7 crore of which 16.68% is Dalit woman's population.

Gender disparity:

The growth rate of Dalit women has improved in comparison to the general women. The gender ratio of Dalit women in comparison to the Dalit men as per National census is 945 against 1000 men. However there are states/union territories which have the lowest gender ratio in comparison to the National. They are:

| Sr. No. | State/Union territory | Dalit Female ratio in comparison to 1000 Dalit Males |
|---------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. | Mizoram | 509 |
| 2. | Dadra/Nagar haveli | 853 |
| 3. | Chandigarh | 872 |
| 4. | Haryana | 887 |
| 5. | National Capital territory of Delhi | 889 |

Similarly the a point of concern is that the growth rate of child population (between 0-6 years) amongst Dalit communities has reduced from 17.4% in 2001 to 14.5% in 2011. The states/union territory which have the lowest gender ratio amongst Dalit children are all from North India. They are:

| Sr. No. | State/Union territory | Dalit Female ratio in comparison to 1000 Dalit Males |
|---------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. | Jammu/Kashmir | 861 |
| 2. | Haryana | 876 |
| 3. | Chandigarh | 887 |
| 4. | Punjab | 888 |
| 5. | National Capital territory of Delhi | 891 |

Literacy rate:

The literacy rate amongst the Dalit women has improved from 41.9% in 2001 to 56.5%. But its still behind the general women whose literacy rate is 64.6%. The five states where the literacy rate amongst Dalit women is below the national figure are:

| Sr. No. | States | Literacy rate |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. | Bihar | Below 45% |
| 2. | Jharkhand | Below 45% |
| 3. | Rajasthan | Below 45% |
| 4. | National Capital territory of Delhi | Between 45 to 50% |
| 5. | Uttar Pradesh | Between 45 to 50% |

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Economic Situation:

Occupational status:

In 2001, about 57 per cent of SC women respectively were agricultural wage labour in rural areas, as compared with 29 per cent for non-SC/STs. In urban areas, 16 per cent SC women were daily wage labourers as compared with only 6 per cent from non-SC/STs. Only 21 per cent of SC women were cultivators compared with 51 per cent for STs and 45 per cent for non-SC/STs. SC women also faced differential treatment in wage-earning, particularly in urban areas. In 2000, SC women casual labourers received daily wages of Rs 37 compared with Rs 56 for non-SC/ST women; the national average was Rs 42. Besides this, a large number of SC women are engaged in so-called 'unclean' occupations, like scavenging. Because of their association with these occupations, Dalit women face discrimination in the social and economic spheres. (Thorat, 2008)

Impact of Globalization on Dalit Women:

The process of globalization has affected Dalit women considerably. With the introduction of new farming techniques, such as mechanization for harvesting and transplanting, women have lost their traditional work in the agricultural sector. Food crops have been replaced by cash crops. Horticulture has been introduced by big agribusiness corporations for export purposes. This has deprived Dalit women of their land and the common resources in the village. Women used to collect greens, fish, and shells from fields for their food requirements for free. This is no longer available to them. Abject poverty has driven large numbers of Dalit women into the sex trade to earn for their families. The globalization process has increased the feminization of poverty and this has affected Dalit women in every sphere of their lives. There is also large-scale migration from rural areas to the urban centres in search of better livelihood options. Women are left behind

to bear responsibility for the family. More and more female headed households emerge and most of them are headed by Dalit women. Such situations push the women into further situations of impoverishment, making them more and more vulnerable to all forms of discrimination and violations. (Unheard Voices: Dalit Women, 2007)

Health situation:

Nutritional Status of Dalit Women:

BMI indicates the nutritional status of women. As per the official figures for 1998-1999 from NFHS report, the percentage of married Dalit women in the age group of 15 to 49 years with BMI less than 18.5 was 42 in comparison to the general women which was 36 percent. The gap between the SCs and the Non SC/STs was large, over 10 percentage points, in Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, and Orissa, and about 10 percentage points in some others.

Violence against Dalit women:

Finally the economic, social, educational and political status of Dalit women is directly linked to violence and subjugation of Dalit women which does not give them to space to fully enjoy constitutional rights.

A three-year study of 500 Dalit women's experiences of violence across four Indian states shows that the majority of Dalit women report having faced one or more incidents of verbal abuse (62.4%), physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%) and rape (23.2%). Verbal abuse included regular derogatory use of caste names and caste epithets possibly amounting to 'hate speech', as well as sexually explicit insults, gendered epithets and threats¹.

Forms and Frequency of Violence against Dalit women

Nine major forms of violence, Six being violence in the general community – physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, and three being violence in the family – female foeticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence from natal and marital family members.

Location of Violence

The majority of Dalit women face violence in *public spaces* – streets, women's toilet areas, fields, etc. – in and around their villages and towns. The next most common place for violence is *within the home*. Aside from domestic violence, a number of women face physical assaults, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and sexual assaults in their very home from non-family members. Violence in the *workplace* ranks third in terms of common locations for violence. Moreover, given their economic dependence, Dalit women often do not report violence from employers in the workplace, instead

keeping silent in order to retain their means of livelihood. In addition, as many Dalit women either work in the perpetrators' home, or have to go there to receive their wages or ask for loans, etc., the *perpetrator's home* also becomes another site for violence perpetrated by general community members. Finally, *government spaces* become grounds for violence where women are forcibly incarcerated, verbally abused, sexually harassed or raped in police stations.

Social Status of Perpetrators of Violence in the General Community

Within the wide range of identified perpetrators of violence against Dalit women in the general community, *dominant caste landlords* emerged as the most prominent group. The violence they mete out is physical, verbal and sexual, often in response to Dalit women asserting their economic rights, that is, challenging caste-class relations by demanding their right to wages or land, or their right to sexual integrity, that is, the right to choice in sexual relations. *Police* also emerge as key perpetrators of violence against Dalit women. They are not active perpetrators; they also act in a significant number of cases in collusion with the perpetrators by failing to enforce the law when violence against Dalit women takes place. Two other groups of perpetrators whose numbers are significant belong to the *professional category*, namely doctors and teachers. In all these cases, these perpetrators hold positions of authority or positions entailing a duty of care and responsibility towards other people. Hence, their presence as perpetrators indicates their gross misuse of the power and authority conferred on them by virtue of their professions. In addition, there are a large number of *"other dominant caste persons"* as perpetrators. Their significance lies in the fact that they are often ordinary community members who, by virtue of their "higher" caste status vis-à-vis the Dalit women, engage in violence against these women. Moreover, often this violence is committed by these perpetrators not only as individuals, but also as group violence involving people of the same status.

Caste Background of Perpetrators of Violence in the General Community

Caste-wise, both forward castes (FCs) and backward castes (BCs) are seen to engage in violence against Dalit women, either as individuals or as a group.

Dalit perpetrators are also present in significant numbers, as mentioned above. Their concentration lies in four forms of violence, namely physical assaults, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and sexual assaults, and rapes. Together, however, they account for significantly very low % of all perpetrators of violence against Dalit women.

Perpetrators of Violence in the Family

As far as violence in the family is concerned, husbands, the Dalit women's in-laws, her relatives and husbands' relatives are perpetrators of violence, in descending order. Husbands are also the key perpetrators of domestic violence, followed by mothers-in-law, the woman's other relatives, fathers-in-law and their husband's other relatives. Given that most of the Dalit women's natal and marital families are very poor, the day-to-day struggles for survival, caste oppression and gender oppression often translate into frequent violence against Dalit women within the home.

Causal Factors for Violence

I. Violence in the General Community

The verbal abuse that is integral to many women's experiences of violence also indicates the dominant caste perpetrators' worldview as regards Dalit women's 'inferior' caste, class and gender status, and consequent powerlessness and vulnerability. Built into the patriarchal caste system is the assumption that Dalit women are available for any form of exploitation and violence, as a consequence of their "low" and "impure" character, and hence the low character of their caste that does not deserve honour and respect.

As far as Dalit perpetrators are concerned, the majority being male, many assimilate and reproduce the gender inequality structured into the caste system by using patriarchal norms to commit violence against women of their own community.

Almost as frequently identified a causal factor for violence in the general community lies in the area of Dalit women's *civil rights*. The violence is either a response to the Dalit women's alleged breach of caste norms by exercising their freedom of expression in speaking out on an issue, or seeking to protect her family or community, or as a means used to reinforce their submissiveness and voicelessness as demanded under the caste system. These issues include:

- revenge or retaliation to settle scores with either the woman, her family or her community;
- response to the women when they questioned the perpetrator/s for violent acts done to them, their children, their

- family members or other Dalit community members;
- where a male member of the woman's household was wanted for questioning by the police;
- insecurity faced as a widow

A fourth causal factor for violence in the general community, given the aspect of economic exploitation built into the caste system, related to *economic resources* – land, or other economic resources/capital such as wages, payment for services, etc. – and particularly Dalits asserting their rights to own or utilise resources. Causes for violence related specifically to land and common property resources, being key economic resources in the villages, include:

- women and their families asserted their rights to own land;
- in order to appropriate the land belonging to the Dalit women or their families;
- reaction against Dalit women and their families owning or leasing land;

Similarly, causal factors related to Dalit women's labour and work include:

- women protested against forced or bonded labour;
- women challenged working conditions;
- women questioned the delay or part-payment or under-payment or non-payment of wages;
- women asked for workers' compensation following their husbands' deaths;

Otherwise, other causal factors that provoked violence include those related to Dalit women's *basic livelihood* outside of economic issues:

- women asserted their rights to access or enjoy housing, or water, or the public distribution system (PDS), or education;

In the realm of *political rights*, several Dalit women spoke of their assertions of basic political rights as provoking violent dominant caste backlashes. The issues that led to violence included:

- women contested panchayat elections;
- women exercised or attempted to exercise political authority as elected panchayat representatives.

Finally, violence also took place when Dalit women sought *justice and the protection of the law* for violence done to them, or to forestall such action, by any of the following acts:

- women filed or tried to file a police complaint;
- women brought or tried to bring incidents of violence to the traditional village panchayat for arbitration;
- women refused to accept compromises following acts of violence;
- to prevent women from telling anyone of the violence or filing a police complaint;
- to prevent women from being witnesses against the perpetrators in a court case.

II. Violence in the Family

Similarly, Dalit women faced violence in the family over a range of issues, suggesting the assimilation of the larger patriarchal caste system's norms by particularly Dalit men, with negative implications for Dalit women's personal lives and interactions in their community. Female foeticide and infanticide stemmed from gender discrimination, combined with poverty or a response to the child being born of an illicit relationship. By comparison, child sexual abuse is primarily seen as the result of husbands asserting their perceived right to sexual relations with their child brides.

When it comes to domestic violence, however, the causes for this violence are much more nuanced and varied. *Gender inequality and norms of female subordination* formed a major category of causal factors for violence meted out by natal and marital family members to Dalit women. Examples of causal factors falling within this category include:

- women allegedly failed to be dutiful wives;
- women asserted their rights;
- women were unable to bear children, or unable to bear sons;

A second major category was *economic* causal factors for domestic violence, including:

- poverty;
- insufficient dowry;
- women earned more income than their husbands, or their natal families had a higher economic status than their marital families;
- women asked their husbands to account for money given from their earnings to the husbands, or refused to give their earnings to fund their husbands' drinking habits, or refused to mortgage jewellery to satisfy their husbands' spendthrift habits;
- to deny women their share of their deceased husbands' property;

A third prominent category of causal factors related to Dalit women's *civil rights*, which include:

- women's insecurity due to their husband's unemployment or alcoholism;
- women's insecurity as widows, or as destitute

Overall, much of the domestic violence arose out of a combination of factors such as internalized gender discrimination, poverty, dominant discourses of dowry, wifely fidelity and duties, and distrust of women to guard their own sexuality all leading to husbands' perceived rights over their wives, or their husbands' alcoholism. The message effectively sent home to Dalit women is that they must keep "in their place"; that is, they must remain submissive daughters or wives, and should not assert their rights against Dalit men and other dominant family members.

Recommendations:

1. Recognise Dalit women as a distinct category among women, and accordingly disaggregate data on Dalit women in census reports, action taken reports and progress reports on implementation of all laws, policies and programmes.
2. The share of budget for the development and welfare of Dalit women should be based on their percentage of population both in the Scheduled caste development and in the women development budget.
3. Present a periodic white paper on the status of Dalit women vis-vis enjoyment of their rights, particularly to development and freedom from violence, in Parliament.
4. Caste-based violence and untouchability to be declared as national crimes and violence against Dalit women as a specific Dalit gender crime.
5. Encourage educational institutions to adopt policies of equal opportunities coupled with affirmative action for Dalit girl children, and monitor their implementation with the participation of teachers, parents and boys and girls, and establish measures to address problems arising from casteist and sexist prejudice and stereotypes.
6. Ensure non-discriminatory health services and facilities with ensuring Dalit women's equitable access to adequate nutrition, including health and maternity benefits.
7. Ensure basic amenities within Dalit women's dwellings and localities, especially electricity, potable water and toilet facilities, as well as decent sewage systems.
8. Establish special services for women survivors of violence where they can benefit from professional assistance of psychologists, doctors, lawyers, marriage counsellors, etc.
9. Provide immediate and enhanced relief and a long-term package of holistic and adequate rehabilitation to them and their family members.
10. Establish a comprehensive and holistic programme for the rehabilitation of former Joginis, and Badi community women.
11. Rehabilitate all women manual scavengers into different occupations by linking better rehabilitation with vocational training.
12. Identify areas in which Dalit girl children are employed as child labourers, and constitute rehabilitation schemes with incentives to pull them back into education.
13. Increase emphasis on vocational and skill-based education for Dalit girls and women, and equip them for job market.

i See *Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India* by Irudayam, A., Mangubhai, J.P. and Lee, J., 2006. Chennai: National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, National Federation of Dalit Women, and Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies.