

Researching with Dalit Women Activists: An Intersectional Feminist Social Work Approach

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Abstract

Aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this article traces and attempts to create an agenda of research that foregrounds how ‘Dalit women’s lives matter’ in feminist research and mobilization at the grassroots. Through critical and participatory engagement with Dalit women activists via the initiatives of the National Council for Women Leaders collective, this article elucidates the experiences of sexual violence faced by Dalit women in India. While framing the intersectional feminist research agenda, it centralizes Dalit Woman activists and their shared experiences on sexual violence in society through cross-case/context analysis of sexual violence against Dalit women across thirteen states in India. The article argues for an intersectional feminist social work research and practice, while working and intervening in the lives of Dalit women.

Keywords

Dalit Women Leaders, Intersectional Feminist Research, National Council for Women Leaders, Social Work Research and Practice

Introduction

Feminist research and mobilization in general have increasingly become visible across the world through the initiative taken by different groups of women coming together with experiences of shared pain, shared stories of oppression and resistance, and most of all, a shared strategy to defy the oppressive patriarchal and other social structures which challenge them and deprive them of a dignified life (Kumar, 2011; Menon, 2012; Patel and Khajuria, 2016). This implies that there is no single way of capturing women’s experiences, and ways of negotiating the world of patriarchy, race,

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caste, religion, and, numerous other stratifications that govern their lives. Women's subjectivities are intrinsically linked to their family of origin, and their caste locations play a major role in the control over their bodies, sexuality, and labor. The specificities of their lived realities are interwoven in the intersectionality of the social stratifications that provide a space for the 'privilege' or 'oppression', depending on their location in the hierarchy of this stratification.

In the case of women from marginalized social groups like Dalits (who are from Scheduled Caste Communities)¹ in India, women's participation in mainstream women's movements and mobilizations has had a peculiar trajectory of 'being in them' and yet 'being invisible within them' (Hartmann, 2009; Omvedt, 2009; Paik, 2014). This trajectory reveals that at several points of time in the history of women's movements and mobilization in India, the core issues such as violence, deprivation, and denial of rights are related to those of women belonging to Dalit communities but often get subsumed within the larger interests of the woman in general. The mobilizations and movements have usually failed to include and address the specific Dalit women's contexts of violence and denial of rights, their agency and voice within those movements, and the nature of the oppression faced.

This becomes even more challenging when women's struggle is seen on the premise of 'personal is political' (Talpade, 2013, 971) which raises questions of 'what happens to the key feminist construct of the personal is political' when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal? Questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systematic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives (Talpade, 2013) disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this knowledge as a commodity to be consumed. If all experience is merely individual, and the social is always collapsed into the personal, feminist critique and radical theory appear irrelevant—unless they confront these discursive shifts. From a postcolonial perspective Talpade (2013) & Spivak (1988) have questioned the hegemony of Western ideas and theorizing of feminism having 'othered' the realities of 'third world women' and have argued that women are a heterogeneous category. Yet there has been little acknowledgement of caste and gender axis which create a different form of oppression and reduce the knowledge of Dalit women and their realities in the peripheries. On the other hand, decolonial theorists, academic and activists like Freire (2017), Said (1994), Smith (2022) discourses enable an analysis of oppression and oppressiveness of the coloniality and its aftermath. The question of who produces knowledge keeping the

¹Dalit is a term that means 'oppressed' and 'downtrodden'. It was first used by the Dalit Panthers in India to denote those men and women belonging to the outcast social groups which include Scheduled Castes in India. They are considered untouchables in the country and subjected to extreme forms of social exclusion and violence. Under the Constitutional Order 1950 certain communities have been notified as Scheduled Castes and have provisions for affirmative action and protections (Articles 341 & 342) [https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20\(SC\)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf](https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20(SC)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf).

geography of experiences, the power of one form of knowledge over others has been questioned by these theorists. For acknowledging and understanding the experiences of Dalit women, these theories provide a direction of analysis which brings us to locating the gender and caste axis and the conspiracy of caste-based patriarchy which impacts the lives of Dalit women. Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 2003) explains this axis and specific ways in which Dalit women's life experiences are impacted. These realities of Dalit women's oppression and experiences of violence as systemic and continuous throughout their life cycle have been articulated by Dalit women themselves in their autobiographies (Bama, 1994; Moon & Pawar, 1989; Viramma, 1998; Baby Kamble, 2018). These autobiographies are pathbreaking and forge an entirely new epistemic of Dalit feminist scholarship. Such writings constitute a new historiography of Dalit women's contexts and lives and as Kapadia (2017, p. 32) has reiterated that, "the multi-modal praxis of Dalit subaltern women that is challenging and transforming their subalternity."

Dalit feminist research informed by Dalit feminist theorization enables a different 'voice' borrowing from Guru's (1995) approach of 'difference'. This has the strength to create social change which is transdisciplinary and paves a pathway to critical research methods (Reinharz, 1992). This article is based on research that adopted an intersectional approach to understanding discrimination and violence as propounded by Crenshaw (1991) and a Dalit feminist approach (Rege, 2013; Paik, 2014, 2021; Patil, 2013). According to the intersectionality approach, people experience multiple barriers when gender discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination (e.g. discrimination based on race, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), and/or other barriers (e.g. poverty, rural residence, etc.). The term "axis" describes identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste, poverty, etc. The terms "multiple" discrimination and "compound" discrimination are also used to describe this axis.

This article, while locating sexual violence within the axis of caste, gender and class uses the Dalit feminist theorizing to bring their situated knowledge and their experiences through research and mobilization in India. Dalit feminism (Paik, 2021; Rege, 2013) positions caste at the center of all epistemic interrogation not just in the form of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' but as inimical to Dalit women when it comes to sexual violence as a tool and means to keep caste power and privilege in place by dominant caste groups.

Aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this article traces and brings out 'how Dalit women's lives matter' and requires specific analysis and interventions. It is based on a study undertaken to explore the reported sexual violence against Dalit women in 13 states of India. This research was undertaken under severe constraints due to the pandemic and the Dalit women activists utilized technology and social media tools (telephonic, WhatsApp, and Instagram) to interview survivors/victims of sexual violence and other stakeholders

working with them as well as mobilize to advocate for their rights and access to justice. The research methodology used was participatory action research (Cornish F, Breton N et al., 2023) using a feminist intersectional approach to highlight the specificity of the nature and forms of violence experienced by Dalit women. In the first part of the section that follows, the article dwells on earlier historicity of sexual violence faced by Dalit women and some research undertaken to bring out this form of violence. The second part describes the simultaneous emergence of a national collective of Dalit women activists from the grassroots and the Dalit intersectional feminist research agenda. In the third section of the article, the research findings showcase the specific and unique nature and forms of violence which Dalit women encounter while living in the margins of the society. It covers the cases of sexual violence from the years 2015-2020. The article ends with a discussion section that emphasizes the need to utilize a feminist intersectional approach by social workers to locate and address Dalit women's situations and violence faced by them.

Caste-based Sexual Violence Against Dalit Women: A Literature Review

The nature of violence against Dalit women came to light through a major watershed case reported in rural India in 1992 (Murthy, 2013; Gupta, 2012). The case for the first time brought out the specificities of identities as 'Dalit' women for feminist mobilization and the need to approach violence against Dalit women from an intersectional and anti-caste feminist epistemology. This nature of the judgment by the sessions court brought out the deeply embedded institutionalized casteism. The sessions court acquitted the perpetrators observing that "Indian culture has not fallen to such low depths that someone who is brought up in it, an innocent rustic man, will turn into a man of evil conduct, who disregards caste and age differences" (Kannabiran, 2012). The case also led to the Supreme Court of India's landmark proclamation of the Vishaka Guidelines which in turn became the basis for the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act of 2013. A detailed study by Mangubhai, Irudayam & Lee (2014), comprising narratives of 500 Dalit women in four states of India also highlighted the systemic violence and denial of access to basic resources. The all-pervasive caste and gender discrimination has percolated into systems and created an enabling environment for the continued perpetuation of violence and inequality. This study played a significant role in highlighting the situation of Dalit women in India. Similarly, a later study by AIDMAM-NCDHR (2018) reflected caste discriminatory practices in schools, access to government programs, and land and livelihood programs. A study by Deshpande & Ramachandran (2020) indicates that almost 16 per cent of the workforce from Scheduled Caste communities are engaged in informal labor and most of these are women workers. Other studies (Guru, 2010; Paik, 2020; Surepally, 2020) have also shown how Dalit women, their identity, and their location as women within specific communities have been overshadowed and lost in the entire discourse for justice.

During the pandemic, Dalit Human Rights Defenders Net (DHRDnet, 2020) documented several cases of sexual violence in seven states of the country. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2015 & 2020) data showed that there has been a 45 per cent increase in the number of rape cases against Dalit (Scheduled Caste) women and girls registered between 2015 and 2020. Further, the National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) showed that sexual violence was the highest among women from Scheduled Caste communities (7.3 per cent), Scheduled Tribe communities (7.8 per cent), and Other Backward Caste communities (4.5 per cent). This is just the tip of the iceberg as this data comprises only reported cases, numerous cases of sexual violence are never reported anywhere and hence are not covered by the data.

Since the author was connected to most of these activists and all were working with Dalit women victims/survivors at the local levels, i.e., in villages and marginalized localities in towns and cities, there was a need expressed for collective action and advocacy. Online conversations and WhatsApp sharing led to the idea for a social media campaign and research on what they clearly could identify as caste-based sexual violence and state impunity. Denial by police stations to lodge FIRs, denial of medical treatment, lack of sensitivity from medical personnel, threats, and intimidation by the perpetrators all seemed to be uniformly used to deter the victims and their families from seeking help, redress, and justice.

Given this situation, aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this study was operationalized into participatory feminist action research and mobilization at the grassroots. It assumed that the non-recognition of the intersectional discrimination faced by Dalit women within a heterogeneous and unequal society has resulted in a greater increase in institutionalized discrimination and prejudices. The specificities of Dalit women and their contexts of life, living, and struggles against oppressive socio-political conditions, institutionalized intersectionality of discrimination, stereotypes, and sexual violence faced by them needed to be brought to the visible arena of feminist politics and agendas.

Research Methodology and Approach

For long Dalit women activists across India have been engaged in redress, advocacy, and providing support services to Dalit women, especially those facing sexual violence. These activists have developed a clear language and theory of anti-caste and intersectional approaches, articulating the same in their languages. But conducting research together to bring in empirical evidence was a new venture for all of us. The study involved National Council for Women Leaders (NCWL), a coalition formed by Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan women activists (author included) in India which was initiated after an infamous rape case where a young Dalit girl was brutally raped (TOI 2024). The following diagram explains their consistent conversations and the approach of the research.



Fig. 1: The Research Process: Feminist Intersectional Participatory Action Research

Deep Conversations (Online and Offline)

There was a clear identification of the problem, i.e., escalation of sexual violence against Dalit women in 13 selected states (Maharashtra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, and Gujarat) and the failure of the criminal justice system to address and redress the aftermath of the violence, provide succor and help to the families. Community support was mired in the power dynamics of the caste system and often the survivors/victims were threatened and intimidated rather than supported when they tried to reach out to the justice system.

Dalitness and Gender Intertwined

The discussions revealed that the vulnerability of Dalit women in these states had heightened as they had to work outside their homes due to financial constraints, some of the younger girls had to work in the farms of the dominant caste people, and their mobility was subject to everyday surveillance and harassment by the youth of the dominant caste communities, while even small children were not spared. This was mainly during and because of the lockdown when existing preventive and protective mechanisms were suspended. This emboldened the dominant caste men and youth to assert their dominance in the form of sexual violence.

Need for Collective Action

The research underwent a cyclical process beginning with a six-month social media campaign with the Dalit Women Human Rights Defenders. The activists shared their work (through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) with the victims/survivors, their challenges as Dalit women and their engagement with the police, medical fraternity,

and the legal systems, discriminatory instances, familial constraints, and the consistent navigation of the state systems to secure services and justice for the victim/survivors and their families.

Research Approach and Process

This was followed by a need to conduct detailed research and utilize the findings to develop a strategy to help the survivors/victims and deepen redress for them. It was clear that such a research required an intersectional feminist approach to bring out the specific context of the sexual violence experienced by Dalit women. Vulnerabilities were exacerbated due to their location in the communities as Dalit, as women and living in poverty and peripheral geographies, which were isolated. The following steps informed the process of the research as an emancipatory and participatory process:

- (a) Conversations for defining what aspects to be covered in the research and how
- (b) A list of 50 cases was drawn up with a purposive sampling technique and were selected for interviews.
- (c) Training activists for data collection, ethics, and simultaneity of providing all possible help to the victims/survivors.
- (d) Collating case studies, filing of Right to Information inquiry in police stations, the study of First information reports (FIRs), and collating secondary data on violence against women specifically from the National Crime Records Bureau, a government database.
- (e) Recording the narratives of the activists and their understanding of the cases they were working with on the ground.
- (f) Gathering factual data on the incidents of sexual violence, the background details of the victim/survivors, the status of their complaints with the police, medical status, and access to counseling and other services.

The study, a cross-case/context study (state-wise), enabled Dalit women leaders from the grassroots (villages and urban peripheral localities) to frame, develop and research sexual violence against Dalit women. It gave the Dalit women activists the opportunity to document their experiences in the interconnections between, caste, gender, and violence and the typical nature and forms of violence perpetrated against Dalit women and girls.

The next section of this article explains the findings and analysis of this study. The data was thematically organised and categorized along four major themes, namely, Nature and Form of Violence, Intersectionality of Caste and Gender, Indifferent and Discriminatory Criminal Justice System, and Community Pressure on the Victims and Assertion and Violence.

Thematic Findings

Nature and Form of Violence: The Intersectionality of Caste and Gender

The research revealed some very disturbing trends that sexual violence is being used by those in dominant positions as a weapon to assert power and reinforce existing hierarchies. Most perpetrators of caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women and girls belonged to dominant castes. Of the 50 cases studied for this research, details of the caste of 36 male perpetrators are available: eight perpetrators each were from Yadav and Other Backward Caste communities; four were from the Rajput community; three each from the Jat and Muslim communities; two perpetrators were from the Sikh community; and one each from the Prajapati, Maratha, Brahmin, Vaniba Chettiyar, Vanniyar, Gupta, Thakur and Gujjar communities.

The study showed a concerning feature that in over half the cases (62 per cent) men and boys of dominant caste groups have targeted Dalit girls under the age of 18 years. The patterns of violence varied based on age, where victims-survivors live, their vulnerability, and the working relationship that families have with perpetrators' households. These parameters converge to create conditions wherein Dalit girls are routinely stalked by these sexual predators. The socio-economic and political power accumulated by the dominant caste groups and families is based on control over land, property, and other economic assets, which in turn is interwoven with political, legal, and administrative power through networks of kinship and influence. This makes the caste system extremely resilient and resistant to change.

Dalit women and girls are often subjected to more severe or aggravated forms of sexual violence, such as gang rapes or rape with murder, and there is often a collective nature to these crimes, with offenders from dominant castes acting in groups to commit offenses. It was clear that Dalit women's bodies were being projected as markers of their Dalit identity and sexual violence was a tool for the exercise of power and subordination of Dalit women. This use of power and dominance is also flowing into the criminal justice system, where impunity is rampant among the very stakeholders duty-bound to provide justice—the police, judiciary, medical functionaries, and others—as was apparent in the well-publicized case during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Institutionalized casteism and discrimination are apparent when the victims/survivors of caste-based sexual violence struggle to obtain justice within India's legal system.

Indifferent and Discriminatory Criminal Justice System

Many cases are not reported or under-reported and as a result they do not reach the criminal justice system. Those who do manage to move through the complex and unfriendly police and judicial systems have low conviction rates. The study revealed that in one case the first information report (FIR) was not filed by the police and in 7 of the cases the report of the crime was not filed under the special law meant for crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Moreover, 22 survivors reported a delay of 5 days to 3 months as the time that made evidence-building and conviction possibilities challenging. Several survivors also reported that the police would refuse

to lodge the report and instead intimidate them with abuse and physical violence, which deterred them from insisting that an FIR be filed. Further, as soon as a case was reported the perpetrators and other dominant groups activated channels of influence within the police system and subverted adequate evidence gathering.

Regarding the cases which finally found their way to the courts, the discriminatory attitudes and bias of the judges and lawyers was another barrier which the victims had to deal with. They were often treated with suspicion and had to go through long pending trials. Out of the 50 cases, 42 remain pending in the pre-trial phase of the courts or during police investigations.

Community Pressure on the Victims

In 37 out of the 50 cases studied, the survivors or families of victims received threats from the accused, their family, or other members of the community members and were pressured to either not complain or to withdraw or compromise. Often, these intimidation tactics were employed to silence victims/survivors and their families, contributing to low conviction rates in rape cases. There was a lack of support from their community as they were themselves living in oppression, fear, exclusion, and poverty. They were also dependent for their livelihoods on the families of the perpetrators.

Assertion and Violence Continuum

Another pattern that emerged is that caste-based sexual violence is perpetrated when Dalit families begin to earn well, buy assets, and send girls for better education and jobs. The stigma of caste sticks like a stamp forever, gender and caste a higher form of discrimination and violence embedded in structures of caste, gender, and labor. The nature of public violence and its shape and form is directed not only on the 'body' and its dignity but also on defilement and violation as a 'community' and caste symbol. Private violence is equally immense, and the triple jeopardy faced by Dalit women intensifies their deprivation. However, this does not deter any of them from the dogged and determined fight for justice and emancipation. In each of the stories of sexual violence lies the triumph of Dalit women survivors determined to become leader activists for justice for many more. A new vocabulary of feminism and struggle is being written out as they also counter the hegemony of *savarna* (dominant caste) feminist approaches towards undoing the patriarchy, gender-based injustice, and violence. The new narratives are interwoven into the lives of the Dalit activists and their emancipatory work with other survivors. As one of the activists shared, "Our fight is against caste-based sexual violence. This fight is for our rights and our self-respect, and we will continue to fight till our women and girls get their dignity and rights. Our fight is for justice."

It is in this spirit that the interventions by activists and social workers have been towards immediate relief, counseling the survivors/victim and their families, supporting the redress process with the criminal justice system, and ensuring compensation for the violence faced by survivors and their families. In tandem with this work has been the

advocacy and campaign work done at a national level to ensure better accountability and response by the system to the needs of the survivors.

Discussion

Towards Dalit Intersectional Feminist Social Work Practice

For long Dalit women activists across the country have been engaged in redress, advocacy, and providing support services to Dalit women especially those facing sexual violence. These activists have developed a clear language and theory of anti-caste and intersectional approaches, articulating the same in their languages.

For the author as a researcher and academic activist, this research meant a consistent use of feminist reflexivity and a conscious engagement with herself. Being aware of the power that she has being an academic and a lived reality as a woman of a dominant caste, she had to make consistent efforts not to drive the agenda of the research and the process of developing it with the activists. Feminist intersectional social workers in India must follow a forked pathway wherein they have to choose between working with the state systems to facilitate services for those left out or working towards changing the unjust social order which ‘marginalizes’ certain social groups and individuals based on their identity (caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality among the few of the diversities). They must locate themselves in any one of these two pathways or work with both. Often this is a challenging and dilemmatic situation where to get some form of justice one must return to the same system which often shuts the doors of redress and support to Dalit women survivors. It is frequently a painstaking, determined, and painful process.

Intersectional feminist social workers must move beyond and outside of the system increasingly coming from locations of the margins, where they have faced oppression throughout their life experiences and that has intertwined and enabled them to become leaders of what we can explain as structural and feminist intersectional social work. Structural social work links individual “problems” to broader societal injustices. It holds an analysis of the social structure at its core, which views social inequalities, rather than individual deficiencies as the root of people’s problems (Mullaly & Dupre, 2018). For Dalit women’s activism, a huge source of inspiration and strength has been the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Rege, 2013, p. 145). He was acutely aware of the intimate connection between caste and patriarchy and the role that they played in women’s subordination in society. Ambedkar’s writings in the *Mooknayak* and *Bahiskrut Bharat* brought out the ills of the caste system and continue to inspire these Dalit women to unite to organize and agitate, as it did during the independence movement.

The research and its findings brought forth the systematically institutionalized form of casteism and discrimination that Dalit women face in their everyday lives. The threat of violence to sexual violence as a continuum increased during the pandemic. The challenges in accessing the criminal justice system, other services for support like legal aid and counselling and entitlements like victim compensation. This research

comes as an urgent clarion call for feminist social workers to address and highlight this form of intersectional discrimination and violence faced by Dalit women despite strong laws in India.

As a feminist intersectional social work educator and activist, the engagement with sexual violence against Dalit women has meant disrupting knowledge claims, reclaiming, and mainstreaming, marginalized knowledge as ‘mainstream’ knowledge. It is also an iteration of praxis from academic to field learning, enabling voices and listening, creating spaces for dialogue and discourse, and walking with and then walking behind. The intersectional social worker challenges the self and is being challenged constantly. Therefore she/he/they must consistently take steps towards change through leadership building, capacitating, research, advocacy, partnership, treading the unknown, conquering fear, the warmth of solidarity and reassurance, acceptance, and sisterhood, as well retain a constant check on the use of power, reflexivity, falling and picking up.

Conclusion

The unraveling of the lived reality of Dalit Women challenges the rhetoric of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ that hides the everyday lives of Dalit women citizens at the margins. The life of Dalit women questions the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the use of violence as coercive power to keep them subordinated. This study highlights the hidden and oppressive ground reality of how everyday ‘humiliation’ and sexual violence are used as a tool against Dalit women to deprive them of a dignified life. It suggests that sexual violence is an exercise of power over the women and the communities to which, they belong, and it is used to generate fear as a tactic to deny access to education, health, forest, land, water, and other citizenship rights that Dalit women are entitled.

In particular, the study underlines the need for Dalit feminist researchers and social workers to understand how intersectional feminist standpoint research can capture axis of sexual violence against women in society—a process of unpacking and acknowledging newer possibilities of ‘feminist’ understandings from Dalit women’s perspectives. Research in this context becomes an emancipatory project in the context of the micropolitics of consistent engagement with families, women and, with local police, media and, medical fraternity creating an enabling situation for Dalit families in the margins. It entails keeping faith in the Constitution of the country and the vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that Dalit women activists continue to articulate and bring to the forefront the systemic denial of justice and strive towards opening the very same system for demanding and ensuring justice.

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