

Dalit Women and Economic Marginalization: The Role of Labor and Exploitation

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Abstract

The paper explores the economic marginalization of Dalit women through an analysis of their labour condition and the exploitation they face in employment sector. As members of one of the most oppressed and vulnerable groups in Indian society, Dalit women experience intersectional discrimination based on both caste and gender. Drawing from secondary data, the paper examines the historical and structural conditions that perpetuate their exploitation, including socio-economic, political and cultural factors. It also analyzes the intersections of caste, class and gender that render Dalit women particularly susceptible to economic subjugation. By addressing these key dynamics, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, caste-based inequalities, and labour exploitation in India.

Keywords: Dalit women, economic marginalization, labour exploitation, caste and gender, intersectionality.

Introduction

Dalit women, who exist at the intersection of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, represent one of the most marginalized communities in India. Historically oppressed and systematically excluded from economic, social, and political structures, Dalit women bear the brunt of a deeply ingrained caste-based discrimination that shapes their lived experiences. Economic marginalization for Dalit women is not just a consequence of their caste identity, but also intertwined with their gender, subjecting them to layers of exploitation in labor markets and social hierarchies. This paper delves into the structural and historical underpinnings of the economic marginalization of Dalit women, with a focus on labor exploitation. The article is primarily based on secondary data. Secondary sources of data are collected through sources such as Journals, books, articles, government reports and news papers.

The caste system is a social stratification system that has been in use for the last 3000 years. This caste system is one of the oldest social strata and forms the foundation of Hindu society. The system includes four divisions: "Brahmans," priests; "field," warrior; "Vaishyas," merchants; and "Shudra" slaves (Bhattachan, 2009 cited in Thapa, TejiIngen, Regmi, Heaslip, 2021). Dalits belong at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and are often perceived as water polluters, untouchables, impure. Dalits are an outcast group in the caste system. The word "dalit" or "crushed underfoot" or "broken to pieces" is the contemporary version of the word "untouchable". "Dalit" owes its origins to the nineteenth-century writings of Jotirao Govindrao Phule as well as the literature of the Dalit Panthers, formed in 1972 in the state of Maharashtra. British colonial census takers deemed all those community neighbors "polluted" and labeled them "untouchables." Mahatma Gandhi called Dalits "Harijans" or "children of God" (Ghosh, 2003). In Hindu scriptures, Dalits are often referred to as "broken people";

Ambedkar called them “Protestant Hindus” or “Harijans” or “Untouchables and Depressed Classes” or “Scheduled Castes”(Menon,2017 cited in Thapa, Teijilngen, Regmi, Heaslip , 2021).

The Dalits are particularly vulnerable and alienated due to the perception of untouchability in the caste system. The upper castes enjoy freedom and higher status, while the lower castes are restricted from participating in all aspects. Caste-based discrimination also affects employment thus restricting Dalits to low-status occupations such as brooms, baskets, ropes, sex workers, and domestic laborers (Patil, 2013 cited in Thapa, Teijilngen, Regmi, Heaslip , 2021). Dalits are also associated with occupations such as scavengers, sweepers, rag pickers, and coolies, which are considered dirty, unimportant and unhygienic and therefore associated with religious notions of purity-pollution.

As the lowest position in the caste hierarchy of Indian society, Dalit’s have historically faced caste-based social exclusion from economic, civil, cultural and political rights. Dalits are socially excluded, stigmatized, and isolated from the mainstream of society. The discrimination and exclusion towards these disadvantaged classes is carried out on a scale by the upper castes and some of the major caste groups. Women of this group of Dalits are the most marginalized of the marginalized. Women in this community face not only discrimination on the basis of their gender, but also ethnic identity and consequent economic deprivation (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015). Dalit women belong to this category, having unique lived experiences, as this group consists of the intersectional oppression of two groups who are oppressed for being born, i.e. being Dalits and women. However, the doubly marginalized status of these women makes them a distinct category, whose experience of being a Dalit woman cannot be understood from the position of being Dalit alone or being a woman alone (Sharma and Geetha,2021). Dalit women are at the utter bottom by the social stratified system as they face threefold structural discrimination: as Dalits, as poor and as women (Bhujbal,2022). The Issue of Dalit women’ essentially embodies marginality and is almost exclusively an issue constituted through multiple forms of subjugation, exploitation and violence (Ciotti,2021). It is important to analyzing the limitations of Dalit women along with caste and gender, multiple barriers are created through the multiple identities of the Dalit woman.

The Dalit community is a caste or caste group that makes up a group of South Asian populations and is historically considered to be marginalized by religious taboos and subjected to illegal and unjustified social and economic deprivation (Sharif and Jabin, 2022). Dalit women face disadvantages on multiple levels in most aspects (Valamathi, Jaiswal, &Jaiswal, 2017). Dalit women have barriers in employment opportunities they are often confined among the unclean occupations, such as manual scavenging, because the concept of purity and impurity is inherent in the caste system (Bhujbal,2022).

Intersectionality in Feminist Discourse: Addressing Diversity and Marginalization

The plurality within the category of ‘woman’ and the diversity in access to rights, identities, and challenges are now widely acknowledged in feminism. Global feminist discourse has recognized the intersection of gender with factors like caste, race, and ethnicity, leading to critiques of mainstream Western feminism for overlooking racial dimensions(Sabharwal &Sonalkar,2015). African American and non-Western scholars have particularly emphasized the distinct struggles of women from marginalized groups, whose experiences differ from those of privileged women due to factors such as race, color, and social origin(ibid). Black feminists, especially in North America, have challenged theoretical frameworks that primarily reflect the perspectives of white, middle-class women, much like how liberal notions of citizenship have historically represented dominant male groups. In this context we would like to mentioned Sylvia Walby argument . She stated that -

“The labor market experience of women of color differs from that of white women due to racist structures that disadvantage them in paid employment. This means that there are significant differences between women based on ethnicity, which need to be taken into account”(Walby,1990). Thus, ethnic and racial issues needed to be examined in the context of intersectionality.

The intersection of gender and caste in India's labor market, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women (ibid). Due to the traditional caste system’s notions of purity and pollution, Dalit women experience exclusion from certain types of employment, particularly in upper-caste homes, where they are often restricted

to menial tasks like cleaning and washing. This discrimination is rooted in the concept of untouchability, which leads to physical isolation and limited job opportunities. Indian feminist discourse has historically avoided addressing caste and religious differences among women, fearing it would fracture political unity. However, issues of violence against women, such as rape and domestic abuse, were addressed through legal reforms following cases like the Mathura police station gang rape in the 1970s. Although these reforms improved protections against domestic violence, public violence against Dalit women remains underrepresented in such initiatives. When caste differences have been acknowledged in Indian feminism, it is often within the context of class, poverty, or rural labor. Dalit women frequently face sexual violence, as seen in a case where a Dalit woman was gang-raped for trying to prevent a child marriage (ibid). This case, handled by the NGO Vishakha, led to a landmark Supreme Court ruling on sexual harassment in the workplace and the establishment of cells to protect women from harassment at work.

Caste and gender intersect in India, affecting both lower and upper-caste women in distinct ways. Upper-caste feminists often overlook caste as a form of social privilege, focusing instead on class and economic issues. This has led to a neglect of caste-based discrimination in the mainstream women's movement, which primarily addresses issues such as marriage, domestic violence, and economic empowerment, while largely ignoring the specific challenges faced by Dalit women, such as public violence and employment discrimination tied to untouchability.

Dalit women experience triple oppression due to their gender, poverty, and caste. They are excluded from higher-paying jobs like cooking in upper-caste homes and are often subjected to sexual violence when caste hierarchies are challenged. In the 1990s, Dalit women began questioning the mainstream women's movement for failing to address their unique issues, particularly the intersection of gender exploitation, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation (ibid). The Dalit women's movement now focuses on securing access to livelihoods, fighting caste-based discrimination, and demanding affirmative action in areas like political participation, land rights, education, and employment. The 2006 Dalit Women's Rights Forum at The Hague (2006) on the 'Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women' was a pivotal moment, where Dalit women voiced their demands on both national and international platforms, challenging caste and patriarchy within their communities.

The Dalit women's movement has taken distinct positions compared to mainstream women's organizations on certain issues. A notable example is the 2005 government ban in Maharashtra on women dancing in bars. While mainstream feminist groups opposed the ban, citing women's right to choose their occupation and resist state moral policing, Dalit women's organizations supported the ban, viewing bar dancing as a pathway to prostitution for lower-caste girls. However, they rejected the government's moralistic reasoning and called for rehabilitation measures for the affected women. This divergence reflects different feminist frameworks. Mainstream feminists emphasize individual freedom, bodily autonomy, and the resistance to patriarchal control, even framing prostitution as "commercial sex work (ibid)." In contrast, Dalit feminists draw from historical struggles against caste-based sexual exploitation, with leaders like Ambedkar advocating for Dalit women to reject traditional practices like prostitution, even if it meant economic hardship.

Historical Context of Dalit Women's Marginalization

Dalit women's marginalization cannot be separated from the historical context of the caste system, a social stratification system that has been central to Indian society for over two millennia. The caste system placed Dalits, formerly known as 'Untouchables,' at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This exclusion was institutionalized through rigid social, religious, and economic structures that not only dehumanized Dalits but also systematically restricted their access to education, property, and dignified forms of labor. Within this framework, Dalit women occupied a doubly marginalized position. While upper-caste women could sometimes benefit from the status and resources of their caste, Dalit women were denied even this limited security. Their labor was primarily agricultural or menial, and they were relegated to the most dehumanizing tasks, such as manual scavenging, working as landless laborers, and engaging in unpaid domestic work.

Exploitation of Dalit Women and their Economic Role

The majority of Dalit women in rural India are engaged in agricultural labor, where they face numerous forms of economic exploitation. Despite performing critical agricultural tasks, they receive significantly lower wages than their male counterparts and are often employed in the most physically demanding and least remunerative activity. The intersection of caste and gender biases means that Dalit women have limited bargaining power in labor markets. They often work under exploitative conditions, with limited access to resources such as land, credit, and technology. Many Dalit women are employed as bonded laborers, trapped in cycles of debt and servitude that persist across generations. The gendered division of labor also places additional burdens on Dalit women, who are expected to manage both productive and reproductive labor. This dual responsibility limits their capacity to engage in income-generating activities beyond subsistence farming, further entrenching their economic marginalization.

In urban areas, Dalit women are concentrated in informal labor markets, where they face a different set of challenges. They often work in unregulated sectors such as domestic work, construction, and small-scale manufacturing, where labor protections are minimal or non-existent. In these environments, Dalit women are vulnerable to exploitation, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and sexual harassment. The informal nature of their employment means that Dalit women have limited access to social security benefits, such as health insurance, maternity leave, and pensions. Their economic insecurity is compounded by the absence of formal contracts and the pervasive use of exploitative labor practices, such as employing women on a temporary or casual basis to avoid providing benefits and protections.

Intersectionality of Caste, Gendered Caste violence, and Labor Exploitation

Dalit women's economic exploitation is not simply a result of their gender or their caste identity, but a consequence of the intersection of these two identities. The theory of 'intersectionality', first articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw, helps us understand how Dalit women experience discrimination in ways that are unique from both Dalit men and non-Dalit women. The caste system's rigid social hierarchy intersects with patriarchal norms to place Dalit women at the bottom of India's social and economic order. This intersectionality means that Dalit women are often excluded from labor unions and political movements, both of which have historically been dominated by upper-caste men. This exclusion limits their ability to organize and advocate for better wages, working conditions, and labor protections.

Dalit women face gendered violence in labor markets. Sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of gendered violence are used as tools to reinforce caste hierarchies and maintain control over Dalit women's labor. In many instances, Dalit women face violence not only from upper-caste employers but also from within their own communities. The threat of violence serves as a means of social control, keeping Dalit women in a state of economic and social subordination. The prevalence of violence in the workplace and at home limits their mobility and freedom to seek better employment opportunities, further entrenching their marginalization.

Social Economic and Political Mobility: Challenges and Barriers

Dalit women's access to social and economic mobility is constrained by a number of structural barriers. One of the primary challenges is their limited access to education and skills training. Historically, Dalit women were denied access to formal education as a result of caste-based exclusion. Although constitutional reforms have improved access to education for Dalit communities, Dalit women still face significant obstacles in attaining higher levels of education due to poverty, social stigma, and gender-based discrimination. Without education or vocational training, Dalit women are relegated to low-paying, low-skill jobs, which limits their ability to improve their economic standing. Additionally, their lack of land ownership and limited access to credit prevents them from investing in small businesses or other entrepreneurial ventures, which could serve as pathways out of poverty.

Political representation is another critical factor in Dalit women's struggle for economic empowerment. While India's Constitution provides for reservations (affirmative action) in political office and government jobs for Dalits, the representation of Dalit women in these positions remains limited. This underrepresentation in political spheres means that Dalit women's specific needs and concerns are often overlooked in policy

decisions. In recent years, Dalit women's organizations have played a crucial role in advocating for labor rights and economic justice. These organizations have mobilized to challenge exploitative labor practices, demand land rights, and seek justice for gender-based violence. However, the broader labor and feminist movements in India have often failed to adequately address the unique challenges faced by Dalit women, leaving them marginalized within these movements as well.

On the other hand, land ownership remains one of the most important factors in determining economic security in rural India. For Dalit women, the denial of land ownership is a key mechanism of their economic marginalization. Although land reforms have been implemented in various states, Dalit women have largely been excluded from benefiting from these reforms. This exclusion is due to a combination of factors, including patriarchal inheritance laws, caste-based discrimination, and the failure of local authorities to enforce land redistribution policies. Without access to land, Dalit women are forced to rely on wage labor for survival, which is often exploitative and insufficient to meet their needs. Ownership of land would not only provide Dalit women with a secure livelihood but also offer them a form of economic independence that could challenge the power dynamics of both caste and gender hierarchies.

Regional Differences in the Economic Marginalization of Dalit Women

The experiences of Dalit women vary significantly depending on regional factors, such as the prevalence of particular industries, state-level policies, and cultural norms. In southern states like Tamil Nadu, where Dalit women are more organized in labor unions, they have been able to achieve some level of economic empowerment through collective bargaining. In contrast, in northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Dalit women face greater levels of caste-based violence and exclusion from labor markets.

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit women have been instrumental in organizing labor movements, particularly in the textile and agricultural sectors. Through unionization, Dalit women have been able to demand better wages, improved working conditions, and protections against sexual harassment. These movements have been supported by local NGOs and women's rights organizations, which have provided Dalit women with legal support and advocacy training. However, in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where caste hierarchies remain deeply entrenched, Dalit women continue to face significant barriers to economic participation. Bonded labor and other forms of exploitative labor practices are common in these regions, and Dalit women often lack the resources and support systems necessary to challenge these practices. Moreover, the prevalence of caste-based violence in these states serves as a powerful deterrent to Dalit women's participation in labor markets.

State Interventions, Policy and the role of NGO and Civil Society

While the Indian government has implemented various policies aimed at addressing the economic marginalization of Dalits, these policies have often failed to specifically address the needs of Dalit women. For instance, although the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has provided employment opportunities for rural women, Dalit women have not always benefited from these programs due to local caste dynamics that prevent their participation. Similarly, while affirmative action policies in education and employment have opened up opportunities for Dalit men and women, Dalit women continue to face barriers in accessing these opportunities due to social discrimination, economic barriers, and the intersectionality of their marginalized identities.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations have played a crucial role in advocating for the rights of Dalit women and challenging their economic marginalization such as AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch), a platform dedicated to advocating for the rights of Dalit women and it focuses issues like economic exploitation, violence and social exclusion, Navasarjan Trust, a Gujrat based organization that works for Dalit communities with focus on women's empowerment etc. These organizations have provided Dalit women with legal support, vocational training, and opportunities for political participation. They have also been instrumental in raising awareness about the unique challenges faced by Dalit women and pushing for policy changes at the local, state, and national levels.

Conclusion

The economic marginalization of Dalit women is deeply rooted in the intersection of caste, gender, and class oppression. Centuries of structural discrimination have relegated them to the most menial, undervalued, and exploitative forms of labor, both in rural and urban settings. Despite legal reforms aimed at addressing caste and gender inequalities, Dalit women continue to face significant barriers to economic participation, including unequal wages, lack of access to land, limited educational opportunities, and pervasive violence in both public and private spheres. They are marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their caste. As a result, Dalit women's labor remains undervalued and their potential for economic and social mobility severely restricted. Structural barriers such as limited access to land ownership, exclusion from formal labor protections, and lack of political representation further entrench their economic insecurity. However, the resilience and resistance of Dalit women should not be overlooked. In various regions across India, Dalit women are mobilizing, forming collectives, participating in labor unions, and advocating for their rights through grassroots movements and NGOs. These efforts represent powerful examples of how marginalized communities can resist systemic oppression and advocate for economic justice.

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