

## Dalit women subsisting without voice or options

The average Dalit woman in India will not see her 40th birthday. “Turning Promises Into Action: Gender Equality In The 2030 Agenda”, a UN report, points out that the average age of death for Dalit women in India is 39.5—“14.6 years younger than for higher caste women.”

In the 2011 census, the Dalit population was estimated at 200 million, and at over 260 million in 2018. Assuming the female Dalit population at 130 million, as a group, they would form the 10th largest country. And this country would have one of the lowest, average age of death. Lower than Sierra Leone, which has been devastated by civil war and Ebola. Such is the magnitude of economic and social stresses experienced by Dalit women in India.

There are two additional reasons this statistic should be alarming. First, this is the statistic for Dalit women in India today, that is considered a high growth, peaceful, post-liberalization economy. Second, the cause of this age of death for Dalit women is not obvious like war or disease; therefore, it does not have an easy fix.

Unbundling the reasons for such a low average age of death for Dalit women is not easy. Dalit women are often among the poorest sections of society, and therefore, tend to have lower access to sanitation, drinking water, or basic healthcare services. But the stresses that are imposed on Dalit women, purely because of their caste, also play a role in this. It is not uncommon to punish, even kill Dalits, for using a common water resource or roads reserved for higher castes. Dalit women and their children are routinely denied medical care as upper castes refuse to treat them.

One way to ask the question is, if higher caste women had the same access to sanitation, water, and healthcare, would the 14-year difference in average age of death disappear? Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, no. Using the Morbidity and Healthcare Survey of the 2004 NSSO (National Sample Survey Organization), Vani Borooh, Nidhi Sabarwal and Sukhudeo Thorat calculate what the average age at death of higher caste women would have been if their attributes had been evaluated using Dalit social status attributes. In their 2012 paper for the Indian Institute for Dalit Studies (which the UN report uses in its findings), the authors find that life expectancy among Dalit women would be 11 years lower than that of higher caste women despite having identical social status conditions like sanitation and drinking water.

This has serious implications in terms of policy solutions and reforms. One would think that Indian governments need to improve conditions for Dalit women, especially in highly segregated village structures, where Dalit homes are near the worst sanitation conditions. The problem here is that current village structures, which are completely based on caste hierarchy, will not really give voice to Dalit women's concerns. Even if new roads, sewage systems, and health facilities are provided by the government, these are likely to be completely controlled by upper castes, and access denied to Dalit women. The data suggests that even if one solved this problem of public goods allocation within a casteist hierarchy, it would still not completely bridge the gap in life expectancy.

There are other stresses currently imposed on Dalit women, beyond access to water and sanitation services. Dalit women are more likely (compared to other women and Dalit men) to experience physical and sexual violence at home, in their immediate neighbourhoods, and at the workplace. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, four Dalit women are raped every day in India. This is an underestimate because of the under-reporting by Dalit victims as the police, magistrates, politicians, etc., tend to be dominated by upper caste men.

It is not realistic to think that Dalit women can actually change the village structure to better accommodate their rights and needs—at least not in the immediate future. At the bottom of the

village totem pole, protesting and giving voice to their demands will more likely get them shunned, hurt, or killed than give them access to better governance services. The only possibility is to leave these village structures that segregate and deny Dalit women even the most basic services.

While Dalit women may want to leave, there is nowhere to go. Because of the current structure of labour laws, dis-incentivizing formal labour markets and hiring, India has an extremely asymmetric and disproportionately informal labour market. Unsurprisingly, Dalit women are also more likely to be trapped at the lowest levels in the informal labour market. Lacking the social networks that enable upward mobility in the labour market, they are often relegated to the lowest paying, hard physical labour under exploitative conditions by middlemen. It is not unusual to be denied access to restrooms and drinking water at the work place. Sexual harassment is the norm and not the exception in the informal sector. The informal sector leaves Dalit women in a poor position to access the economic growth resulting from market liberalization.

We have denied Dalit women both voice and exit, and it is killing them. They are stuck in a parochial village system with no voice and agency to better their condition. They are imprisoned without exit options because of the exploitative labour market thanks to India's terrible regulatory framework, with the worst reserved for the weakest and most vulnerable.

We need urgent and sensible labour laws reforms to give exit options to Dalit women trapped in a system that will not even let them get to their 40th birthday, let alone give them cause to celebrate it.

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