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‘Leave no one behind’ and the challenge of intersectionality: Christian Aid’s experience of working with single and Dalit women in India

Jayshree P. Mangubhai and Chiara Capraro

The principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ is strongly emerging as a defining aspect of the new development framework under negotiation in 2015. This stems from an acknowledgement of the failure of the Millennium Development Goals in securing benefits for the most marginalised groups, those suffering from economic deprivation and discrimination as a result of intersecting inequalities. As the new development framework takes shape, national-level experiences of tackling intersecting inequalities can provide lessons on the shifts required in policy and practice to address the specific needs of women experiencing deprivation, violence, and discrimination because of their gender and other identities. This case study illustrates lessons learnt from Christian Aid’s programmatic experience in several states of India in support of Dalit women and single women as they individually and collectively struggle to gain dignity and realise their rights.

Le principe « n’oublier personne » se dégage fortement comme un aspect clé du nouveau cadre de développement en cours de négociation en 2015. Cela s’explique par la reconnaissance de l’échec des Objectifs du millénaire pour le développement à obtenir des avantages pour les groupes les plus marginalisés, ceux qui sont défavorisés sur le plan économique et sont victimes de discrimination du fait d’inégalités présentant des points d’intersection. Tandis que le nouveau cadre de développement prend forme, les expériences au niveau national pour ce qui est de résoudre les inégalités présentant des points d’intersection peuvent fournir des enseignements sur les évolutions requises sur le plan des politiques et des pratiques pour satisfaire les besoins précis des femmes défavorisées, victimes de violences et de discrimination du fait de leur sexe et d’autres identités. Cette étude de cas illustre les enseignements tirés de l’expérience programmatique de Christian Aid dans plusieurs États indiens pour soutenir les femmes dalits et célibataires dans leur lutte individuelle et collective pour assurer leur dignité et concrétiser leurs droits.
El principio ‘que nadie se quede atrás’ está adquiriendo creciente fuerza como un aspecto definitorio del nuevo marco de desarrollo que está siendo discutido en 2015. Ello surge de manera concomitante al reconocimiento de que los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio fracasaron en su intento por conseguir beneficios para los grupos más marginados y para las personas que sufren privaciones económicas y discriminación como resultado de desigualdades que se superponen. A medida que se construye el nuevo marco de desarrollo, las vivencias experimentadas al realizar el esfuerzo de enfrentar las desigualdades traslapadas presentes a nivel nacional, pueden brindar aprendizajes respecto a los cambios requeridos para responder a las necesidades de las mujeres que experimentan privaciones, violencia y discriminación debido a su género y a sus otras identidades en lo que a políticas y prácticas se refiere. Este estudio de caso examina los aprendizajes obtenidos de la aplicación de los programas de Christian Aid orientados a apoyar a las mujeres dalits y a las mujeres solteras que luchan, individual o colectivamente, para lograr dignidad y hacer efectivos sus derechos en varios estados de India.

Key words: gender; inequality; caste; empowerment; India; intersectionality

‘Leave no one behind’: from theory to practice?

The limitations of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in benefitting the poorest of the poor have increasingly been realised. With achievements based on averages, MDGs could virtually be met even when the most marginalised missed out. Very early in the discussions around the new post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) development framework, a new principle started emerging – to ‘leave no one behind’. This ambition – that no human development goal or target should be met unless met for all social and income groups – is a principle worth fighting for, and provides an opportunity to reframe and reprioritise action at both the global and national level (High Level Panel Report 2013). It will require governments to identify those people and communities who are failed by the status quo, falling through the gaps of policy-formulation and implementation. We will need to look beyond quintiles,\(^1\) and beyond the ways single categories of difference create relations of inequality between individuals and groups (for example gender, ethnicity, caste, or [dis]ability). Meeting the post-2015 ambition will necessitate understanding the interests and needs of those who experience multiple disadvantages and exclusion, as a result of intersecting inequalities.

Already, international human rights law – including the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966) – acknowledges the
existence of intersecting inequalities, and the way in which different inequalities compound each other to create unique and complex disadvantage for the individuals facing them.\(^2\) The obligation placed on states is to eliminate intersectional discrimination by preventing, diminishing, and eliminating the conditions and attitudes which cause or perpetuate it, and to enact specific measures to attenuate or suppress conditions that reproduce this discrimination (CEDAW 2010; ICESCR 2009). To respond to their international legal obligations and the SDG agenda will require states to go beyond merely seeking GDP growth boosting strategies to also concentrate on redistribution by closing the gap between the wealthy and the poor, and prevent further marginalisation and deprivation, by redistributing resources and power in ways which benefit those experiencing complex inequalities.

This article seeks to explore and underscore the importance of these issues, via a discussion of Christian Aid’s programme work to support women who have Dalit caste identity, and women with single marital status. Christian Aid has been working on this agenda under both its general India national programme, and its Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme, a DFID-funded programme managed by Christian Aid.\(^3\) The programmes are based on awareness that the root causes of poverty in India cannot be explained without a reference to caste and gender. Both these characteristics cause marginalisation and exclusion. Further, in a context of gender inequality, marital and family status shapes women’s gendered experience of poverty, creating particular challenges for single women. Development initiatives and social policy programmes need to support single women and Dalit women to claim their entitlements through collective action and advocacy.

Current public policies, including social protection and anti-poverty policies, fail to respond to the intersectional nature of inequalities faced by single Dalit women. This results in these women falling into the gaps of social provisions, and continuing to experience discrimination, violence, and destitution arising from deeply-engrained, complex, and shifting social norms. The programmes focused on in this article aim to support women who experience discrimination based on both these aspects of identity, promoting opportunities for them to organise, and building their leadership to claim their rights and entitlements vis-à-vis the state, dominant castes, and their own menfolk and families.

We write this article as colleagues who work on issues of gender justice policy and advocacy, respectively at the South Asia level and at the global level, both with knowledge and expertise on the gender and inequality issues in the Indian context. The article draws on information from several sources: the personal experiences of staff members managing the programmes, captured via informal interviews; impact assessments and learning studies written up as grey literature to use in reporting and organisational learning; the annual reports of partner organisations; and finally, interviews conducted by one of the authors with some of the organisation heads.
The first section sets the context for single women and Dalit women in India. The second section looks at programmatic approaches in support of single women in the northern state of Jharkhand, while the third section looks at approaches to build the collective action of Dalit women, including those engaged in manual scavenging, to claim their rights and fight against discrimination and violence. The fourth section then examines the challenges and lessons learnt from programmatic experience, and ends with some implications for development programming and policy.

**The status of Dalit and single women in India**

India currently ranks 135 out of 187 countries on the UNDP’s gender development and equality index (UNDP 2014, 172–9). Despite a slew of gender-responsive laws, policies, programmes, and budgets, the majority of women still endure inequality in all major areas of life. The situation of the country’s roughly 587 million women, however, is not uniform. Women from certain marginalised groups consistently appear at the bottom of poverty indicators. Two such groups of women are Dalit or scheduled caste women, and single women. The former face exclusion and discrimination foremost on the basis of their caste and gender, the latter on the basis of their gender and marital status. These inequalities intersect with economic disadvantage, and are mutually reinforcing.

Overcoming challenges in the struggle for the rights of women experiencing intersecting inequalities requires a deep understanding of the lived experiences of these women and the power dynamics that reinforce their marginalised position not only in society at large, but also within their own communities. The experiences of single women and Dalit women in India are masked by a national discourse on diversity which seeks to acknowledge different (read, discrete) identities to be promoted within the notion of an overarching nationalistic identity. The discourse of diversity, which is familiar in the popular media and underpins state policies, results in lack of space to identify and problematise the unequal power relations which exist between different social groups (Pandey 2010).

**Dalit women in India**

The approximately 98 million Dalit women in India (Data Table A10, Census of India 2011) live spatially segregated on the outskirts of villages or in overcrowded urban slums. They are denied equal access to and command over resources and services, as well as public and cultural spaces. Caste and gender inequalities intersect where, for example, Dalit women face ‘untouchability’ practices and discrimination related to the collection of water, an activity ascribed to women under the sexual division of labour. Dalit women are less likely to own land than women of other castes, which pushes them into low paid and often exploitative labour. They are primarily agricultural labourers, but also take on non-farm labour, including traditionally ascribed ‘polluted’...
tasks such as manual scavenging (the manual removal of human excreta from dry latrines) and sweeping.

Violence is perpetrated against Dalit women with impunity by other castes, taking advantage of their relatively powerless position. If they assert their right to resources and spaces, this is seen as a transgression of social norms on their part and punished with violence (Irudayam et al. 2011). Much of this violence is sexualised in nature. According to the National Crimes Record Bureau data (2014, 424), five Dalit women report rape in India every day. These figures mask a far higher estimated number. The author was involved in one study of 500 cases of violence across four states, which showed that 67.1 per cent of cases of rapes of Dalit women went unreported due to the women not reporting for reasons including fear of the perpetrators or fear of bringing dishonour to the families, or else family/community/dominant castes intervening to prevent registration of the cases (Irudayam et al. 2011).

Significantly, studies show that caste-based social exclusion is more acutely felt by Dalit women than by Dalit men because the women experience greater ‘untouchability’, and ill-treatment, from dominant caste women and men (Shah et al. 2006). Political exclusion then denies these women a voice and an equal say in decision-making on the issues that affect their lives. This situation is compounded by gender discrimination and violence within the family, influenced by the wider dynamics of caste and class oppression.

**Single women in India**

‘Single’ women (defined as women who are widowed, divorced, separated, or women older than 30 who have never married) face significant challenges, starting with the basic challenge of survival. The number of widowed, divorced, or separated women alone is 48 million (Data Table C2, Census of India 2011). A study of 386 single women in six states (National Forum for Single Women’s Rights 2011) highlighted a number of significant trends. Over half of the women were below the age of 45, under half were literate (24), and a disproportionately higher percentage (43.5 per cent) came from historically excluded scheduled caste (Dalit) and scheduled tribe (Indigenous) communities (27). Most of the women were employed in daily wage labour, subsisting on below minimum wages, and lived in small houses that lacked basic amenities. While at least 60 per cent of widowed women were able to retain control of their marital homes (51), most separated and divorced women were dispossessed when the marriage broke up. Despite this, only 12.7 per cent had benefitted from government housing schemes (49) and only 24.8 per cent (57) received a pension or some kind of social security entitlement. Moreover, few single women enjoyed participation in local political processes outside of exercising their vote (ibid).

Behind the poverty and marginalisation of single women lies their perceived ‘failure’ to conform to social norms that demand good women be faithful wives and...
mothers within male-headed households. These norms prescribe male control over female sexuality, which then deems women who are living in female-headed households without the ‘protection’ of men to be morally suspect. Hence, negative stereotypes about these women enhance their vulnerability to harassment, evictions, sexual exploitation, and abuse from family members and others. Even widows, who have not left their marriages but who are involuntarily single, attract social sanctions in the form of strong superstitious beliefs, such as accusations of being witches, and social rejection. Widows have the right in civil law to inherit property from their husbands in their own right, but traditional practices in patrilineal societies pass property down the male line, leaving widows to be supported as dependents by sons or other male relatives (Agarwal 1998), and vulnerable to psychological and physical abuse.

Policy shortcomings for Dalit women and single women

Public policies intended to benefit Dalits as a caste group, and women as a sex, do not fully respond to the specific interests and needs of Dalit women or single women, let alone addressing the intersecting issues faced by women who have both these identities. While it is true that there are targeted development programmes and affirmative action (reservation) provisions for scheduled castes and women in local governance, education, and government employment, social norms cause de facto exclusion of Dalit women. Further, the tendency among policymakers to focus on a single aspect of identity-based discrimination rather than understanding intersecting inequalities leads to individuals who belong to two marginalised categories falling into the gaps. For example, in work and higher education Dalit women often become excluded because of the existence of two separate quotas they could be eligible for; that is, they are told to apply for the women’s quota when they try to access the scheduled caste quota, and they are directed towards the scheduled caste quota when they apply for the women’s quota (Singh 2000, quoted in Grey 2005). As a result, the majority of the beneficiaries of reservation are Dalit men or dominant caste women respectively (National Human Rights Commission 2004). Additionally, quotas operate as a form of rationing: because of the existence of quotas, Dalit women are deemed ineligible for unreserved categories (Das 2006).

Similarly, in the case of ‘single’ women, a number of lacunae exist. The existing social security net in the form of pensions and other entitlements for the poor do not extend to separated and divorced women, or unmarried older women, or widows younger than 40. The underlying assumption is that young, able-bodied single women can fend for themselves (Dhar 2011). Many single women lack legal papers to establish marital status, especially in cases of permanent separation, leaving them with few rights and the burden of providing for themselves and their children. Similarly, the complicated and lengthy bureaucratic procedures to access social security and other entitlements, including the need for multiple documents to prove one’s single status
(for example, death certificates of husbands in the case of widows’ pensions), coupled with the frequent need to pay bribes or a percentage of one’s entitlement to officials, serve to increase the burden on these women (National Forum for Single Women’s Rights 2011).

Single but not alone: realising rights for single women

Ekal Nari Sashakti Sangathan (Association of Empowered Women Alone, or ENSS) was established in the north Indian state of Jharkhand in 2005. The association today comprises around 34,000 members spread across 21 districts of the state (internal report). ENSS is led by low-income single women, most of whom enjoy little or no family support. The women are facilitated to organise themselves into associations at the village panchayat level, which are federated at the block, district, and state levels. ENSS focuses on developing and enhancing the capacities and leadership of single women, so that they are able to tackle their multiple vulnerabilities, demand access to resources and entitlements, as well as solve the socioeconomic problems of their communities. It also seeks to empower the women to engage in lobbying and advocacy to reform laws and policies in order to ensure the rights of single women.

Christian Aid’s involvement with ENSS is via local implementing partners. It has focused on strengthening the collective, democratic functioning of the association at all levels, through the facilitation of regular meetings, training sessions, and the building of linkages to other like-minded networks. We have also encouraged ENSS to widen its focus to address issues including discrimination against single women, campaigning and advocating for equal land rights for single women, and awareness-raising and campaigning against violence against single women, for example witch-hunting (internal programme document). Taking into account large-scale poor literacy levels and lack of access to information, a key component of the programme has focused on supporting women to make a decent, independent livelihood. The programmes aim to generate and build women’s knowledge about how to go about this, not only on practical issues of how to access entitlements, but also to build common perspectives on core issues of discrimination, gender equality, exclusion, rights, and entitlements. Women need access to land, health, and livelihood-related entitlements and associated skills, and this can be achieved in part by building their awareness of their independent rights to resources and services. They can then raise their voices and claim entitlements. For example, supporting women’s access to the government’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is emerging as a priority.

A formal evaluation of the programme was carried out in 2011. This, together with subsequent research in 2013–2014, suggests it has helped to generate rising levels of confidence and motivation among single women association members to organise and take action to claim entitlements. A number of women have filed complaints regarding domestic violence, trafficking, the denial of maintenance, official corruption in the
distribution of entitlements, and other issues. An indicator that women find this approach helpful is the increasing membership, and regular participation, which we have seen at all levels of the ENSS organisational structure, as well as greater participation of single women in local village-level committees. Increasing participation in different decision-making bodies at the local level is significant; women are claiming spaces to speak up and take part in decision-making on issues of development, health, water, sanitation, and forest protection on behalf of their communities.

By widening and deepening organisation-building, ENSS aims to reach from village to state to ensure greater public awareness that single women’s issues are specific and need to be acted upon (ENSS Objectives Statement). In the words of Prameela Devi, an ENSS member and separated woman who successfully petitioned to receive a share of the marital property in her name, empowerment stems from a feeling that ‘I am single but not alone’. Beyond this, several thousand single women have accessed formal avenues of credit in order to move into self-employment in allied agriculture, animal husbandry, or small businesses in the villages (internal programme documents 2013–2014).

Increasing the agency of women is only one side of the coin. For women to be able to claim equal rights to services and resources, institutional gender biases need to be removed, which requires attitudinal change. Research into the ENSS experience suggests such changes are taking place. ENSS undertook sustained engagement, through discussions and evidence-based representations, which led to the Jharkhand state government providing for the inclusion of single women in several key entitlement schemes such as pensions for young widows, labour cards in the name of single women, and 10 per cent quota for the daughters of single women in government Kasturba schools.10

Advocacy at the national level is also a key component of ENSS’ work, through the National Forum for Single Women’s Rights, a network in which ENSS participates with seven other single women associations across north and central India. The Forum has operated since 2008. Its success can be gauged from representatives being included in the consultative process for writing the 12th Five Year Plan of the Government of India.11 The Minister of Finance subsequently noted single women as a group requiring special action and allocated, for the first time in the 2013–2014 financial year, a separate budget for the development of single women (Union Budget Speech 2013–2014 and Union Budget 2013–2014), while also considering a separate quota for single women under two of its key housing entitlement schemes (Dhar 2012).

Shifting mind-sets together: working towards dignity for Dalit women

In the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, Dalit Stree Shakti (DSS) has been working since 2005 to organise Dalit women to struggle for their rights. The organisation emerged out of the perceived failures of both the Dalit and women’s movements in the
state to address the specific issues of Dalit women, particularly gender-based caste violence and caste-class-gender based exclusions from access to quality education, entitlements under government schemes and from political representation (interview with DSS director, Hyderabad, 20 August 2014).

DSS work concentrates on these issues by supporting Dalit women to form collectives at the village level, federated to the state level, where they receive training to build their capacity to engage in independent decision-making. At present, over 1,000 collectives involving around 6,000 women have been initiated in seven districts (DSS annual report 2014–2015).

Almost all the members and co-ordinators have moved from a process of surviving discrimination and other rights violations to becoming human rights defenders and most are Dalits themselves. DSS aims to support the building of ‘collective agency’ – that is, organised action – through different issue-based campaigns, meetings, training sessions, and engagement with the media and government officials. A central understanding is that the women have been traditionally excluded from access to knowledge, and that knowledge means respect and power, especially the power to act. In addition to knowledge on rights, entitlements, and the institutional structures of government, sessions support women to analyse their situation and the current political context. The organisation also works with women to devise strategies for change, boosting self-confidence and self-esteem as Dalit women.

One core aspect of the work involves supporting the women’s collectives to take up cases of caste-based gender violence, as well as domestic violence, in order to ensure access to justice. The collectives work with the DSS district co-ordinator, conduct fact-findings for incidents, ensure immediate relief for the survivor and assist her to file a complaint with the police. Where domestic violence is involved, the collectives begin with a series of counselling sessions for both parties in order to halt the violence and resolve the conflict. If this fails, then the woman is supported to take recourse to legal interventions. The collectives monitor the ongoing cases, especially to support the survivors to pursue justice and not to be pressured into compromises with the perpetrator. The collectives are encouraged to work in a collaborative manner with the government, in order to gain credibility and influence among officials. At the same time, where police negligence is found, the collectives have strongly protested to the higher authorities. The result is that DSS increasingly has become a point of contact for officials seeking collaboration in cases of atrocities, and around 75 per cent of cases where the women’s collectives and DSS have accompanied the victims/survivors to court have led to convictions over a period of five years (interview with DSS Director, Hyderabad, 15 September 2013).

The work on the ground by the women’s collectives is complemented by evidence-based engagements between Dalit women collective members, DSS, police, and government officials, in order to promote more Dalit women inclusive policies and schemes and strengthen the implementation of protective laws. As a result of DSS
advocacy, for example, the Women and Child Welfare Department now ensures that compensation is paid immediately to rape victims, and a number of government orders have been promulgated to establish stringent procedures for the distribution of compensation following such violence.

In a similar manner, a PACS programme partner organisation, Jan Sahas Social Development Society, which is based in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, has been engaged since 2000 with one specific section of Dalit women, those who do the work of manual scavenging. This practice continues to blight the lives of an estimated 1.2 million Indians, around 90 per cent of whom are women and belong to specific ‘low caste’ Dalit communities (Human Rights Watch 2014). Over 20 years after its legal prohibition and despite a new law enacted in 2013, this indecent and inhuman work continues under both government and individual employers (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Jan Sahas identifies and liberates those engaged in manual scavenging into decent livelihoods. For many of these women, this is the only work they have known and, given their precarious economic situation, that income is vital for running their homes. At the same time, all are aware of the undignified nature of the work, and the consequent discrimination that especially their children face. Jan Sahas supports women to access government rehabilitation and livelihood schemes, and skills development opportunities, to gain alternative, decent work. Women also form community-based organisations of liberated manual scavengers, in order to support and motivate others. A focus on dignity enables members to articulate the problem and develop leadership skills to take forward the struggle to eradicate this practice. These community-based organisations are then brought together in a national movement for dignity, which currently runs across around 110 of the 676 districts in the country (http://www.jansahasindia.org/, last checked by the authors 15 May 2015). The movement has been responsible for organising rallies and foot marches to spread awareness about the need to end manual scavenging and restore dignity to these women. At the same time, the organisation aims to fill a key supportive role to foster movement-building around the issues on which it works, in order to build alliances that can pressurise the government to eradicate manual scavenging. It also operates a resource centre providing legal support to women, taking up cases of rights violations.

A large focus of Jan Sahas’ work has been on advocacy. The organisation has been part of a three-year campaign which has seen women marching across the country to demand stronger legal measures. All this led to the enactment of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013, and to continuing efforts now to enforce the law to end this practice. Moreover, whereas the benefits of the government’s rehabilitation schemes primarily went into the hands of Dalit men, regular advocacy has led to greater government focus on Dalit women as the key beneficiaries of such schemes.
Challenges and lessons learnt

**Balancing immediate practical needs with longer-term strategic needs**

Economic disadvantage and gender inequality intersect to create poor educational levels among women, which in turn constrain their ability to transcend poverty and inequality. As a result, the securing of employment opportunities for socially isolated low-income single women or Dalit women is a basic and immense challenge, which leads to a focus on maintaining survival-level livelihoods rather than supporting women to aspire to greater prosperity. This means, in effect, a focus on meeting immediate practical needs and does not help to challenge the lower status of single women and Dalit women in society. In the absence of more targeted programmes for these women to promote their entry into higher-value areas of the labour market, there are too few opportunities for them to shift into better employment.

Hence, interventions have to be flexible and operate on a long-term trajectory in order to increase their opportunities to break the cycle of poverty. This takes place by accommodating the women’s multiple roles and responsibilities, while motivating and facilitating them to shift from a focus on individual benefits attained through the women’s associations to working together towards long-lasting change in the lives of all single or Dalit women.

**Engaging men, leaders, and the wider community**

If programmes only focus on supporting women’s individual agency, this may place them at risk of increased violence and abuse. Overcoming intra-family and community resistance has to be consciously built into interventions. An example comes from DSS. The success of the Dalit women’s collectives depends in part on engaging with Dalit men, especially the Dalit male leaders in the local communities. Men have to be convinced of the need for women to engage in empowering economic and political activities. The challenge here is to shift attitudes which consider it appropriate for women to take part in economic empowerment processes focusing on a self-help group model, which traditionally engages with savings schemes, but inappropriate for women to engage in a more political model of organising to secure rights and entitlements for the community (and themselves!).

In the experience of DSS (interview with DSS director, Hyderabad, 20 August 2014), the key is to emphasise the good of the whole community of women taking part in political action, and the need for gender equality if a community is to be harmonious and prosperous. The underlying message is that the collectives are not about women dominating over men; rather, they are to promote spaces for women to equally contribute to bettering the lives of their community. This includes not only taking up issues of livelihood entitlements such as land and work, but also addressing cases of domestic violence. This is complemented by interventions with youth, understood as a
critical stakeholder in widening spaces for Dalit women’s rights, in terms of personality and leadership development as well as debates on key political issues such as affirmative action.

In a similar manner, the challenge for Jan Sahas is to focus on rights, in order to support women and their families to give up manual scavenging and move into other work. This is challenging as it flies in the face of economic realities for these very poor individuals, families, and communities: average manual scavenging work in central India earns around Rs.10 to Rs.20 (USD 0.16–0.32) per private household per month (Jan Sahas 2014, 18). Where women are key breadwinners for their families and where they have been socialised into believing that it is their duty to continue this work, any attempt to increase the economic vulnerability of the family is met with resistance. It is for this reason that the liberation of those engaged in manual scavenging to be able to regain their dignity has to be tied to messages of mobilisation, liberation, and rehabilitation into dignified livelihoods. This requires that women be provided with new skills to engage in productive employment, but also elements of social and political consciousness-raising in order to be able to demand the right to live with dignity. Engrained beliefs about caste and gender have to be challenged.

Jan Sahas premises its work on an understanding that manual scavenging cannot be eradicated through technical solutions alone, for example shifting women into new occupations and replacing dry latrine with flush water-based toilets. Such strategies fail to grapple with caste and gender inequalities that keep women in this degrading occupation. This includes recognising that Dalit men may discriminate against these women while pressuring them to continue this occupation. In other words, challenging the mind-set that reinforces the boundaries keeping certain castes of women in this illegal occupation remains crucial.

Creating and maintaining new power dynamics for positive change

India has yet to see clear, time-bound plans of action to ensure caste and gender equality, and to eradicate manual scavenging. Government’s challenges to caste-based discrimination and violence against women do not fully address the interests and needs of Dalit women. Certain state governments continue to deny the very existence of manual scavenging, despite all evidence to the contrary. Dominant caste employers of cleaners support the continuation of manual scavenging. Informal caste institutions and actors are often still clearly exerting influence over formal state actors, a link that remains to be severed. Collectives and organisations fighting for Dalit women’s rights need long-term encouragement and support to sustain their actions.

One way to gain more support for the collectives and their agenda is to eventually admit non-Dalit female members, in order to provide space for Dalit and non-Dalit women to interact and break down social barriers. This, however, requires first that the
Dalit women members feel empowered enough to engage on equal terms with other women, in order for their leadership potential to remain.

Another challenge comes from the shifts in power relations that occur as the women organise and become more independent and assertive of their rights. The resulting backlash and threats to ENSS members from middle men and money lenders, who traditionally have had a great sway over poor single women’s lives, are an example. Only when members are able to form good relations with the officials in their localities have they been able to counter the negative reactions from family and community. Overall progress has also been slow in terms of shifts in property rights in favour of single women, including land, which would signal a strong challenge to gender- and marital-status induced inequalities.

Engagements with government stakeholders are also marked by the need to recognise that progress will be slow in building understanding and political will to create equitable measures and to ensure that government mechanisms are functioning to check violence against Dalit and single women. Strongly-ingrained institutional biases based on caste, class, and gender need to be broken. Moreover, the adequate representation of these women in governance structures, and subsequently their free and informed political participation, remains to be realised given the continuing hostile socio-political environment in which these women live. Hence, while significant advocacy gains have been made over the years, the stronger political participation in, for example, the village panchayats by single or Dalit women would only further support their agenda to be pushed.

A further challenge lies in the relationship with the wider women’s movement in pushing for the recognition of difference, of intersecting inequalities, and how they increase the vulnerabilities of certain categories of women. While there has been some agreement on the recognition of Dalit women’s issues, this is yet to translate into more concrete forms of engagement and alliance building between the women’s movement and Dalit women’s organisations such as DS5. Similarly, the issue of manual scavenging has always been perceived as a ‘Dalit’ issue, not as a women’s issue, thereby narrowing civil society response to it.

**Working for individual and collective resilience**

Another significant challenge concerns the fact that gains in terms of economic rights – that is, improvements in the extent to which single Dalit women can engage in productive activities and make a livelihood – does not necessarily lead to challenges to the norms producing stigma, isolation, and abuse of these women. In other words, a focus on economic development alone is insufficient to shift these women from the margins. For instance, liberated Dalit women who shift from manual scavenging into alternative small businesses in their villages often continue to face stigma and discrimination on the basis of their caste and former occupation.
In response to this challenge, Jan Sahas continues to use public marches and demolitions of dry latrines in order to help people to understand the problem and challenge the mind-sets that stigmatise the women. It also has recognised the need to engage with the private employers of manual scavengers in order to support their access to government entitlements to water-flush toilets as part of its interventions.

Conclusion

What do these experiences tell us about meeting the immediate and longer-term needs of women experiencing intersecting inequalities? First, the dynamics of intersecting inequalities as they affect individuals need to be recognised and addressed in policies and programmes. As we have seen, governments and NGOs which choose to intervene on the basis of one identity are problematic: the different identities are experienced together and simultaneously, and this approach risks many interests and needs falling into the gaps, unaddressed.

Secondly, interventions need to be built supporting the organisation of individual women into a structure to advance group-based demands for rights and justice through collective agency. Obviously collective action is a challenge for women whose identities are shared to some extent but not on every point; the more sophisticated an analysis of intersecting inequalities becomes, the greater the challenges for organisation. In addition, rehabilitation and consciousness-raising is particularly important for women whose oppression feels commonplace and goes unquestioned, even by them. This requires providing safe spaces for women to come together and recognise their personal struggle as part of a collective, wider movement that builds a sense of dignity and strength to bring about change. This needs to be complemented with an approach that seeks to involve the wider community, starting with male leaders of the community to advocate for a shift in the way in which political and social spaces are created and occupied in order to advance community demands. There is a need to make conscious efforts to build institutions and spaces for Dalit women in particular in order to bridge voice, representation, and leadership gaps.

Thirdly, looking at the wider single identity-based movements such as the women’s or Dalit movements, there is a continuous need to build new perspectives to challenge the idea that taking up single or Dalit women’s rights – or single Dalit women’s rights! – can dilute attention to the issues of gender discrimination or caste discrimination. Instead, acknowledging difference, and how this is converted into different oppressions and disadvantages, strengthens solidarity and widens the range of interventions to transform gender and interlinking inequalities.

Finally, work towards an enabling legal and policy environment that addresses intersecting inequalities cannot be divorced from interventions to change mind-sets, and the social norms that underlie them. While able to achieve success at the individual level, the case studies highlight how damaging social norms constitute the most
significant resistance to widespread change. Integrating these findings into a new and transformative post-2015 agenda will be challenging – they point to a need for intelligent and integrated planning, which draws energy and political impetus from the headlines (for example, Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, and Addressing Inequality – both current proposals for stand-alone goals), but which avoids siloes. It will require a long-term approach which includes indicators which track changes in social norms over time, and invests in the required data. And it will require a strong consensus on the achievement of human rights for all, including the political leadership to name the inequalities which continue to exclude at a national and local level, and which can intersect to reproduce the most extreme forms of poverty and marginalisation. If these points are recognised, then the new agenda may succeed in leaving no one behind and in the words of the UN Secretary General, putting us on ‘the road to dignity by 2030’ (UN Secretary General 2014).

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Notes

1 Evidence suggests that those most likely to be excluded by progress in development are those groups of people whose economic deprivation intersects with ‘culturally devalued identities, locational disadvantage and lack of political representation’ (Paz Arauco et al. 2015, viii).

2 In recent years, the committees that monitor the international laws CEDAW and ICESCR have provided detailed comments that explain what constitutes the obligations of states when it comes to respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights in terms of addressing the multiple discrimination that certain groups face due to the intersection of two or more identities. For more information, please see CEDAW and CESCR references provided below.

3 More information can be found at the Christian Aid website: http://www.christianaid.org.uk and PACS website: http://www.pacsindia.org (last checked by the authors 22 June 2015).

4 For example, India has a constitutional right to non-discrimination on the basis of gender and affirmative action provisions for women (Article 15), laws on anti-
trafficking, anti-dowry, sexual harassment of women and domestic violence laws, a National Policy on the empowerment of women, and has undertaken gender-responsive budgeting. For more information please go to Ministry of Women and Child Development website: http://wcd.nic.in/ (last checked by the authors 22 June 2015).

5 Scheduled caste is an official term used for those communities listed by the Government of India as castes characterised by extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability. Notably, Dalit Christians and Muslims are left out of the scheduled caste list. In this article, all those who face untouchability are considered to be Dalits irrespective of their religion. For more information please go to http://idsn.org/countries/india/ (last checked by the authors 22 June 2015).

6 ‘Untouchability’ refers to the imposition of social disabilities by reason of a person’s birth into certain ‘polluted’, ‘low’ castes to which historically prescribed, degrading occupations linked to death, dirt, and menial labour are attached. For more information please go to http://idsn.org/countries/india/ (last checked by the authors 22 June 2015).

7 Lowest unit of local governance, comprising several villages.

8 These organisations are Samuel Hahnemann Associates & Research Centre and Shramjivi Mahila Samiti.

9 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme specifies the right of every rural household to 100 paid work days for one household member. Women and men are both eligible to apply and receive equal pay.

10 Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, or government residential schools for girls of families living below the poverty line in ‘educationally backward blocks’.

11 For more information on the Government of India’s planning process and the 12th Five Year Plan, please go to http://planningcommission.gov.in/index_oldpc.php & http://12th plan.gov.in/ (last checked by the authors 22 June 2015).

12 The proposed goals, at the time of writing, are respectively Goal 5 ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ and Goal 10 ‘Reduce inequality within and among countries’. The final goals will be agreed at the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

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