

## A Critical Insight into the Invisible Intersectionality and Vulnerability of the Wives of Manual Scavengers in India

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**Abstract:** Despite being illegal, manual scavenging is still one of the most caste-based and dehumanizing jobs in India. The lived realities of their wives are remarkably invisible, despite the fact that male scavengers have received the majority of scholarly and policy attention. The voices and experiences of these women—who suffer from the combined oppression of caste, gender, and class—are highlighted in this paper using an integrated framework of Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality. Utilizing a qualitative meta-analysis of post-2018 literature, official data, NGO reports, and grassroots testimonies, the study shows how these women are routinely denied legal protections, policy benefits, and epistemic recognition despite their unpaid caregiving, emotional labor, and indirect involvement in sanitation work. In addition to social stigma and material deprivation, their stories show how their agency has been consistently erased from both feminist movements and state discourse. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, in particular, is criticized in the paper for its shortcomings in addressing the gendered aspects of caste-based labor. It makes the case for a transformative justice model that centers the wives of manual scavengers as legitimate stakeholders and is based on self-representation, epistemic equity, and inclusive rehabilitation policies. The paper calls for a change from tokenistic recognition to meaningful justice that is intersectional and based on Dalit women's everyday realities by redefining their marginalization as essential to comprehending structural violence in India.

**Keywords:** manual scavenging; intersectionality; Dalit feminism; gender; caste; legal invisibility

### 1 Introduction

Manual scavenging is one of the most dehumanizing caste-based jobs in India. It has historically been assigned to Dalit communities like the Valmiki and Madiga. Although the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, formally abolished it, the practice continues in both urban and rural areas. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment reported in 2023 that over 58,000 manual scavengers have been officially identified throughout India. However, independent estimates from NGOs such as Safai Karamchari Andolan suggest that the actual number exceeds 1.6 lakh individuals. The death toll is alarming; government reports indicate 431 sewer and septic tank deaths between 2016 and 2022, highlighting the failure of protective laws.

Research and policy have often centered on male scavengers, leaving their wives unrecognized, even though these women face a heavy burden of caste and gender-based violence. They undergo what Kimberlé Crenshaw referred to in 1989 as “intersectional oppression.” Their identities as Dalit, poor, and female deepen their marginalization. Beyond providing emotional and domestic support, many women also engage in indirect scavenging work. This includes cleaning soiled clothing, managing tools, and coping with the psychological stress of their

husbands' dangerous jobs. Despite their significant contributions, they do not benefit from rehabilitation programs, compensation packages, or community acknowledgment.

This paper highlights the wives of manual scavengers using the lenses of Dalit feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality. It utilizes qualitative meta-analysis of recent academic studies, government data, journalistic accounts, and NGO reports published after 2018.

Scholarly work on manual scavenging in India has mostly looked at how caste systems tie into sanitation jobs. From what I recall, early studies by sociologists and human rights groups point out that this kind of work gets forced on Dalit groups, like Valmiki or Madigas, who are part of Scheduled Castes. People like Bezwada Wilson and groups such as Safai Karamchari Andolan keep showing how the practice sticks around even with laws against it.

A lot of that research dives into manual scavenging as exploitation based on caste. It stresses how ideas of purity and pollution hold up the whole hierarchy, and sanitation labor fits right into that. The states bans do not really change the deep structures that keep this going, or at least that is what the studies suggest.

Then there is the feminist side, which gets into Dalit women's lives under caste and patriarchy. Scholars like Sharmila Rege or Gopal Guru argue that you cannot just look at gender for these women, since caste shapes everything about their place in society. Dalit feminists call out mainstream feminism in India for skipping over caste issues, and they also point to problems in male led Dalit movements that ignore women's oppression.

Some literature zeroes in on women who do the scavenging themselves, especially cleaning dry latrines in rural areas. Those studies talk about the heavy stigma they face, plus dangers on the job and being pushed to the economic edges.

It seems like most of this focuses on women actually doing the manual work. But there is not much on the wives of men who scavenge, and that feels like a real oversight. These wives might not get labeled as scavengers officially. Still, they end up dealing with a lot tied to the job. Like washing dirty clothes or handling tools, and then there is the emotional side from things like sewer deaths in the family. All while running a home marked by that social shame.

The main categories in the literature cover Dalit women overall, or women scavengers specifically, and the link between sanitation and caste. Repetition there does not help much with the wives part. They stay kind of hidden in the analysis. This article tries to fill that in by looking at how these wives face overlapping vulnerabilities, and why they get overlooked in knowledge and policy. It points to bigger blind spots in how we talk about and study these structures. Not everything ties up neatly here, but that gap stands out.

## **2 Intersectionality: Interwoven Structures of Marginalisation**

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, provides an important way to examine how social identities, such as race, gender, and class, interact with one another. These identities do not exist separately; they work together to create specific and overlapping forms of disadvantage. While intersectionality has roots in Black feminist legal critique, its strong framework has made it applicable in various contexts, including India. Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Nivedita Menon (2004) have used this perspective to explore how the Indian caste system interacts with patriarchy and class oppression, shaping the lives of women.

For the wives of Dalit manual scavengers, intersectionality reveals the range of oppressions they face. Their identity as Dalit women places them within a system of caste hierarchies, which has for centuries subjected them to exclusion based on ideas of purity and pollution. Their gender roles make much of their labor—emotional, physical, and reproductive—invisible, even in their communities. Economic hardship, stemming from generational poverty and social stigma, increases their vulnerability, especially in situations where caste-based jobs are passed down in families.

This issue is worsened by lack of institutional support, as welfare policies and legal protections are either poorly enforced or missing altogether. Intersectionality shows us that these women face domination not through separate means, but through overlapping systems of power that reinforce each other.

## **2.1 Dalit Feminism: Centering Caste, Labour, and Gender in Marginal Lives**

Dalit Feminism developed in response to the exclusion of Dalit women's experiences from both mainstream feminist discussions and the broader Dalit movement. Savarna feminists have often focused on gender inequality but have not fully addressed caste as a source of power. Meanwhile, the Dalit movement, led primarily by men, has emphasized caste liberation while largely ignoring how gender affects Dalit oppression. Dalit feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege (1998) and Gopal Guru (1995) challenge both areas, asserting that the experiences of Dalit women cannot be simplified to caste or gender alone. Their work promotes a perspective rooted in the real lives of the most marginalized women—a stance that is aware of caste, grounded in material conditions, and aimed at political change.

In the case of manual scavenging, Dalit feminism serves as a key analytical tool. The wives of male manual scavengers occupy a vulnerable position at the crossing of caste exclusion, gendered servitude, and economic disadvantage. These women do not simply watch their husbands endure degrading work; they actively contribute—though often ignored—to a caste-structured system of waste management. Rege (1998) argues that we must understand the category of “Dalit woman” through her labor, resistance, and the social meanings tied to her body.

## **2.2 Core Dimensions of Oppression**

First, the ongoing caste-based dehumanization embedded in the Brahmanical patriarchal order treats Dalit women's bodies and labor as impure. As Paik (2014) describes, being linked to scavenging reinforces ideas of social pollution, which get passed down and often internalized within communities. This leads to bias not just from dominant castes, but also within local institutions like panchayats and healthcare systems.

Second, their labor is largely unseen and unpaid. While men are the visible faces of manual scavenging, the wives take on crucial responsibilities that support this work: cleaning clothes stained with excrement, organizing tools, managing disposal practices, and caring for households affected by caste-based exclusion. These tasks are essential for caste-accepted sanitation work, yet they remain unrecognized by policymakers and rights advocates.

Third, Dalit women often face sexual exploitation and violence, frequently at the hands of dominant caste men. Research by Human Rights Watch (2014) and Sumeet Mhaskar (2020) shows that such assaults are rarely prosecuted due to failures in law enforcement and judicial systems. Their social status makes them visible as targets but invisible as victims.

Finally, the political silence surrounding the wives of Dalit scavengers is deep-rooted. Their involvement in grassroots activism is usually controlled by NGOs, Savarna-led feminist groups, or political platforms that tokenize their experiences without changing the power dynamics. As Soundararajan (2023) points out, true empowerment means that Dalit women must not only be heard but also have control over how they are represented.

By centering these voices, Dalit feminism rejects claims of universality in women's struggles. Instead, it advocates for a grounded, intersectional, and caste-aware politics that reflects the real lives of women at the bottom of India's social hierarchy.

### **3 The Marginalized of the Marginalized: Wives of Manual Scavengers**

Manual scavenging, the hereditary job of physically removing human waste, remains one of the most degrading forms of work in India. Even though it was legally banned by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, the practice continues in various forms, heavily affecting Dalit communities like the Valmikis, Madigas, and Balmikis. While discussions around reform and justice have started to address the plight of male manual scavengers, the experiences of their wives are mostly overlooked. Their lives demonstrate what could be called "marginalization within marginalization," highlighting the intersection of caste, gender, and class oppression.

These women confront multiple forms of discrimination that shape their daily lives. The caste system assigns them an excluded social status, signified by untouchability, verbal abuse, segregation from community resources, and a lack of basic dignity. Scholars like Anupama Rao (2009) and Paik (2014) explain that this exclusion is deeply rooted in ritual beliefs surrounding purity and pollution, enforced through both explicit and subtle violence.

Their gender further intensifies this oppression. These women often face sexual violence, experience pressure to fulfill reproductive roles, and lack autonomy in personal and community decisions. If their husbands die—often due to unsafe working conditions—they are thrust into early widowhood, facing grief along with social isolation, economic hardship, and increased vulnerability. Human Rights Watch (2014) has recorded numerous instances where these women receive no compensation, rehabilitation, or state-supported access to health and social services.

Beyond these issues, their connection to the stigmatized work of manual scavenging leads to a specific form of occupational stigma. Even if they do not engage in scavenging themselves, many wives contribute by washing contaminated clothes, managing tools, disposing of waste, or cleaning homes abandoned by others. These contributions, crucial to the system's function, often go unrecognized in government records and social policies. Rege (1998) emphasizes that the labor of Dalit women is not only invisible but also systematically erased, reflecting how caste patriarchy obscures the mechanisms of oppression.

Moreover, State's neglect is a significant factor in maintaining their marginal status. Despite laws enacted in 2013 for rehabilitation, education, and alternative job opportunities, the implementation has been poor. Many women report not being identified in rehabilitation surveys or receiving compensation after their husbands' deaths. The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis has noted these failures, highlighting that welfare programs often do not reach widows and female dependents. This lack of administrative attention leads to a cycle that keeps women in poverty, tied to stigmatized labor, living in unsafe conditions, and facing barriers to justice and opportunities for improvement.

In academic discussions, scholars like Sumeet Mhaskar (2020) and Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2023) have called for a new approach to manual scavenging that goes beyond just sanitation. They advocate for focusing on caste, gender, and labor rights, centering the voices of those most affected. These viewpoints stress that the wives of manual scavengers are not just victims but strong survivors who manage homes, raise children under pressure, and maintain emotional and social bonds in their fractured communities.

To disregard their experiences is to misunderstand the structure of caste-based labor. Their suffering is not incidental—it is central to understanding caste inequality in India. By highlighting their stories, this paper aims to fill a gap in academic literature and influence policy, advocacy, and justice efforts to create inclusive rehabilitation models that recognize these women as vital stakeholders, not just extensions of male workers.

### **3.1 Epistemic Justice and Self-Representation**

The demand for epistemic justice is a central tenet of Dalit feminist theory. This implies that underrepresented people and groups ought to influence the creation of knowledge in addition to sharing their own experiences. Epistemic justice addresses how people are harmed in their capacities as knowers, as philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) explains. This injustice, which stems from Dalit women's continuous exclusion from popular discourse, scholarly debates, and policy decisions, is real for them, particularly for the wives of manual scavengers.

In addition to being overlapping forms of oppression, caste and gender also significantly erase knowledge, according to Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege (1998). In both mainstream feminist circles and the Dalit movement, Dalit women have frequently been silenced or used as tokens. Others often narrate their experiences marked by caste violence, gender exploitation, and social humiliation, stripping these women of their autonomy and complexity. Rege advocates for a "Dalit feminist standpoint" that is based on lived experience and the political need for self-representation.

In response to this erasure, activist movements have emerged. Groups like the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) and Dalit Women Fight have created spaces for Dalit women to share their stories, especially those related to manual scavenging, sexual violence, and inaction from the police. Through public hearings, digital storytelling, and community organization, these groups emphasize that Dalit women's voices should be central—not just in resistance but in creating knowledge. AIDMAM has documented how the wives of manual scavengers often speak about the trauma of seeing their husbands die in septic tanks or watching their children leave school due to caste harassment. These narratives are not just tales of suffering; they are powerful statements that challenge the social structures allowing this violence to exist.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan, a Dalit-American activist and founder of Equality Labs, is one of the most influential voices in this area. Her work highlights that narratives of Dalit women should be seen not just as tragic accounts but as records of resistance. She makes the case that Dalit women's knowledge systems, which are based on survival, communal care, and spiritual strength, provide an alternative way of knowing that contradicts the prevailing Brahmanical framework in her book *The Trauma of Caste* (2023), which blends personal experience, political theory, and healing techniques. Soundararajan's emphasis on naming caste trauma is part of a larger effort to reclaim what has been systematically denied by colonial, patriarchal, and casteist systems: the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual autonomy of Dalit women.

Thus, the demand for epistemic justice is more than just a plea for inclusion; it is a demand to redistribute intellectual power. For the wives of manual scavengers, reclaiming their right to tell their stories, theorize, and resist is both a healing act and a revolutionary one. By centering their voices, Dalit feminism asserts that these women are not objects of pity, but active agents of knowledge and change.

### **3.2 Patriarchal Notions and the Indirect Labour of the Wives of Manual Scavengers**

The wives of manual scavengers deal with a lot that doesn't get talked about much, especially how their everyday chores keep this whole caste system going in sanitation work. I mean, while people study the women who actually go into the sewers, the wives at home are doing stuff that is just as tied to it, but invisible. Like washing clothes full of sewage or cleaning the tools their husbands use, all while living with that heavy stigma from society. It feels like this labor isn't even counted in the bigger picture of waste management, but without it, the system probably wouldn't hold up.

In these households, the way labor gets divided is so gendered, with women stuck handling the domestic side that connects right to the dirty work outside. Studies show how caste and gender team up to push Dalit women into these roles dealing with impurity, you know, like from that Centre for Equity Studies report back in 2018. Men might be the ones seen entering tanks or whatever, but the process spills over into the home through what the wives do. Washing contaminated stuff from human waste, it's basically extending the caste division inside the family.

This setup makes their work disappear even more because it's seen as just normal women duties, not real labor linked to hazards. I think that is part of why sanitation jobs stay in families, passed down through marriage and all that household stuff, like Patil (2024) wrote about. It's not just one person's job, it's the whole family cycle, and women keep it running unpaid. Sometimes it seems hereditary in a way that traps everyone. Then there is the social side, how these wives and families get pushed out completely. Whole communities face boycott, no access to resources or even basic interactions, as Human Rights Watch noted in 2014. The stigma of impurity spreads to everyone around the workers, not just them.

For the women especially, this hits hard with discrimination everywhere, from public spaces to job chances, and more risk of violence. Reports like from UNFPA in 2021 say families suffer, but women take the worst of the exclusion and those gender vulnerabilities. Scholars call it double discrimination for Dalit women, mixing caste and patriarchy, from that Oxford Human Rights Hub piece in 2023. They end up invisible yet exploited in ways that stack up. Recognizing all this hidden work by the wives could help see the real scope of caste sanitation labor and how gender fits into India's exclusion systems.

Social implications of manual scavenging also affect individuals who are not directly involved in sanitation work. In this regard, social implications of manual scavenging affect the wives of manual scavengers. Stigma associated with manual scavenging can also be explained by the caste ideology of purity and impurity. Caste ideology of purity and impurity often considers Dalits to be impure. Therefore, wives of manual scavengers are often subject to social ostracism, discrimination, and exclusion, even though they are not directly involved in manual scavenging. Stigma associated with manual scavenging, therefore, can also be explained by the broader social implications of patriarchy and caste, as these social implications of patriarchy and caste link women's identity with their husbands' occupation.

It has also been argued by social scientists who study caste and labor relations that stigma associated with sanitation work does not affect individuals alone. Rather, stigma associated with sanitation work also extends to entire households. According to Human Rights Watch (2014), entire households of sanitation workers are subject to systemic discrimination, including denial of access to public spaces, denial of access to social gatherings, and denial of access to villages. These social boycotts of sanitation worker households are also based on caste, as these households are considered to be permanently impure. Therefore, social implications of manual scavenging affect women from these households more, as women are often responsible for managing social relations in public spaces such as water resources, markets, and schools.

Dalit feminist scholars have emphasized the fact that the stigma of untouchability is further accentuated by patriarchal values that influence the social identity of women. According to Sharmila Rege (1998), the Dalit women's experience of oppression is mediated by the dual axes of caste and gender hierarchy. This makes Dalit women more susceptible to exclusion, as the oppression is mediated in the public as well as private spheres. For the wives of manual scavengers, the experience of oppression is visible in terms of limited social interactions, limited economic opportunities, and humiliation in public spheres. The association with the occupation of manual scavenging makes them untouchable and thus undesirable members of society. This leads to discrimination against these women.

#### **4 Invisible Lives: A Statistical and Structural Review of the Wives of Manual Scavengers in India**

The practice of manual scavenging often gets attention from policymakers and the media, but the focus is usually on the men doing this degrading work. What is missing from official statistics and reports is a clear account of their wives. These women face stigma, structural violence, and economic instability that come with this caste-based labor. They are not just passive observers of a job that the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, has banned—they are often co-victims and co-workers, excluded from data, employment, and justice.

##### **4.1 Statistical Silences and State Recognition**

According to official figures from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE) in 2023, 58,098 people in India were identified as manual scavengers. However, this number likely underestimates the true scale of the practice. Independent groups like Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) believe that over 1.6 lakh individuals are still engaged in this work, often in indirect or unregulated ways.

Significantly, these numbers nearly entirely overlook the female dependents or wives of these workers. There is no official data on how many widows of manual scavengers exist or their access to support and compensation. This lack of statistical recognition is a form of epistemic violence—it ignores the gendered and familial aspects of caste-based labor.

A 2019 study by the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) found that over 80% of women from manual scavenging households are unemployed or underemployed. This is not due to a lack of desire to work, but because of caste stigma, illiteracy, and systemic discrimination. Many of these women find themselves in unpaid and undervalued caregiving roles within their households or communities.

## **4.2 Gendered Stigma and Social Taboos**

Wives of manual scavengers experience social exclusion due to their association—direct or indirect—with caste-degraded labor. Field reports from Human Rights Watch (2014) and grassroots investigations by AIDMAM show that these women often face barriers to communal water sources, temple access, and participation in social events. The idea of "pollution" affects not only the scavengers but also their families, particularly women, who are viewed as guardians of family "purity" in Indian patriarchal culture.

Scholar Shailaja Paik (2014) highlights that the stigma surrounding these women is not only professional but also tied to codes of ritual purity. This stigma persists despite the legal abolition of untouchability. She points out that the sexualities and moralities of Dalit women are more strictly policed in this context. Widows of deceased scavengers, in particular, are vulnerable to exploitation by upper-caste men and community leaders.

## **4.3 Lack of Employment Opportunities and Economic Exclusion**

Despite the state's rehabilitation promises under the 2013 Act, many women—particularly widows—remain left out of skills training programs, pension plans, or educational benefits intended for dependents. A study by Sumeet Mhaskar (2020) shows that rehabilitation efforts rarely cover the spouses or female dependents of deceased scavengers. Those who try to find other jobs often face caste bias in hiring, especially in rural and semi-urban regions.

In a qualitative study in Madhya Pradesh (SKA, 2022), many widows reported that even when they sought work as domestic helpers, their caste identity—easily identifiable through surnames or addresses—led to silent rejections or outright humiliation. Several women described being told to clean toilets even in supposedly "upgraded" jobs, reflecting the ongoing perception that Dalit women are suited for sanitation-related work.

## **5 Review of Legal and Policy Frameworks: Excluding the Wives of Manual Scavengers**

India has long claimed to tackle manual scavenging through a range of legal and administrative measures. From constitutional protections to specific rehabilitation laws, the state has sought to show its commitment to eradicating this caste-based, inhumane practice. However, a closer examination of the legal and policy landscape shows a consistent neglect of the unique struggles and rights of the wives of manual scavengers, who remain sidelined in both legislation and enforcement.

### **5.1 Legal and Policy Evolution**

The legal approach began with Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, which prohibited untouchability. Yet, it wasn't until the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, that any formal legal step was made to ban the practice. This Act received criticism for its lack of enforcement, vague definitions, and failure to address rehabilitation effectively.

A more detailed framework was established through the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR Act). This law explicitly banned manual scavenging, defined entitlements for rehabilitation, and laid out responsibilities for local authorities. It also called for surveys to identify manual scavengers and connect them with skills training and alternative jobs.

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR Act) was enacted for the eradication of the practice of manual scavenging and for providing rehabilitation for those who are involved in this undignified occupation. Although the Act is a landmark legislation for addressing the problem of caste-based sanitation work, the framework of the Act is centered only around those who are directly involved in the practice of manual scavenging and has not sufficiently addressed the position of the wives of manual scavengers. This is because the legislation has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is because the legislation has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, which is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers, and this is again because it has not sufficiently addressed the position of wives of manual scavengers. These provisions include one-time cash benefits, skill development, and alternative employment schemes. However, the legal provisions do not recognize the wives of manual scavengers unless they are also identified as manual scavengers in the government survey. Such a restricted categorization creates a large policy gap. For instance, the wives in the families of sanitation workers also have a critical role in supporting the entire mechanism of sanitation labor. They are often responsible for cleaning the contaminated clothes and managing the equipment used in sanitation work. Moreover, they also face the brunt of the hazardous effects of the work and the stigma attached to their work due to their association with the practice of sanitation labor. However, the Act does not provide specific provisions for the wives of manual scavengers.

Despite these improvements, the law does not address the female family members—especially wives—of manual scavengers unless they are involved in scavenging directly. There are no specific provisions acknowledging their unseen or unpaid work, emotional burdens, or their right to rehabilitation if their husbands pass away.

## **5.2 Administrative Initiatives: A Narrow Focus**

Administrative programs like the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) provide financial support, skills training, and loans for new livelihoods. However, these benefits mainly go to identified manual scavengers, leaving their spouses in a legal and bureaucratic limbo. For instance, widows of deceased scavengers frequently find themselves excluded from compensation plans, especially if they are not registered beneficiaries or if their husbands worked informally or through contracts.

Moreover, surveys conducted under the 2013 Act often have limited scopes and rarely include family members unless they are visibly engaged in cleaning tasks. Investigations by NGOs like Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) show that widows whose husbands die in sewer-related accidents are often denied compensation because of insufficient documentation or the state's refusal to acknowledge the cause of death as work-related.

### **5.3 Neglect in Policy Imagination**

The policy framework does not address the gendered and intergenerational impacts of manual scavenging. There is no attempt to consider the education of daughters, the mental health of widows, or their inclusion in job markets beyond sanitation work. The intersecting identities of these women—as Dalit, female, economically dependent, and linked to a stigmatized occupation—are entirely missing from policy discussions.

Even with ambitious legal texts and targeted schemes, the Indian state has consistently overlooked the needs and rights of the wives of manual scavengers. This invisibility is not merely a failure of execution; it indicates a deeper structural blindness in how law and policy view the issue. To genuinely end caste-based sanitation work, frameworks must shift from individual-centered interventions toward justice that focuses on families and communities, placing the voices, needs, and rights of Dalit women at the forefront.

## **6 Centering the Margins: Intersectionality and Dalit Feminism as a Framework for Justice**

The combined framework of Intersectionality and Dalit Feminism provides an urgent lens to understand the lived experiences of the wives of manual scavengers. This approach is not just academic; it is a commitment to dismantling dominant narratives that have ignored the lives of the most oppressed. By refusing to view caste, gender, and class as separate categories, this framework shows how different forms of marginalization work together to support systemic inequality, especially for Dalit women who are closely connected to manual scavenging through family and community ties.

### **6.1 Deconstructing Dominant Narratives**

Mainstream discussions about caste oppression often emphasize male Dalit experiences. Gender-focused conversations in India usually center on Savarna women's issues, leaving out caste as a relevant topic. This dual invisibility, seen in both anti-caste and feminist movements, has been criticized by scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru, who point out that Dalit women's voices are often silenced or appropriated. Intersectionality, first defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is crucial in addressing these oversights by showing that power systems don't function separately. The oppression faced by the wives of manual scavengers is not due to caste, gender, or class alone, but the combination of all three, along with state neglect and social stigma.

This framework helps us critique how dominant narratives about manual scavenging often present the issue as one of sanitation or poverty without recognizing its caste basis. These narratives often ignore the unpaid labor performed by women in these households. They focus on the act of scavenging while overlooking the emotional and social burdens carried by the wives of these workers. An intersectional and Dalit feminist analysis challenges these simplified views and encourages us to see these women not as collateral victims but as central figures in the experience of structural violence.

### **6.2 Centering Lived Realities in Research and Policy**

The strength of this framework lies in its focus on situated knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of the real experiences of marginalized women over abstract theories. In the case of the wives of manual scavengers, their stories of grief, labor, humiliation, and resistance should not be viewed as mere anecdotes but as crucial to understanding caste and gender violence in India.

A standpoint-based methodology, as Rege advocates, insists that social theory should reflect the views of the most oppressed rather than be studied from afar. Collecting oral narratives and testimonies from the wives of manual scavengers not only restores their agency but also counters the epistemic injustice present in caste and gender research.

Policy must also reflect this framework. Current laws like the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act of 2013, while important for criminalizing the practice, often overlook gender and caste in their implementation. The wives of both deceased and employed scavengers frequently miss out on surveys, compensation, and rehabilitation programs, despite their significant involvement. An intersectional Dalit feminist approach requires a complete rethinking of such policies to include these women as essential participants deserving justice and care.

### **6.3 Towards Transformative Justice**

This framework advocates for transformative justice, not just legal reform. It calls for comprehensive socio-economic rehabilitation, access to education, employment, healthcare, mental health services, and a restoration of dignity for women historically overlooked by the state and society. A cultural shift is required to break the silence around caste and gender-based violence while highlighting the resistance and resilience of Dalit women.

As Thenmozhi Soundararajan argues, the stories of Dalit women encompass not only their pain but also their survival, community, and hope. In addition to being victims of past injustice, manual scavengers' wives are living examples of resistance, embodying knowledge about the mechanisms of oppression and how to combat it.

Their experiences ought to be at the center of justice, policy, and research, not just a footnote in the stories of gender and caste violence. We can strive toward a future in which structural violence is eradicated at its source by firmly establishing our frameworks in their realities.

## **7 Conclusion**

The difficulties faced by Indian wives of manual scavengers expose a complicated caste, gender, and institutional neglect issue that has long been disregarded in popular discourse. Despite being illegal and widely denounced, manual scavenging's gendered and familial components continue to be marginalized in scholarly and governmental responses. These women deal with structural neglect, emotional trauma, and social stigma in addition to the indirect effects of their husbands' demeaning occupations. Their stories reflect a deeply ingrained caste patriarchal norm that devalues Dalit women's lives and labor.

In order to reframe the issue and move away from male-centric perspectives of manual scavenging and toward a more comprehensive understanding of systemic violence, this paper combines intersectionality with Dalit feminist standpoint theory. It draws attention to the ways that policies, despite their progressive ideals, frequently overlook the gender realities of caste-based employment. Prohibition alone is insufficient to provide these women with true justice; they also need acknowledgment, compensation, and equitable resource allocation.

Achieving both epistemic and material justice is the goal of elevating their voices in state responsibility, legal reform, and academia. It goes beyond simple representation. Society can only start to eliminate the structural underpinnings that have sustained their exclusion by acknowledging their suffering, labor, and resistance. Since these women are essential to imagining a fair future free from patriarchy and caste, they should no longer be marginalized.

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