Taking Center Stage

A lineup of 12 stories inspired by gendered lived experiences across India

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dasra

This lineup is part of Dasra's cross-sectional efforts to strengthen seeing with a
gender lens. While it is not representative of the entire spectrum of gendered
identities or India-wide realities, it aims to scratch the surface of what it is like
to be marginalized on account of gender throughout the lifespan.

These stories were co-created and brought to the fore by Dasra's partner non-
profits organizations and programs from extended networks. We thank them
for sharing their experiences, insights and perspectives.

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Foreword

66,94,35,590 people or **8%** of the world's total non-male population resides in India.

Is this statement offsetting? However, the process of recording today, _his_tory-in-making, prioritizes trends from a world dominated by patriarchal norms. Evidence about 'other' gendered identities is often created in context to 'men of privilege' at center stage.

The rare counting-in of women and other marginalized identities is often an exception, not the rule. So, while we are quick to celebrate milestones like women going to space, or a trans person winning the local elections, we must also reflect on how power dynamics among genders are skewed on a daily basis, and through generations. We must pause to assess the consequences these have on the most marginalized of us.

In this moment of reckoning, _Taking Center Stage_ brings a spectrum of gender identities under the spotlight. Why? Because while talking about gender, lived experiences are critical evidence. Oral cultures, personal narratives, or anecdotes help us see the people as embodied, in flesh and blood, navigating diverse contexts. Devoid of these nuances, we may not always understand the layers. The lives of people from marginalized gender identities intersect with the social, economic and geographic realities, affecting their experiences in personal, domestic and public spheres. In India, the identities of caste, class, ethnicity, region, religion, disability, etc. create a complex grid of challenges. Therefore, evidence driven by and centered on the data bearer can provide deep insights for creating meaningful impact.

This lineup of gender identities provides a glimpse into the lives of 12 individuals from marginalized gender identities across India, and offers prompts for stakeholder action. Since efforts focusing on gender equality continue being under-resourced, the nonprofit and philanthropy sector can play a significant role in paying heed to such evidence, championing it, and facilitating problem-solving that transforms gross inequalities. It is time to act!

It's time we deepened our focus on Sustainable Development Goal 5 i.e., Gender Equality, as it concerns half the world's population.

132 years to achieve Gender Parity

Up to year 2020, we were 100 years away from gender parity

With generational losses in 2020-21, the world is trailing further

India ranks **135** out of **146** countries on gender parity

On health and survival: India is at the very bottom

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Prachi (15) & Suman (17)

Chennai, Tamil Nadu

The world that sisters Prachi and Suman inherited was rigged against them. Born to sanitation workers, a majority of whom are from lower caste groups in India's discriminatory caste hierarchy, they grew up witnessing their community bear the brunt of informal sanitation work.

What were their challenges?

They saw their mother and aunts return from long days of cleaning highways, neighborhoods, toilets, septic tanks and gutters — with cracked feet, rashes, infections, and bruises from walking in ill-fitted protective gear and pushing loaded tricycles all day, every season. Back home, they'd be dominated by the men of the house.

Their fatigue turned into chronic illnesses, which many succumbed to before reaching their 50th birthday, all because they couldn't risk taking a day off and losing their job. As poor Dalit women (belonging to lowest caste group), they couldn't switch jobs on a whim because the caste hierarchy limits access to opportunities, affecting education, skill levels, and the social capital required for accessing better incomes, livelihoods, and a quality of life.

Can we address the question of gender without addressing caste?

Statistics reflect this exact picture:

65% of sanitation workers in the Chennai city corporation are women between the age group of 30 and 58 each of whom suffer from bruises and infections every month[1].

A report on manual scavenging across four states in India also reveals that around **92%** of people cleaning dry latrines are women, out of which **85%** experienced caste-based discrimination and violence.

Furthermore, out of the **1.2 million** prevailing manual scavengers, about **95%** to **98%** of them are women.[2]

This is despite manual scavenging being banned due to the associated historical caste-based injustice.

"THE TRAUMA OF DALIT WOMEN IS THAT THEY ARE 'THE OPPRESSED AMONG THE OPPRESSED,' THRICE ALIENATED ON THE BASIS OF CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER."

- Urmila Pawar (The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir, 2008)

The sisters saw nowhere their community's women could rest, use the toilet, or even change their sanitary napkins while on their period. Outside the community - they never felt safe, routinely experiencing verbal abuse, casteist slurs, and assault from "upper caste" communities.

What solutions could help transform the lived experiences of women sanitation workers?

Since these jobs expose workers to hazardous situations – it is necessary to adopt an inclusive and technical approach for worker safety and wellbeing. By providing:

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Facilitating skill-building

By doing this, the livelihoods available to women sanitation workers will be dignified and better paid.

Philanthropists must use their influence to enable inclusive sanitation so women, transgender persons, and people with disabilities, have access to safe sanitation services, and representation as decision-makers across the value chain.

Priya (16)

Muzaffarpur, Bihar

Priya was born in Muzaffarpur, a rural district in Bihar, where she lived with her parents and older brother. Despite financial difficulties, the parents made sure the children went to school and had a happy childhood. Unfortunately, the parents succumbed to COVID-19 in 2021, and their nearest relatives from Patna adopted the children.

How did orphanhood impact Priya?

While Priya's brother was allowed to continue his schooling, Priya was made to take on housework in the neighborhood to contribute to the family's income. Due to prevailing gender norms, Priya's education was seen as a financial liability, while her brother's was seen as an investment. Talks of marrying her off as soon as she reaches the legal age (18) have already begun.

"PRIYA IS ONE OF ESTIMATED 1.9 MILLION COVID-ORPHANS[9] IN INDIA, AND HER GRIEF IS COMPOUNDED DUE TO HER GENDER."

Government funds allocated specifically for COVID-orphans haven't benefited her, as the government's fixed deposit can only be accessed by her at the age of 24. If not for an adoptive family, Priya will have to enter the state's child protection system – which already sees a far higher percentage of abandoned girls than boys.
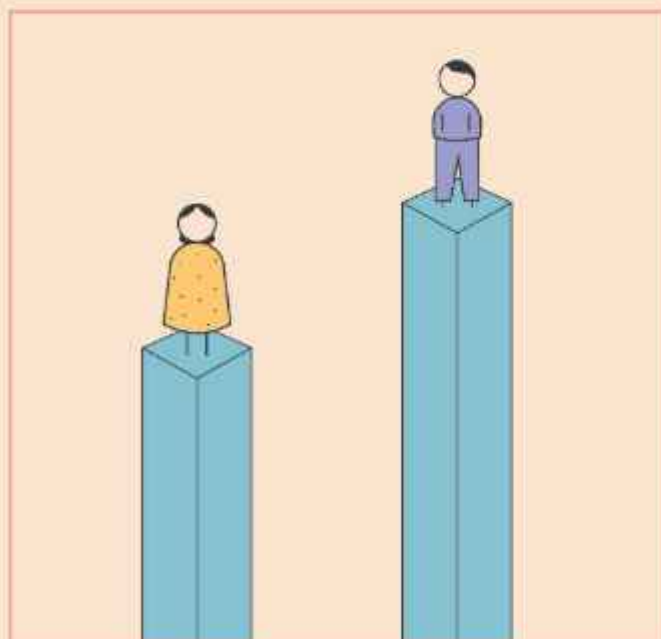
"ABANDONMENT RATES FOR THE GIRL CHILD IN INDIA ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH, AND THE CARE SUPPORT PROVIDED TO GIRLS ALSO CONTINUES TO BE INEQUITABLE AND INADEQUATE."

Ensuring that alternative care support to children, especially girls who separated from their birth families, is regularly monitored with continuous efforts to strengthen family structures remains crucial.

What solutions could help transform the experience of COVID-orphans?

While solving problems for vulnerable children – existing gender dynamics should be considered. Philanthropy can sponsor NGOs that run community-based programs to increase awareness about gender stereotypes and empower families and communities to create equitable environments for all their children, gender no barrier. Additionally, philanthropic support can also be directed towards NGOs that run leadership, counselling, and mentorship programs for vulnerable children, especially girls, to increase their agency within the ecosystems they interact with regularly such as schools, family settings etc.

Asha (17)

Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Asha has an intellectual disability. Five years ago, her family migrated from Uttar Pradesh to Ahmedabad. Her father is employed at a factory and mother undertakes small tailoring assignments, working from home. During peak times, Asha tries to support her mother as best as she can, and together, the family of 3 is able to earn roughly INR 12,000 per month (USD150).

Asha has never attended school because her mother constantly worries about her safety. She keeps her engaged in religious and spiritual practices as she cannot foresee a clear future for Asha.

"THE HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH CONDUCTED A STUDY ON THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES, WHEREBY THEY FOUND OUT THAT AT LEAST ONE OR MORE STAFF MEMBERS SAID THAT IT WAS A WASTE OF TIME TO SPEAK TO WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES BECAUSE THEY CANNOT COMMUNICATE, THEIR TESTIMONIES CANNOT BE BELIEVED, OR SIMPLY BECAUSE "THEY ARE MAD AND WILL SAY ANYTHING."

- Violation of Human Rights of Women suffering from Intellectual Disabilities- A Criminal Justice Issue in India[14]

What are the challenges Asha faces?

Most of the decisions in Asha's life are taken by her mother who believes that she is incapable. Asha feels uncomfortable in the presence of other children as she fears being bullied. She has not received any formal education or even the chance to be a part of the education system. Due to lack of awareness, there are limited job opportunities and no training facilities or skilling centers for young adults like Asha. She and her family struggle to access basic health facilities and social security.

Asha aspires to study and become a teacher. She believes this would only come true in a dreamworld, where there are no stigmas or superstitions attached with disability and everyone has equal opportunities.

"IN A GOVERNMENT HOME IN DELHI, A STAFF MEMBER EXPLAINED THAT WOMEN WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL OR INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES ARE BARRED FROM COOKING OR EVEN ENTERING THE KITCHEN, BECAUSE THE OTHER GIRLS REFUSE TO EAT FOOD MADE BY THEM. THEY SAY WE WON'T EAT FOOD MADE BY THE HANDS OF A 'MENTAL' PERSON, ALSO BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT CLEAN."

- Human Rights Watch Report[15]

How can philanthropy support adolescent girls with disabilities?

Philanthropy must support underfunded focus areas like disability rights and action by identifying organizations that are moving the needle on ground. People with disabilities should have equitable access to education and vocational training. For this, it is important to support advocacy and awareness building at the family and community level. Working with the families and caregivers of children, particularly adolescent girls with disabilities, can change the narrative in a way that helps transform lives.
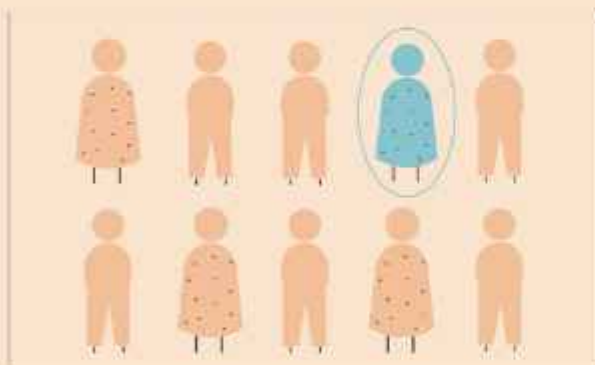
Shaanti (19)

Jehanabad, Bihar

Shaanti comes from a family of landless farmers belonging to the Musahar community, and is the eldest among four brothers and three sisters. Today, Shaanti works at a not-for-profit in Himachal Pradesh, miles away from where she was born. If it not been for an NGO intervention and her grandmother's support, she would have found it difficult to overcome some challenges girls from her community face.

What did these challenges look like?

Children from the Musahar community, considered as Scheduled Castes, are often neglected by teachers at the local schools, and are even provided mid-day meals after "upper caste" children have eaten. Such discriminatory practices were a routine part of Shaanti's childhood. Indi is home to 2.3 million people from this community, and many of them continue facing discrimination due to their historical occupation of catching rats, which is linked to a mythical curse. The total literacy rate of the community 3 percent and falls below 1 percent among women.[10]

> "WITHIN THE COMMUNITY TOO, SHAANTI FACED SOCIAL PRESSURES WHICH WERE TO DO WITH HER GENDER: WHILE HER MALE PEERS DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL TO FIND WORK OUTSIDE OF THE VILLAGE, THE GIRLS WOULD BE EXPECTED TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL AND GET MARRIED."

Where Shaanti comes from in Bihar, **40%** of the girls are married before reaching the legal age of 18

Dalit households have a fertility rate higher than the states already high rate of **3%** per household

Women's and girls' health is often neglected, early marriage and pregnancies contribute to high levels of maternal deaths, particularly in women under the age of **24**

How can philanthropy help transform the lives of adolescent girls?

It is important to accelerate adolescent-first approaches by funders, civil society, and government, for engaging the critical mass of 15 million adolescents in India, especially girls, to thrive and achieve their full potential. This will elevate their voices and leadership, build knowledge and networks, mobilize greater resources, and enable policy improvements. Investing in ensuring adolescents are healthy, safe, educated, and empowered fuels multi-generational impact and can propel poverty alleviation and growth for the nation.

Miloni (23)

Kohima, Nagaland

Miloni hails from a village in Nagaland, though due to their parents' transferrable jobs they grew up in different cities across the state. The common link through all those places was how difficult it was to be their true self. Miloni's community placed a strong emphasis on gender roles as prescribed by their faith and societal norms. Boys who were overtly feminine were teased and ostracized, and girls like Miloni, who identified as gender non-binary, were teased for not being feminine. For this reason, Miloni feared coming out.

What were Miloni's challenges?

While they were in class 11, Miloni fell in love with one of their classmates. They began their first romantic relationship, but Miloni's roommates reported it to the school principal, who then escalated it to the families. While Miloni's mother never brought it up, their girlfriend's parents pulled her out of the hostel.

What followed changed Miloni's mind about community and religion forever. Their friends would come harass and make them swear that they were not a homosexual, and everywhere around them, there was open condemnation of gay marriage.

Miloni is able to recount their experiences now, but it has been a tough journey.

"I lost my mother a few years ago. I could never properly come out to her, but I wonder if she always knew."

Miloni had to develop a thick skin, but has also chosen to be their authentic self. While they do not feel it is safe to come out to their community yet — they hope to make people understand them better through their stories.

How can philanthropy support the queer community?

Navigating the heteronormative and patriarchal structures that are engulfed in skewed social and cultural structures can have a deep impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of youth from the queer community. Therefore, philanthropy can support organizations that provide counselling and support to youth, especially when their families and communities don't understand them. Philanthropic intervention should also focus on changing the narrative by creating resources that will develop inform perspectives about the lived experiences of the queer community.

"AT THE AIRPORT, FOR EXAMPLE, EVEN IF THEY STAND IN THE SECURITY LINE MEANT FOR FEMALES OR USE THE FEMALE RESTROOM, THEY'RE ASKED IF THEY ARE MALE OR FEMALE. "ONCE, OUT OF EXASPERATION, I WALKED INTO A MALE RESTROOM BUT COULD NOT GO THROUGH WITH IT."

Lakhi (26)

Kutch, Gujarat

Lakhi lives in Nakhatrana, a village along India's border with Pakistan, with eight family members. All of them work as laborers on nearby fields — from herself to her 85-year-old grandmother.

Lakhi spent her childhood attending the village school and raising her younger siblings. Gradually, housework and care started to take precedence, and she was unable to devote time to schoolwork. Due to this, she failed her high school exams, and thereafter joined her father as a farm hand for an income of INR 200 (USD 2.5) a day. Unlike her wealthier friends, Lakhi could never learn the community's traditional embroidery, a craft that has become a sustainable source of income for many in her village.

What are Lakhi's challenges?

"LAKHI'S BEEN A KEEN OBSERVER OF HER SURROUNDINGS — DROUGHTS, CYCLONES, LOSS OF GRASSLANDS, EARTHQUAKES, MILITARY PRESENCE, NOMADIC PASTORALISTS AND THEIR HERDS HAVE ALL BEEN PART OF HER LIFE. YET, CHANGING WEATHER PATTERNS HAVE DISTURBED HARVESTS YEAR ON YEAR, AND SINCE 75% OF AGRICULTURE IN NAKHATRANA IS RAIN-FED, LAKHI WONDERS WHETHER THEIR LIVES ARE SUSTAINABLE HERE.[16]"

Furthermore, the village Lakhi lives in is extremely remote, and only two buses run to and from here daily — one early morning and the other in the evening. Lakhi remembers a time her village received water just once every three days, which her mother or grandmother would collect and store. Although her community has inhabited this part of Kutch for centuries, land measurement and allocation activities have not yet taken place. On paper, her family is landless. Even if this exercise happens, by local customs, daughters-in-law inherit land, and not the daughters who are typically married away in other villages.

Lakhi feels that the only way she can support herself now is by moving to Bhuj or Ahmedabad, where she can find more gainful employment.

How can philanthropy support young women like Lakhi?

Young women like Lakhi feel curbed because of the gender roles in society, adversely affecting their wellbeing and opportunities. Philanthropy can support nonprofit interventions that question the status quo and set young women up for success. Building skills of young women for accessing livelihood options, not traditionally undertaken by women, can improve their incomes and also change the norms. Training women in skills like driving, masonry, information technology and other fields can take us further in the journey for gender equity.
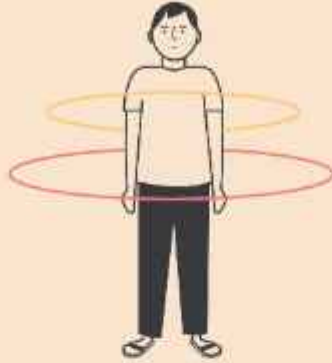
Shivani (29)

Cuttack, Odisha

Every morning, all through childhood, Shivani woke up in discomfort — physical, emotional and social, and this was entirely linked to the concept of gender. Assigned the sex "male" at birth and named Raj by her parents, she could never identify with male gender norms, roles, or relationships. This meant a lifetime of fighting.

How does a transgender child grow up in India?

Shivani fought two battles all through her childhood: one between her internal and external selves, the other with those around her who would torture her for the gender dysphoria.

Being born into a poor family and away from trans communities/role models added to her challenges. Shivani would wear a boy's uniform to school and then college, and try hard to engage with people without revealing herself, but it wasn't long before she would get "caught". What would follow next was scrutiny, abrupt dismissals, and rejections from school, social circles, and later on jobs.

How deeply does a trans identity impact lives?

Employment
For most poor trans people in India without independent income, livelihood options are typically limited to sex work, a job as a bar dancer, or begging.

Mental Health
Shivani's mental health suffered greatly, as it does for a majority of individuals who experience gender dysphoria.

"OF A SAMPLE GROUP OF INDIAN TRANS PEOPLE, 98.6% REPORTED TO BEING VERBALLY ABUSED, 79.2% WERE PHYSICALLY ABUSED, 33.3% SEXUALLY ABUSED, AND 18.1% FACED CHILDHOOD ABUSE AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIFETIME".

- Naskar P. et al.[3]

Social security
Most population data that the government gathers is gender disaggregated, i.e., it is divided by sex (male and female), but not by gender which includes a broader spectrum of identities.

"STUDIES SHOW THAT THE SUICIDE RATE AMONG THE INDIAN TRANS POPULATION IS 32-50%, AND THAT 50% OF THIS POPULATION HAD ATTEMPTED SUICIDE AT LEAST ONE TIME BEFORE THEIR 20TH BIRTHDAY."

- Manual on Mental Healthcare of Transgendered Persons in India 2021[4]

"THE FIRST CERTIFICATE WE GET AS A HUMAN BEING IS THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE WHICH OUR PARENTS PROVIDE THE DATA FOR. EVEN THAT DOES NOT HAVE A COLUMN TO RECORD FOR INTERSEX CHILDREN. THE LACK OF IDENTITY CARDS IN THEIR PREFERRED NAMES AND RECORDING THEIR PREFERRED GENDER IDENTITIES MEANS THAT MANY INDIANS WHO IDENTIFY AS TRANSGENDER ARE EXCLUDED FROM VARIOUS SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS."

- Humsafar Trust, an organisation for the LGBTQIA+ community[5]

To put things into perspective:
when India went into lockdown due to the pandemic, approximately

1% of the estimated **4.8 million**

transgender population received ration supplies promised to them by the government, largely because they are not documented.[6]

What solutions could help transform the lived experiences of trans people?

It is important to strengthen solutions that change the narrative around gender norms and build awareness regarding trans identities. The stigma associated with trans identities make them vulnerable to harassment, discrimination, and violence, in homes, schools, workplaces and public spaces. Philanthropy can provide capital to organizations working on advocacy, trans rights, and sensitization of law enforcement authorities. Supporting organizations that are improving their access to education and livelihoods is also critical for improving their lived experiences.

Gooli (33)

Dahod, Gujarat

Gooli was born into an Adivasi community, in a district covered in forests and hills. She grew up living a hardy life of rigorous labor for subsistence; she would be up from the crack of dawn, working on the field in exchange for harvest, grains, and milk, and return home to clean the house and feed the family — eating at the very end what little was left with her mother.

What is Gooli's story?

Gooli was married at the young age of 13. Eventually, Gooli and her husband migrated to the nearby city of Ahmedabad in search of work. Gooli lost her husband due to an accident few years ago, and currently lives with their children in a hut at a construction site, where she works as a cleaner.

She often skips meals and rest, and suffers from a range of health issues, but doesn't have the time to seek medical attention. While her lifestyle is typical of that seen at labor camps, by medical standards, she is severely malnourished. At home in the camp, she doesn't have access to liquified petroleum gas (LPG) and uses solid fuels like wood, kerosene and waste for cooking, which has worsened her health.

"AN LPG CYLINDER COSTS MORE THAN INR 1,000 AND LASTS FOR ONLY ABOUT A MONTH, WHILE FIREWOOD TO LAST THE MONTH CAN BE PROCURED FOR INR 100–400. THIS IS WHY BIOMASS BURNING IS A MAJOR CONCERN AND SOURCE OF HOUSEHOLD AIR POLLUTION FOR WOMEN."

- *Sudharak Olwe, Warrior Moms*[1]

Given the lack of creches for her children on site and how exploitative her work tends to get, Gooli longs to be back in her village. But village life is challenging too — her husband's death has been attributed to her bringing "bad luck" and she's been labelled a "witch". Whenever she visits, vigilantes threaten to kill her, cut access to resources, and confine her.

"They label a woman a witch to snatch away her rights and also to break any social relations and support she has..."

How can philanthropy support women who are multidimensionally poor?

Gooli wants to educate her kids well so that the family can break out of poverty. She wishes that one day she can finally move back to her small farmland in her village, find a job there and live without the pressure of moving in search of work. Philanthropy must support interventions addressing concerns of migrant women workers across source and destination, by responding to needs like childcare and also strategically focusing on socio-economic empowerment.

Meghna (40)

Pune, Maharashtra

Meghna was born into a family classified as 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC), an umbrella term used by the Government of India for several communities considered socially and educationally backward. She went to school, studied diligently, and cultivated hobbies — but with an alcoholic father as the head of the household, the family didn't have a stable income, and eventually, she had to drop out of school at the age of 14, and start earning.

The stop in schooling meant that she could only access precarious and menial jobs that remain her means of livelihood even today — thirty years later. As a child, she worked to support herself and her parents. Today she works to support her children and an alcoholic husband. The intergenerational cycle of poverty continues for her.

What are the ties between gender, class, and aspirations?

About 82% of women's employment in India is informal, at workplaces that are not always recognized in the formal economy and extend beyond employers' premises, ranging from waste collectors to stay-at-home garment embroiderers.' Meghna's work is in between, informal despite it being within the boundaries of a well-established cafeteria, where she works as a cleaner.

She is not on payroll, and remains uncounted. At the cafeteria, some employees have the necessary paperwork, are covered by social security benefits, and get paid leave. Meghna receives her wages in cash, about INR 6000 (USD75) per month, works seven days, and her leave is unpaid. To make ends meet, she takes up an odd job, as and when time permits.

Despite making up a majority of the labor force, women like Meghna suffer gender biases at the workplace and their incomes are always low. Despite her entrepreneurial spirit, Meghna always has to prioritize short-term basic needs for her family. Due to limited exposure, she operates within informal systems of credit, which pushes up her debt burdens. Furthermore, a lot of the work she does is unpaid – this includes domestic and childcare work for her own household.

According to NSSO data:

In India,

women spend 84% of their working hours on unpaid activities,

while men spend 80% of their working hours on paid work.

"My day begins at 5 AM, I prepare lunchboxes for the children and my husband, then work from 8 AM to 8 PM at the cafeteria and return home to resume housework again. However, I can't earn more than Rs 125 a day no matter how hard I work."

Lockdown Crisis

In 2020, she and her husband tried opening a small restaurant but had to shut it with the onset of COVID-19 and and subsequent lockdowns. At present, she has no capital or savings to fall back on. In the latest Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, India has begun to see positive shifts in its performance on the indicators related to economic participation and opportunity.[8] It is important to build on this momentum and focus on India's informal workforce.

What solutions could help transform the lived experiences of the informally employed women workers?

It is important to adopt a gender lens while discussing economic growth, given the exclusionary practices towards women in the workforce. Solutions for informal women workers have to factor in their lived experiences and intersectional identities. The industry and non-profit sectors can act collaboratively to address backlash against necessary policies such as maternity benefits, addressing gender-specific needs at the workplace. Philanthropy can extend flexible grants to initiatives that advocate for gender equality in pay, treatment, and opportunities.

Tasneem (40)

Bandipora, Kashmir

Tasneem lives with her children and husband in the high conflict district of Bandipora, where lockdowns and terrorist violence regularly bring life to a standstill. Due to an accident in 2007, Tasneem lost both of her lower limbs. Shortly after, her husband who used to work as a street vendor suffered a stroke and has been bed ridden since.

What are Tasneem's key challenges right now?

Today, Tasneem is the sole earning member of her family — running a general store set up by an NGO. All her earnings are spent towards covering medical expenses for her husband, while her son has dropped out of school to be a primary caregiver to his father.

While Tasneem experiences a loss of agency in navigating everyday life, she worries for her children. Living in a high conflict zone makes them vulnerable to the repercussions of militarization.

With the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, additional troops were deployed, schools and colleges shut, tourists ordered to leave, and phone and internet connections suspended to check dissent;[12] with COVID-19 and related anxieties entering this mix soon after, Tasneem's mental health suffered greatly.

50%
of women
compared to 37%
of men) suffered
from probable
depression

22%
of women
(compared to 18%
of men) suffer from
post-traumatic
stress disorder
(PTSD)

36%
of women
(compared to
21% of men) had a
probable anxiety
disorder

This difference between the sexes is significant for all three disorders."

- Kashmir Mental Health Survey 2015[13]

"Every day, I wake up with anxiety like something bad is going to happen. Even at home, I don't feel safe."

How can philanthropy support women with disabilities in conflict areas?

In conflict areas, the need for mental health support remains high. Tasneem's wishes to see her son get the best education. She hopes that one day she will be able to provide sufficiently for her family for them to lead fulfilling lives. By supporting local and community-based organizations in conflict areas, philanthropy can support rehabilitation and livelihood generation for women with disabilities. Such interventions also positively impact children and other family members in the fold of care.

Shrimati (60)

Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh

Shrimati is a 60-year-old and her community is classified under the category of Other Traditional Forest Dweller (OTFD). She runs a tea stall at her village in Uttar Pradesh. She is presently leading a people's movement seeking formal identity documents and access to welfare schemes for her community.

What is her story?

Shrimati's ancestors were employed by the British administration to grow trees and harvest wood for the development of the Indian railways, in the Katarniaghat forest region — where they eventually settled.

Today, while the tribal communities residing in the forest have received official recognition and forest rights, the non-tribal families comprising minority groups and Dalits, like Shrimati, continue to struggle for official recognition as Non-Traditional Forest Dwellers.

Without formal identity documents and an address, her children have had limited opportunities for education and employment. Shrimati herself, a 60-year-old woman, has no formal access to medical facilities, a concrete home, toilets, or social security benefits

Due to the lack of formal identity documents — women like Shrimati continue to struggle with low wage jobs as migrant workers at far away construction sites

She has been publicly recognized for her inspiring movement for rights and entitlements that galvanized over 3000 women. But her village is yet to be recognized as a forest village and due entitlements are still pending for the community

During the pandemic, distribution of dry ration and other resources were done based on identity proofs and bank accounts, which families like Shrimati's lacked. However, through the efforts of a local organization, they were able to meet immediate needs.

How can philanthropy support women with disabilities in conflict areas?

Philanthropy can sponsor organizations that use a rights-based approach to organize and build awareness in affected communities regarding their entitlements. Supporting organizations' efforts to secure identity proofs that unlock social security and welfare schemes by the Government can create catalytic impact. Through inclusion, women like Shrimati and her family can access better livelihoods, in the present and for the next generation. As a senior citizen living in difficult circumstances, this is especially critical.

Sita (65)

Belgaum, Karnataka

During the first seven years of Sita's life, her village in Belgaum had been gripped with consecutive droughts, illnesses, and low harvest. Sita's family — bonded laborers — were convinced that devoting Sita to a local goddess would bring a change in fortune. This practice was not uncommon in Dalit communities of the region, and had been happening for centuries.

At the age of 7, Sita was taken to the temple and devoted as a Devadasi, which meant that she was now a "servant of God". Nothing changed in their financial situation. However, the family fell deeper into poverty, becoming entirely dependent upon the goodwill of their upper caste landowners.

How did this affect Sita and what challenges does she face today?

The Devadasi system had become synonymous with prostitution and the exploitation of women from lower caste communities. This was compounded by local beliefs such as believing that intercourse with a Devadasi was a remedy for diseases.[17]

This is how thousands of young girls from Sita's generation faced exploitation, harm and abuse, often introduced by their own family members. What had typically followed was a cycle of poverty, intensive labor, social exclusion, and sex trafficking.

Today, many years later, at the age of 60, Sita has been one of the women who helped put an end to this system in Belgaum during the past two decades. While she now has the support of other ex-Devadasi women and advocacy organizations, she still faces several challenges:

"THE DEVADASI SYSTEM PERSISTS DUE TO TRADITION (ALBEIT ILLEGALLY) IN OTHER DISTRICTS OF KARNATAKA AND MAHARASHTRA. IN THE PAST 18 YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN NO FORMAL SURVEY TO RECORD HOW MANY DEVADASI WOMEN EXIST IN THESE AREAS. BUT NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS ESTIMATE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE IS OVER 80,000. MANY DEVADASI WOMEN CONTINUE TO CONTRACT STDS (AND SEVERAL HAVE EVEN SUCCUMBED TO THEM).[18] "

The opportunities for their children remain poor due to lack of resources. Children of ex-Devadasis require financial aid for higher education and hostel facilities. They have to move away from their respective villages, where they are more vulnerable and at risk. The pension set aside for ex-Devadasis over the age of 45 as of now is **INR 1500** per month (USD 18.84). While this amount is not enough to meet the most basic needs, several ex-Devadasi women are uncounted on pension lists. They remain homeless, and have no unemployment allowances.[19]

How can philanthropy support women who face challenges due to socio-cultural norms?

Philanthropy must support organizations that are led by proximate leaders from marginalized identities, who share the lived experiences of the community. It is important that organizations working on the ground are steeped in the context surrounding the socio-cultural realities to navigate the processes of change effectively. The leadership of women like Sita can help build solidarity and be inspiring for others in the community. Flexible grants to such organizations can help mobilize resources for underfunded interventions like shelters, legal aid, etc.

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Glossary of Terms

Gender: the socially and culturally constructed ideas of what it is to be male or female in a specific context.

Gender Dysphoria: a sense of unease that a person may have due to a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity.

Gender Equality: the state of being equal in status, rights and opportunities, and of being valued equally, regardless of sex or gender identity and/or expression.

Gender Identity and/ or Expression: person's own sense of being male, female, or another identity beyond this binary, and how they choose to manifest this externally.

Gender Norms: collectively held expectations and beliefs about how people should behave and interact in specific social settings and during different stages of their lives based on their sex.

Gender Intersectionality: a perspective that acknowledges the concrete experiences of inequality that result from the interaction of gender with other social markers of difference.

LGBTQI: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex and asexual (and/or allies)

Sex: The biological categorization of a person as male, female, or intersex.

Sexual Orientation: A person's emotional, romantic, physical and/or sexual attraction to others.

Socio-Demographic Identities used in India: these socio-demographic identities cover those who have been historically, socially, economically, and culturally discriminated against. This discrimination is acknowledged by the system and various constitutional safeguards have been created to empower individuals identifying with these identities. Some of these identities are as follows:

- **Adivasi:** the collective name used for indigenous peoples of India, constitutionally known as Scheduled Tribes

- **Caste:** a uniquely Indian and Hindu system of social organization. In the sociological writings, it is often viewed as a "closed system" of social stratification in which groups are divided on the basis of ritual purity, pollution, or social status. While the stratification is sanctioned by the Hindu religious belief, in the context of South Asia and its diaspora, caste systems transcend across to other religions as well.

- **Dalit:** derived from the word "dalan", meaning broken or oppressed, 'Dalit' is a nomenclature chosen and used by the Scheduled Caste community to identify itself

- **Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities:** stands for all those communities which were once notified under the Criminal Tribes Acts, enforced by the British between 1871 and 1947. These Acts were repealed by the Independent Indian Government in 1952, and these communities were "De-Notified". A few of these communities which were listed as de-notified are also nomadic. DNTs are hard to reach, less visible, and therefore frequently left out of welfare schemes/ programs. Terms such as nomads and semi-nomads are applied to social groups who undertook a fairly frequent, usually seasonal physical movement as part of their livelihood strategy in the recent past.

- **Minority Groups:** a group of people whose practices, race, religion, ethnicity, or other characteristics like sexual orientation or disability, and are fewer in numbers than the main groups of those classifications.

- **Other Backward Classes:** socially and educationally backward classes (SEBC), and the Government of India is enjoined to ensure their social and educational development

- **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group:** a classification of 75 tribes for whom the Ministry of Tribal Affairs carries out specific welfare initiatives not extended to all Scheduled Tribes

- **Persons with Disabilities:** people with physical disability, intellectual disability, mental illness, or multiple disabilities caused due to chronic neurological conditions or blood disorder.

- **Scheduled Castes:** Scheduled Castes is the official name given in India to the lowest strata of the caste system who were infamously referred to as 'untouchables.' These castes faced social, educational, and economic isolation and have been among the most disadvantaged communities historically.

- **Scheduled Tribes:** Scheduled Tribes are classified as marginalized communities on the basis of geographical isolation, primitive traits, distinct culture, economically backward, or shy of contact with the community at large.

- **Tribes:** A tribe is a group of people who live and work together in a shared geographical area, having a common culture, dialect, and religion. A tribal society is a group of tribes organized around kinships.

Transgender: Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. "Trans" is sometimes used as shorthand for "transgender."

Women and Girls' Empowerment: The expansion of choice and the strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations so that women and girls have more control over their lives and futures.

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