

## **Empowerment of Dalit Women in Rayalaseema**

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The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Dalit women also have less power within the Dalit movement itself. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organizations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men.

### **Assertion by Dalit women**

Dalit women today are not simply passive victims; the current mood is not one of mere acceptance, but one of determination to "transform their pain into power". In fact, they have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recognized and recorded. They have been actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of South Asian villages, and are often at the forefront of struggles for basic human rights. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land and livelihood rights and against untouchability, pointing to the potential for their self-emancipation, given adequate support. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world by critiquing dominant caste ideologies. They participate today as visionary leaders in the local governance institution by asserting their rights. While they continue to struggle against structural discrimination and exclusion, violence and impunity are systematically unleashed by dominant castes to keep them in their place. While recognizing the gendered nature of caste discrimination for Dalit women, these women have turned their suffering into one of resistance, actively participating shoulder to shoulder with men in their communities in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. They have simultaneously contributed to the welfare of their families, sustained their communities given their labour for producing food and wealth for their countries. In this regard, Dalit women build their identities on a culture of resistance against the hegemonic culture of the caste system, expressing their defiance and revolt against the caste, class and gender discrimination that oppresses them. This assertion of distinct identity and simultaneous forging of a collective identity in multiple struggles marks the Dalit women's movement in various ways<sup>1</sup>.

### **Human rights of Dalit women**

The countries where caste discrimination persists are party to most of the relevant human rights instruments: the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). These treaties provide equal rights for men and women. As these countries are also party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), governments have a specific obligation to make sure that women can realize their human rights. It is generally accepted in international legal standards that governments have to do more than just pass laws to protect human rights. Governments have an obligation to take all measures, including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfill and enjoy their fundamental rights. Equally importantly, governments must implement these laws, policy measures and programmes to fully discharge their obligations under international law, this includes an obligation.

To exercise due diligence in punishing those who engage in caste-based discrimination and violence. Women in India are oppressed in the name of caste, class, religion and patriarchy. Every hour two cases or

rapes, four incidents of molestation and seven events of cruel harassment are reported. This includes dowry deaths, killings and suicides. The right to education, health and equal enjoyment at par with men is denied. Dalit women are forced into religious prostitution, known as “Devadasi”, “Jogini” and by many other names. Children of Devadasi women are discriminated and subject for many forms of exploitation. The women to enhance their opportunities of livelihoods, strengthening leadership to raise voice against gender discrimination, promoting exclusive platforms to discuss on the equal rights of women<sup>2</sup>.

### **Human Rights Violations against Dalit Women**

According to Dalit activists, Dalit girls have been forced to have sex with the village landlord, in rural areas, women are induced into prostitution (Devadasi system), which is forced on them in the name of religion. The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage in those areas. Early marriage between the ages of ten years and sixteen years persists in large part because of Dalit girls vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men: once a girl is raped she becomes unmarriageable. An early marriage also gives parents greater control over the caste into which their children are married. Moreover, Dalit women are also raped as a form of retaliation. Landlords and the police use sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community. One of the reasons that Dalit women continue to be target of atrocities is that in rural areas, due to extreme poverty, lack of education, and as high caste Hindus own 80% land, Dalit women are forced to work on minimal wage. A slight denial to their orders or daring to ask for a raise in wages can result in humiliations, beating, torture, rape, killing and jail. More often, Dalit women’s and children are held by as ransom to catch their spouses on minor charges<sup>3</sup>.

### **Dalit women and struggle for existence**

The life, work and struggle of Dalit women for survival and dignity today have to do more with the subjugation in the past. This struggle assumed varied dimensions, particularly in the face of significant developments in the socio-economic and political spaces. To meet the challenges, National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women through long drawn debates and discussions amongst the Dalit women, representatives from the women’s movement and Dalit movement as a whole for over a decade. Dalit women view the formation of NFDW in the larger context of historical struggles of Dalits all over the country to redeem their full dignity, particularly that of the Dalit women. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste-based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment against growing pauperization, building self-confidence and leadership<sup>4</sup>.

In the Rayalaseema region in southern Andhra Pradesh, small-scale, marginal poor farmers make up 80% of the marginalized communities in the area. Each family has an average of 0.5-1 hectares of land, but without capital, they have not been able to invest in their land. Large areas are undeveloped and lack proper measures to conserve soil and water. Four-fifths of the land is rain fed, the region has an average rainfall of 820 mm and suffer from frequent droughts, there are streams and small rivers but they are all seasonal.

Irrigation water comes largely from tanks, open shallow wells and tube wells. The land is characterized by broken hilly terrain with an uneven landscape, the land is eroded and overgrazed and people have rooted out trees and plants for fuel. Rising population has increased the pressure on the land, even steep slopes have been brought under cultivation, further increasing erosion and reducing the protective cover of vegetation. The womenfolk find it harder to collect fodder and fuel wood. The marginalized people convert the poorest land into cultivable on the upper slopes. It would require a lot of investment to make them cultivable<sup>5</sup>.

The local women have been linked to the women’s forum at the mandal (cluster of villages) level, which works against the violation of women’s rights, atrocities and domestic violence against women. The members of the working groups, farm workers and marginal farmers were linked to the mandal agricultural worker union, which is registered under the trade union Act and promotes rights and economic development of its members through negotiation and advocacy with government and other agencies. Marginalized communities gained power in the watershed institutions, discrimination against women decreased. Women formed self-help groups, have developed income generating activities as groups, and now earn equal wages.

### **Dalit women’s maternal health-Caste discrimination**

While all women are victims of gender and class discrimination. Dalit women face gender-class-caste discrimination, which affects their health. Besides, dalit women also face discrimination in accessing health facilities. A study conducted in Andhra Pradesh shows that, health workers doesn’t visit dalit colony in 60% of villages. Dalits are not allowed to enter public health centers in 12% of village, health staff of both public and private health centers discriminate Dalits in health centers in 18% of villages while treating Dalits<sup>6</sup>.

**Some facts about Dalit women's maternal health**

- Percentage of Dalit girls marrying below 18 year is up to 60%
- 43.1% of Dalits pregnant women do not receive any antenatal check up
- 56% Dalit women suffer from anemia
- 38.7% do not receive any Tetanus toxoid injections and only 48.6% were given Iron and Folic acid tablets
- 80% Dalit pregnant women deliver at home
- Only 14% have nay postnatal check up within 2 month of birth
- Unmet need for family planning 15.4%
- 42% of currently married women have reproductive health problem

To conclude, Empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasized the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passively recipients of development strategies. Therefore, participation is considered as an essentially first step in order to empower women. Finally it can be said that provision of inclusion of directly elected women members have created a new avenue to participate in the decision-making process in the only democratic institution at the grass-roots level<sup>7</sup>.

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